

He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not: Misogyny and Emotional Burdens in *Much Ado About Nothing*

Much Ado About Nothing centers around several elaborate acts of deception, including the premise of Beatrice and Benedick's romance. The assertion could be made that their love itself is a deception, but I counter this with the idea that their love is defined by the gendered emotional imbalance created by social expectations and enforced by the belief of the other's unrequited love. Their love is sanctified by the choice to commit to this imbalance despite their struggles with societal expectations of their behavior, which makes their relationship in the play deeper and more honest, but can also further speak to the integrity of misogynistic love as a whole. Love is defined by wanting—craving satisfied when earning a prize, guilt alleviated when unspoken forgiveness is granted, longing finally brought to an end. This wanting is finally brought to an end only when they share it together without the disruption brought by their differing responses to the knowledge of the other's unrequited love.

This emotional imbalance is characterized by the different reactions between Beatrice and Benedick when they learn that the other loves them. Beatrice feels guilty—condemned for her sarcastic and cruel treatment of Benedick, while he feels joyous, as if he has won something he has been fighting for. Beatrice reacts to the indirect confession of Benedick's love by immediately asking, "What fire is in mine ears? Can this be true? / Stand I condemned for pride and scorn so much?" (Shakespeare 91) Her immediate reaction is to accept the responsibility for Benedick's anguish as her own fault, which on the surface seems to function as a representation of Elizabethan culture. However, Beatrice notably rebels against social conventions throughout the course of the play. With "Masculinity and Emotion in Early Modern English Literature (Review)" by Elise Dunbo as a reference for Elizabethan-era expectations of a woman's role in society as a baseline, Beatrice clearly defies the requirements of submission to a man, especially

within marriage. Her behavior in this scene contradicts this when she accepts the guilt and immediately positions herself underneath him in terms of power. This is furthered by Benedick's emotional victory over her, as he does not reciprocate this guilt Beatrice feels for her treatment of him, which creates the aforementioned emotional imbalance. He feels as if he has gained something from Beatrice's love and sees it as something that uplifts him rather than weighs him down. As a post-war soldier, he instead views her love as a another battle he has vanquished and views it with the love that one has for a prize incredulously won.

For Benedick and Beatrice, love and war are deeply intertwined. War is the constant battle between them, with their interactions beginning as "a kind of merry war betwixt Signior Benedick and [Beatrice]: they never meet but there's a skirmish of wit" (*Much Ado about Nothing* 1.1.55). Their relationship is founded upon conflict, where both are trying to gain something over the other. Men, specifically Benedick, are socialized into believing that women are prizes in Elizabethan society (Denbo), so this conception of love for him and the conditioning of his behavior from war leads him to believe that Beatrice and her love are meant to be something he can win. The lack of ownership of her love frustrates him, as "it is certain [he is] loved of all ladies, only [Beatrice] excepted: and [he] would [he] could find in my heart that [he] had not a hard heart; for, truly, [he loves] none" (*Much Ado about Nothing* 1.1.111–4). He feels as if he has lost something because of the lack of love he receives from Beatrice—if she loves him but he does not reciprocate, it gives him power over her. Her emotions are at least somewhat controlled by him, while he can claim that she holds no possession over him. This imbalance leads him to feeling a sense of victory and elation that doesn't match Beatrice's guilt. His conditioning plunges him into viewing masculinity as a war against himself that can only be reconciled when he surrenders his victory and allows himself to reciprocate Beatrice's love, with

this idea of love as possession born out of the objectification of Elizabethan women during the time period (Dunbo).

Benedick's response also holds additional weight because of his personal relationship with women. Though Beatrice is similarly jaded about marriage and men, Benedick reduces his view of women to one-dimensional characters—almost objects—who either "conceived" or "brought [him] up" (Shakespeare 17) or he is by default, "a professed tyrant to their sex" (Shakespeare 17). This view of women makes him more of a misogynist than his lack of trust in women alone as described in "Much Ado About Nothing: A Modern Perspective" by Gail Kern Paster. However, he seems self-aware of the culture's objectified view of women, as he asks Claudio, "Would you buy [Hero] that you enquire after her?" (Shakespeare 17). This seems contradictory, because he commodifies Beatrice's love as a victory in the same way when he is tricked into thinking that she loves him. A shift is marked in his actions before and after he requites her love, where he allows himself to give up the power and control he has over her by giving her the same power in return and thus restoring her humanity and personhood. The main significance in Benedick's actions lies in the equality and restored personhood he offers Beatrice through his love. Dunbo discusses the societal standards between men and women during the Elizabethan era and centers along the fact that women were considered inferior to men in every single way, barely considered human within themselves. The action of Benedick offering her this equality despite the social stigma towards it and his own previous beliefs is a massive change, which is almost proof within itself of his love for her. He sacrifices a part of himself for her comfort, to ease her guilt and unease that she feels obligated to take upon herself; he sacrifices a part of himself so she can regain a part of herself.

On the surface, it seems like both Benedick and Beatrice contribute to an unequal dynamic. Love is beautiful not despite but because of the emotional imbalance between Beatrice and Benedick. Beatrice's attempts to break out of the social requirements of Messina makes her guilt doubly relevant. Guilt on its own is a deep expression of empathy but to a level of awareness of one's own role in causing harm to someone, but the fact that Beatrice fell back into the gendered social expectations of how she should behave for his love displays not only the misogynistic expectations for women during the Elizabethan era, but also how she allows herself to fall into what she rebels against for him. The guilt is only resolved when she knows he has forgiven her and the harm done is nullified by his love for her. Her guilt functions as a burden—her guilt is all the love she cannot return to him. When she is able to love him, she feels as if it acts as an apology for her previous actions that harmed him. No longer does she feel as if she carries the weight of his longing for her, but that she is able to reciprocate wholly.

Benedick functioning through his love for her similarly yet differently, which equalizes the emotional imbalance they struggle with. He gives up the views of victory he begins with, allowing himself to love Beatrice despite his claims of never being able to have that kind of faith in a woman. He grants her the freedom she longs for, both in her life and within their relationship, despite rallying against it when witnessing Claudio and Hero's romance. Benedick and Beatrice's love is beautiful because it's a product of both of their sacrifice of their strongest beliefs against what they followed. They willingly allow themselves to fall into love instead of being restricted to it, which is the biggest act of rebellion they can do against the norms of love.

This choice to love is harshly intentional, as they take agency in the lens of social determinism despite seemingly functioning within it. Their love is a contradiction that they choose to commit to over what they've been expected to perform as. Beatrice relieves herself of

the guilt she is meant to carry and Benedick relinquishes the power he holds over her by committing to the choice of love. Their love is so powerful solely because of the choices made that allow it to exist—without struggle, the wanting cannot be satisfied. Their love is like an act of war but when it ends, it brings peace time with it.

Works Cited

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