

# The Ethical Choice of the Father-Daughter Conflict in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

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**Abstract** This study employs ethical literary criticism to uncover the social and natural ethics manifested in the conflict between the paternal figure (Egeus) and his daughter (Hermia) in Shakespeare's comedy, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Furthermore, it examines the ethical choice made by Hermia. It argues that the conflict between Egeus and Hermia serves as a manifestation of social ethics. The father-daughter conflict prompts readers to contemplate the social and natural ethics that were prominent throughout the Renaissance era. Hermia's ethical choice reflects her emotional needs, rebellious spirit, and Shakespeare's progressive ideas regarding ethics. It also serves as a demonstration of ethical wisdom. This study provides a thought-provoking example of ethical choices.

**Keywords** *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; father-daughter conflict; ethical choice; ethical literary criticism

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## Introduction

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) emerged as a preeminent dramatist whose works delve into the intricacies of father-daughter relationships. During Shakespeare's

era, familial bonds held significant sway within the societal framework. The father-daughter relationship allowed Shakespeare to explore daughters' challenges in a patriarchal society. Thus, the theme of the father-daughter dynamic is prominently featured in "twenty-one of Shakespeare's plays" (Dreher 1). Although *A Midsummer Night's Dream* ostensibly gravitates towards themes of love, fantasy, and romantic entanglements, it astutely incorporates the element of father-daughter conflict. In this comedic masterpiece, Egeus desires to bestow his daughter, Hermia, in matrimony upon Demetrius. However, Hermia, intimately acquainted with her friend Helena's affection for Demetrius and harboring her love for Lysander, rebels against this prescribed union. Even in the face of her father's accusatory stance and resorting to legal coercion via the Duke of Athens, Hermia remains relentless and fearless. In pursuing marital autonomy, she boldly defies her father's wishes and the legal strictures of Athens, ultimately choosing to elope with Lysander.

While Hawley (2010) has delved into the ethical dimensions of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the inquiries have been predominantly confined to the lens of traditional ethics. Nevertheless, a recent shift towards interdisciplinary exploration in analyzing Shakespearean works has emerged. For instance, Deng Jianbo, Arbaayah Ali Termizi, and Manimangai Mani (2023) utilize Bowen family systems theory to scrutinize the father-daughter relationship in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, arguing that the factors contributing to the dysfunctional nature of this relationship include "the levels of differentiation of the self of Lear, Goneril, Cordelia, and Regan, the projection of Lear's anxieties and unresolved conflicts onto his daughters, and the chronic anxiety stemming from societal regression" (185). Additionally, Zhang Baike and Tian Junwu expound on the metaphors of diseases, ethical transgressions in historical writing, and political ethics depicted in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* through the lens of ethical literary criticism. They state that although Shakespeare's ethical adaptation of Plutarch's historical work may be questionable, the diseases and deformities attributed to Caesar in the play reflect the prevailing historical consciousness of the British people during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These depictions serve as metaphors for the "body politic and the demythologization of Caesar" (Zhang and Tian 99), ultimately conveying Shakespeare's ethical stance. Furthermore, Luo and Wang (2022) explore the intricate connection between the sense of power, the upper structure, and Macbeth's ethical choices. They posit that Macbeth's ethical downfall and moral failure stem from his spinx factors: his insatiable lust for power and his misguided selection of an ethical path. These deficiencies, coupled with the upper structure he endeavors to construct, mold his ethical values and judgment. The authors assert that the pivotal

elements determining his inevitable fate lie in “his controlling of his spinx factors” (Luo and Wang 288).

Although scholarly investigations have explored Shakespeare’s plays through the lens of ethical literary criticism, a notable dearth of focused analyses specifically addressing *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* remains. Prior examinations of this play have predominantly scrutinized its ethical aspects through the prism of conventional ethical perspectives. Hence, a compelling need arises to reevaluate the father-daughter conflict within the comedy from an innovative standpoint. Such an approach seeks to unveil the profound significance of this conflict, thereby offering readers a compelling exemplar of ethical choices in literary works. Consequently, this article meticulously examines the parent-child ethics inherent in the father-daughter conflict in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, distilling profound ethical implications. In contrast to preceding studies, this article strongly emphasizes the ethical dimension within the play, scrutinizing the societal and cultural significance reflected in the father-daughter conflict through the lens of social ethics. It not only elucidates the natural desires of Hermia and Egeus but also sheds light on the ethical conflicts inherent in their positions. Furthermore, the article endeavors to trace the historical context in which the play unfolds, focusing on the ethical choices made by Hermia as a central ethical theme. The article probes her ultimate ethical choices by dissecting the ethical dilemmas confronting Hermia due to her multiple ethical identities, delving into the profound ethical meanings encapsulated within them.

### **Commentaries on the Comedy and the Theory**

Presently, the exploration of ethical themes in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* predominantly relies on conventional ethical frameworks. In his scholarly contribution entitled “Midsummer Night’s Dream: Relating Ethics to Mutuality,” Hawley (2010) explores ethical conflicts within this comedic masterpiece. Hawley explores the ethical dilemmas and investigates relational resolutions within *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Proposing that Shakespeare’s play underscores the necessity of resolving ethical disputes through interpersonal relationships, Hawley contends that the fantastical “fairy world” of King Oberon disrupts human affairs, leading to ethical confusion. The author states, “Hegel’s dialectic, Jean-Luc Nancy’s transfiguring, and Martin Buber’s relational perspectives take up Shakespeare’s premise of treating ontology and ethics as facets of the same movement” (Hawley 159). As Hegel maintains that any (unavoidable) alienation has to be overcome, it also demonstrates “Nancy’s and Buber’s symbolic consecration of ethical being as

mutuality” (Hawley 159). The emerging moral relationship dampens the “unethical acquisitiveness” of Helena and Demetrius (Hawley 163). While acknowledging that the lovers within the play do not resolve every ethical dilemma arising from the financial, “political and social conflicts” depicted, Hawley contends that their renewed desires nonetheless “extend relational ethics to the world of the play” and resonate with contemporary audiences (Hawley 163). By drawing on the philosophical views of Hegel, Buber, and Nancy, Hawley provides a nuanced understanding of the play’s themes and characters, demonstrating their connection to broader philosophical concepts. Importantly, Hawley underscores the enduring relevance of Shakespeare’s work in contemporary ethical and philosophical discussions. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the author’s primary focus centres on the philosophical and ethical aspects of the play, with less exploration of its literary and historical contexts. While Hawley (2010) has thoroughly examined the ethical disputes within *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the ethical choice of the father-daughter conflict in this comedy have not been subjected to investigation. Furthermore, the author predominantly adopts the research methods of traditional ethics, rather than embracing an interdisciplinary approach.

Nie Zhenzhao, a distinguished literary theorist, recognizes the importance of interdisciplinary research within literary studies. Against economic globalization and the swift advancement of high technology, the trajectory of literary studies has gravitated towards interdisciplinary development, marking a prominent contemporary trend (Ren Jie 736)<sup>1</sup>. To comply with this trend, Nie advocates for ethical literary criticism. This theory combines literature, ethics, morality, sociology, history, psychology, linguistics, brain science, and natural sciences. It creates a new theoretical paradigm with interdisciplinary knowledge attributes by organically integrating the different knowledge elements (Nie et al. 89)<sup>2</sup>. As espoused by Nie, ethical literary criticism is a critical theory that is employed to examine, assess, and interpret “the ethical nature and function of literary works” through the lens of ethics (“Ethical Literary Criticism: A Basic Theory” 189). Unlike moral criticism, ethical literary criticism refrains from adjudicating a literary work based on contemporary

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1 Translated by the authors of this paper. Original text is available in Ren Jie, “Interdisciplinary Studies and the Construction of Discourse System of Ethical Literary Criticism,” *Forum for World Literature Studies* 5 (2022): 735-744.

2 Translated by the authors of this paper. Original text is available in Nie Zhenzhao et al., “Conversations on the Ethical Literary Criticism and the Frontier of Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature,” *Journal of Central China Normal University (Humanities and Social Sciences)* 2 (2022): 79-105.

moral standards. Instead, it accentuates a commitment to “historicism,” advocating for examining a work’s ethical values within its historical or chronological context. The primary objective of ethical literary criticism is to discern the ethical causes that give rise to literature and shape its characters and events. It endeavors to illuminate the ethical dilemmas surrounding events, individuals, and their conduct, providing an ethical judgment. In contrast to conventional ethical critics who often analyzed literature through the lens of “their personal ethical and moral principles” or, at best, those of their contemporaries, Nie contends that such an approach renders their critique unreliable and distorts both the objectives and methodologies of literary analysis. Instead, Nie suggests that ethical critics should concentrate on elucidating the ethical value inherent in literature, utilizing their moral principles as frameworks. Unfortunately, historical ethical critics used literary analysis to validate their morality rather than engaging in a genuine investigation. In contrast, ethical literary criticism places a heightened emphasis on “objectivity and historicism” compared to traditional ethical criticism, considering “the contemporary value of literature as its historical value rediscovered” (Nie Zhenzhao, “Value Choices and Theoretical Construction” 85).

The core concept and theoretical cornerstone of ethical literary criticism is ethical selection, a focal point underscored by Nie (2021). This perspective attributes the cognitive differentiation between humans and animals to ethical selection. Nie contends that ethical selection is crucial in bestowing human beings with rationality and moral awareness, ultimately transforming them into “ethical beings” (“Ethical Literary Criticism: Sphinx Factor and Ethical Selection” 386). Within the realm of literature, ethical choice often constructs or deconstructs identity, and ethical identity determines or influences ethical choice. For example, Hamlet grapples with an ethical dilemma surrounding the imperative to avenge his father’s death yet finds himself unable to make a definitive ethical choice. According to Nie, this predicament is intricately tied to Hamlet’s evolving ethical identity, which undergoes significant transformations upon his mother’s marriage to Claudius. Nie argued that Hamlet assumes the role of Claudius’s stepson and prince to a certain degree. The recently acquired ethical identities engender him a sense of hesitation regarding seeking retribution, as he must navigate “the ethical taboo of patricide and regicide” (Nie Zhenzhao, “Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism” 94).

Nie (2015) analyzed ethical dilemmas, ethical knots, and ethical identities in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. However, the scrutiny of ethical choices within the context of the father-daughter conflict in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* has been conspicuously absent from scholarly discourse. Consequently, building upon

Nie's (2015) groundwork, the present study endeavors to leverage ethical literary criticism as a conceptual framework to investigate social and natural ethics in the father-daughter conflict and Hermia's ethical choice in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

### **Father-Daughter Conflict and Social Ethics**

The father-daughter relationship is pivotal in the intricate fabric of familial structure, embodying a dynamic interplay of tradition and disruption, conflict, and reconciliation. Patriarchy, as a social system, emphasizes the dominance of men in the realms of family, politics, and society while positioning women at a relatively lower rung in terms of social status and power, which manifests within the family unit where men traditionally hold a perceived superiority, wielding decision-making authority, particularly in domestic affairs. Fathers are emblematic of authoritative figures, exercising control over pivotal aspects such as their daughters' matrimonial prospects. However, for daughters, the patriarchal system can become a form of restraint and oppression, igniting within them a desire for rebellion in pursuit of personal freedom and rights. Consequently, daughters frequently navigate a nuanced relationship with their fathers, characterized by a complex interplay of respect and defiance. Simultaneously, an inherent desire for paternal protection exists juxtaposed with a longing for liberation from imposed constraints. The intensity of this opposition varies with changes in social circumstances. During periods of relative societal stability, daughters may be more inclined to heed their father's counsel. Conversely, daughters may rebel to counter paternal authority in eras marked by moral decay or social upheaval.

The play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare was probably composed in 1594 or 1595, with its initial publication in 1600 (Wells et al. 575)<sup>1</sup>. In Shakespearean England, the aristocratic family structure was inherently patriarchal. Parent-child relationships were typically distant and formal, characterized by a lack of emotional connection, and controlled exclusively by "paternal authoritarianism" (Boose 325). Egeus, like many fathers of his time, is portrayed as obsessed with preserving his dominance over Hermia, even at the cost of her well-being. The depiction of Egeus exemplifies the prevailing ethos of paternal authority, which permeated the aristocratic family structure in Shakespearean England. This portrayal underscores the paternal role extending beyond mere guidance to encompass a resolute exertion of control, symbolic of the broader societal norms governing parent-child relationships in that era.

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1 See Stanley Wells et al., eds., *The Complete Oxford Shakespeare*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987.

In the Elizabethan era, daughters often faced a dilemma regarding marriage: either they surrender to their father's authority or follow their personal preference. Under normal circumstances, daughters have almost no autonomy in marriage and must obey their father's arrangements for significant marriage matters. As Cook says: "those in authority—parents or guardians of minor children and masters of servants—had to give formal consent to the marriage of their charges" (69). In this context of the times, Shakespeare portrayed an authoritarian father, Egeus, who interfered with his daughter's marriage in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. However, Shakespeare "may have been the exploration in extreme circumstances of the notion of a right to autonomy in matrimonial choice" (Sokol 149). Therefore, Shakespeare created the authoritarian father in the play and the daughter who challenges patriarchy and pursues freedom of love. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the daughter Hermia completely ignores her father's authority, rebels against her father, and eventually marries her true lover, Lysander.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* elucidates the ethical conflict between the freedom of romantic choice and paternal authority. The opening scene of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* introduces us to the central conflict of the play—the struggle between Egeus, a father, and his daughter, Hermia. In Act One, Scene One, Egeus is depicted as a dominant and authoritative figure who exercises control over his daughter Hermia. He "possesses his daughter and commands her to marry Demetrius" (Szakolczai 9-10). However, Hermia vehemently opposes this arrangement, asserting her stand and refusing to marry Demetrius, the man her father favors. Her defiance leads to her being brought before Theseus, the Duke of Athens, for judgment. Theseus, in his counsel, emphasizes the societal expectation that children should regard their fathers as god-like figures with absolute authority. Egeus, in turn, insists on his right to make decisions on behalf of his daughter, declaring, "As she is mine, I may dispose of her"<sup>1</sup>(1.1. 42) and goes on to transfer his rights over Hermia to Demetrius: "And she is mine, and all my right of her/ I do estate unto Demetrius" (1.1.97-98). These words and actions reflect the "official ideology" of the time (Cook 98-99). Dreher (1986) notes that Egeus's language in the play indicates the degree to which he views Hermia as a possession, transferring her as if she were a piece of property. His possessive love is evident through the "first-person possessive pronouns" he uses, emphasizing his right and control over her (Dreher 49).

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1 Citations of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are from William Shakespeare, "A Midsummer Night's Dream," *The Oxford Shakespeare Comedies*, edited by Stanley Wells et al., New York: Oxford UP, 1987, 575-600.

Theseus's addition to Egeus's demands underscores the cultural psychology underpinning this rigid societal system. Theseus advises Hermia that she should unquestioningly obey her father, portraying fathers as the ultimate authorities who shape their children's lives, much like a sculptor molding a figure in wax:

What say you, Hermia? Be advised, fair maid.  
 To you your father should be as a god,  
 One that composed your beauties, yea, and one  
 To whom you are but as a form in wax,  
 By him imprinted, and within his power  
 To leave the figure or disfigure it. (1.1.46-51)

Theseus' warning is a stark reminder to Hermia that challenging her father's authority is futile in a society where children are perceived as passive and malleable. In contrast, fathers possess god-like power to shape or even harm their offspring. Hermia expresses her confusion and fear of "the possible outcomes of her disobedience" (Szokolczai 10). However, within the play's narrative, this oppressive and regressive view of Athens is swiftly replaced by a more progressive and enlightened perspective. When her father invokes "the ancient privilege of Athens," Hermia seeks clarification about her position, challenging the assumptions underlying this tradition (Gleckman 24). Her inquiry into the potential consequences of refusing to marry Demetrius indicates her refusal to conform to societal expectations.

The opening scene of the play serves as a satirical commentary on patriarchy and the harm it inflicts upon women. In their pursuit of arranging suitable marriages for their children, parents often assume they have more experience and the responsibility to make decisions. Egeus' insistence on Hermia's marriage to Demetrius is driven by his desire to maintain his patriarchal authority, and he acts irrationally, prioritizing this authority over his daughter's well-being. Stephanie Chamberlain's article, "Law of the Father," supports this perspective, emphasizing that Egeus disregards his daughter's wishes to uphold the "ancient privilege of Athens," the law of the father that compels this confrontation before the Duke's court (34). Zitouni et al. (2020) hold that in this scene, Shakespeare not only ridicules Egeus' irrational conduct but also takes a feminist stance, highlighting the harm inflicted by "the laws of a patriarchal system" (121). Kurian (2016) also asserts the concept of "patriarchal parental control" is reinforced and normalized through the relationship between Egeus and Hermia, with the endorsement of

Theseus (9). Moreover, Olson (1957) believes Egeus sees his role as a guardian who has the authority to make decisions on behalf of his daughter. Theseus upholds this position, emphasizing that children must obey their fathers. The Athenian law is possibly “the law of hierarchy which Plutarch’s Theseus introduced” (Olson 103-104).

The father-daughter conflict in the comedy serves as a representation of the prevailing societal standards and expectations surrounding marriage during Shakespeare’s era. This depiction highlights the influence of patriarchal authority, wherein parents frequently exerted control over their children’s decisions regarding marriage. In the eyes of contemporary viewers, Egeus may be perceived as unduly dictatorial, compelling his daughter to make a difficult choice between romantic love and dutiful adherence to familial expectations. Therefore, analyzing the historical backdrop encompassing Renaissance marriage customs is imperative. Marriage had a distinct purpose during the Renaissance that diverged from the contemporary perception of a personal romantic relationship. The primary purpose of this practice was to foster the union of two families, establish economic benefits, and forge significant political connections. Marriage served as an economic imperative for ordinary people, including peasants, artisans, and laborers, since it facilitated cooperation and allocating tasks across diverse occupational domains. In this context, parental consent is pivotal in a child’s decision-making process regarding their job path, religious vocation, or choice of marital union. Parents were obliged to “provide for their children’s future” (Dreher 24). However, the seemingly triumphant portrayal of male dominance and paternal authority is immediately challenged by the character of Hermia. She resists her father’s insistence on an arranged marriage and questions his belief in his “ancient privilege” to make decisions about her life (Loomba 182). This resistance highlights the tension between traditional patriarchal values and the evolving agency of daughters in matters of love and marriage.

Therefore, a fierce conflict between the father and the rebellious daughter is portrayed in the play. This conflict leads to the rupture of the father-daughter relationship and tears apart the fragile bonds of traditional ethics. Egeus, a stubborn father who clings to traditional ethics, is cut from the same cloth as those fathers in conventional households, tending to exercise authority in controlling his daughter’s actions. This traditional patriarchal ideology has long dominated social structures. However, with the rise of the Renaissance movement, this authority based on submission is no longer as steadfast. Nevertheless, Egeus remains stubborn, holding onto his patriarchal mindset of controlling his daughter’s behavior with an

authoritative stance, which is the fundamental reason for the conflict between him and his daughter.

### **Father-Daughter Conflict and Natural Ethics**

A doctrine of nature forms the basis of Shakespeare's conception of life. Shakespeare revealed many of the results of his research into the mysteries of nature. His works offer a philosophy of ethics, art, and politics. In Elizabethan contexts, the term "nature" encompasses several basic meanings. It refers to a person's inherent characteristics and deficiencies, including character, physical body, and mental functions. It also contains human feelings, instincts, and emotions. From an ethical vantage point, it suggests individuals should align their actions with the natural order, emphasizing the significance of moderation and avoiding excess, particularly in areas like lust, as part of "a broad moral law" (Knowlton 719-723).

The opening scene of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* provides a symbolic exploration of the evolution of erotic desire within the context of changing societal norms. In the "pre-classical Athens" setting, it can be observed that sensual urges were subjected to the dominance of "patriarchal imperatives" (Gleckman 24). Montrose (1996) argues that the play reflects the dialectical tension surrounding the concept of marriage in English Protestant culture. It simultaneously portrays authoritarian and misogynistic aspects, reflecting the emphasis on masculine authority over women. However, it also reveals the multiple and potentially contradictory ideological positions surrounding early modern Protestant marriage, marked by debates about equality versus hierarchy in domestic life (Montrose 110-113)<sup>1</sup>. In this context, Protestantism allowed for an expanded role of eroticism within marriage, emphasizing the importance of sexual satisfaction within the marital relationship. While reformers like Luther and Calvin acknowledged the naturalness of sexual desire, they also urged moderation and discipline, even within marriage. The idea of "due benevolence" pertained to fulfilling one's spouse's sexual needs, promoting a restrained and passionate love between couples (Gleckman 27-28). In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Egeus perceives his daughter's attraction to Lysander as a form of magic that pulls her away from his chosen suitor. However, "the magic Egeus perceives is actually Hermia's awakening eroticism" (Gleckman 25).

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare portrays the ethical conflicts between Hermia and Egeus. To begin with, Hermia is not just Egeus' daughter but

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<sup>1</sup> See Louis Montrose, *The Purpose of Playing: Shakespeare and the Cultural Politics of the Elizabethan Theater*, Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996.

also Helena's close companion. Helena's impassioned accusation against Hermia, likening their past relationship to a "double cherry, seeming parted, / But yet an union in partition" (3.2.210-211), has led many critics to draw a sharp contrast between the harmonious equality of female bonds and the dominance and violence associated with heterosexual relationships. This dichotomy has fueled arguments equating "heteroeroticism with female subjugation and homoeroticism with female empowerment" (Sanchez 502). Helena's portrayal as the "imperial vot'ress" (2.1.163) who avoids Cupid's influence and walks in "maiden meditation, fancy-free," (2.1.164) underscores this perspective. While this interpretation sheds light on alternatives to traditional "heteronormative marriage," it also risks overlooking the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of women's desires and emotions (Sanchez 502). Helena's nostalgic depiction of her past closeness with Hermia further emphasizes the idealization of same-sex relationships as havens of purity and innocence, free from the perceived lust and domination associated with heteroeroticism:

We, Hermia, like two artificial gods,  
 Have our needles created both one flower,  
 Both on one ampler, sitting on one cushion,  
 Both warbling of one song, both in one key,  
 As if our hands, our sides, voices, and minds  
 Had been incorporate. So we grew together,  
 Like to a double cherry: seeming parted,  
 But yet an union in partition,  
 Two lovely berries moulded on one stem.  
 So, with two seeming bodies but one heart,  
 Two of the first—like coats in heraldry,  
 Due but to one and crowned with one crest.  
 And will you rend our ancient love asunder,  
 To join with men in scorning your poor friend?  
 It is not friendly, 'tis not maidenly.  
 Our sex as well as I may chide you for it. (3.2.203-219)

Hermia and Helena have attended school since early childhood, forging a close relationship. When Helena perceives Hermia's mocking, she interprets it as an act of betrayal. Sanchez (2012) points out that Helena's emphasis on their unity and identity suggests a fantasy of perfect harmony, with even their "sides" blending into

one, suggesting sexual connotations that were understandable to contemporaries (502-503).

Additionally, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Egeus is the father of Hermia and the one who loves Demetrius. The joke made by Lysander in the initial act, wherein he proposes that Demetrius should wed Hermia's father, Egeus, rather than Hermia, suggests a possible homosexual relationship between the two men. This jest challenges the notion of Demetrius's "certain right" to Hermia based on parental approval, as Lysander argues that Egeus seems to "have more love for Demetrius than for his own daughter" (Derrin 430-431). This episode reflects the complexity of romantic relationships within the societal constraints of the time. According to Chamberlian (2011), Egeus is in love with Demetrius, and his passion for Demetrius overrides "his responsibility to Hermia" (34). David Schalkwyk (2008) argues that Egeus "wants to give his daughter to Demetrius because he loves him" (71). Homosexuality, a taboo during Shakespeare's era, becomes a hint in the play. Nie's conception of natural ethics, as expounded in his scrutiny of taboos and ethical orders, furnishes a robust framework for examining *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In the context of the play, written at a time when heterosexual marriage was prevalent in Britain, the concept of taboo is central to the formation of the ethical order. According to Nie (2021):

Taboo is the foundation and guarantee of the ancient ethical order. Taboo is the origin of morality—in the progress of human civilization, we have gone through the transformation of taboos into morality. Taboos presently play a role in morality. The formation and change of the ethical order of human society are institutionally premised on taboos. (Nie Zhenzhao, "Ethical Literary Criticism: A Basic Theory" 192)

Nie (2021) underscores the significance of taboo in shaping the ancient ethical order, elucidating its role in the establishment of morality and the formation of ethical order. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the prevailing attitudes toward heterosexual marriage can be construed as embodying the taboo of homosexuality. Shakespearean comedies have often been viewed through the lens of restraining libidinal impulses, especially female sexuality, by channeling them into stable and socially acceptable matrimonial engagements. Scholars such as Frye and Olson have highlighted the role of comedy in adapting Eros to the moral fabric of society,

ultimately culminating in well-ordered marriages (181; 99)<sup>1</sup>, which aligns with Nie's perspective on the transformative nature of taboos. As argued by Sanchez, "patriarchal power and heterosexual marriage" are seen as safeguards against the perceived chaos of women's desires and emotions (501). In this context, adherence to traditional values, including heterosexual marriage, coincides with the institutional framework of taboos that shape the ethical order. Thus, the comedy depicts the evolving ethical considerations influenced by taboos and their transformative journey into contemporary morality.

The ethical conflicts manifesting in the interactions between Hermia and Egeus are intrinsically tied to their shifting ethical identities. Egeus navigates the dual roles of being Hermia's father and Demetrius's lover while Hermia grapples with her identity as Egeus's daughter, Lysander's lover, and Helena's partner. These shifting ethical identities contribute to ethical confusion.

### The Ethical Choice of Hermia

What is the ethical choice? The ethical choice is each specific choice that makes up the entire ethical selection of humankind. As posited by Nie (2020), ethical selection refers to the process humans must undergo to acquire their humanity after the formation of human nature through natural selection. This process involves the choices humans make to be moral individuals, and it requires education and learning to accomplish (Nie, "Value Choices and Theoretical Construction in Ethical Literary Criticism" 73)<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, Yang (2022) elucidates that following the phase of natural selection, human beings must go through a process of moral perfection, that is, the step of ethical selection. Natural selection is the choice of the form of man, the choice of man as a new species; ethical selection is the choice of the nature of man, the choice of how to be a moral man (420)<sup>3</sup>.

In Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Hermia assumes multiple ethical identities, encompassing her roles as Egeus's daughter, Lysander's lover, and Helena's romantic partner. As a daughter within the societal confines of the Renaissance, Hermia is forced to choose between ethics and nature. Irrespective

1 See Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957; Paul A. Olson, "A Midsummer Night's Dream and the Meaning of Court Marriage," *ELH* 2 (1957): 99.

2 Translated by the authors of this paper. Original text is available in Nie Zhenzhao, "Value Choices and Theoretical Construction in Ethical Literary Criticism," *Social Sciences in China* 10 (2020): 71-93.

3 Translated by the authors of this paper. Original text is available in Yang Gexin, "From Ethical Selection to Scientific Selection: The Theoretical Logic of Ethical Literary Criticism," *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature* 3 (2022): 416-425.

of the ethical environment in which women lived throughout history, Hermia consistently bears the ethical responsibilities intrinsic to her identity as a daughter. Therefore, she cannot openly defy her father. Hermia, deeply influenced by the traditional moral values prevalent in the Renaissance era, internalizes the notion of paternal authority. Her daughterly ethical identity compels her to align her actions with her father's wishes, perceiving him as an authoritative figure. In the ethical milieu of the time, Hermia had no choice but to comply with her father's commands. In her era's ethical environment, Hermia encounters an irreconcilable conflict between her identity as a daughter and that of a lover. In response, she opts to elope with her beloved Lysander. This choice underscores Hermia's status as a morally conscientious individual, as she adheres steadfastly to fundamental ethical precepts. Hermia's ethical choices, reflective of ethical wisdom, align with Nie Zhenzhao's insights into the essence of ethical wisdom and its correlation with ethical choices:

Firstly, ethical wisdom helps people make rational ethical choices in complex ethical environments with various ethical identities and severe ethical conflicts. Secondly, ethical wisdom requires sticking to historically solid ethical moral principles and norms, breaking free from old ones, and advocating for new ones that reflect societal evolution. Finally, ethical wisdom often operates through moral intuition, where individuals internalize certain ethical moral principles as part of their self-awareness, enabling them to express ethical wisdom through moral intuition in ethical choices. Moral intuition guides the creative processes of the authors and the ethical choices of the characters. Moral intuition unites reason and sensibility, manifesting accumulated concepts in specific settings and making choices by perception rather than extensive rational deliberation<sup>1</sup>. (Nie et al. 103)

Su Hui (2022) further enriches our understanding by emphasizing that writers reflect dynamic changes in notions of good and evil during periods of social transformation through three types of characters and their ethical choices: the first type is the rebels, pioneers, and innovators. They have advanced thinking and choose to rebel and fight against the old moral principles and norms when there is a sharp conflict between the old and the new ethics, which is an essential manifestation of the ethical wisdom

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by the authors of this paper. Original text is available in Nie Zhenzhao et al., "Conversations on the Ethical Literary Criticism and the Frontier of Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature," *Journal of Central China Normal University (Humanities and Social Sciences)* 2 (2022): 79-105.

of human beings. The second is the defender of the old system and morality. Writers often expose and criticize these characters' conservative and backward ethical and moral views and regard them as representatives of the evil forces that prevent the heroes from pursuing their ideals. The third is the characters caught in ethical dilemmas during social transformation. They cannot make correct value judgments on good and evil, leading to self-loss and even evil choices. Among the above three types of characters, the writer gives his ethical wisdom to the first type of characters so that the ethical choices they make during the period of social transformation fully reflect the foresight and ethical wisdom; the latter two types of characters do not have ethical wisdom, but the writer demonstrates the value judgment and ethical wisdom through the shaping of the characters and their destinies and the arrangement of the end, reflecting the writer's foresight in the development trend of the history of the society (Nie et al. 104)<sup>1</sup>.

Hermia, a character created by Shakespeare in his comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, demonstrates ethical choices by defying irrational rules and traditional beliefs to pursue love with intelligence and wisdom. Ultimately, she overcomes the challenges and achieves success. Shakespeare invented Hermia as a rebel, pioneer, and innovator and endowed her with his ethical wisdom, causing her ethical choices at this time of societal change to demonstrate both foresight and ethical wisdom.

### Conclusion

The father-daughter relationship in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* reflects the societal dynamics of Shakespearean England, highlighting the conflict between traditional patriarchal values and daughters seeking autonomy in love and marriage. The father-daughter conflict ruptures traditional ethics, with Egeus representing a stubborn adherence to outdated norms amid societal changes in the Renaissance era. The ethical conflicts in Hermia and Egeus arise from their shifting ethical identities, contributing to ethical confusion. Shakespeare describes Hermia as the daughter of Egeus, Lysander's lover and Helena's partner, leaving her entangled in an ethical dilemma. The ethical choices made by Hermia contribute to the development of the conflict between her and her father while also exemplifying ethical wisdom. Thus, this comedy offers a good example of ethical choices.

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1 Translated by the authors of this paper. Original text is available in Nie Zhenzhao et al., "Conversations on the Ethical Literary Criticism and the Frontier of Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature," *Journal of Central China Normal University (Humanities and Social Sciences)* 2 (2022): 79-105.

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