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### Female Misogyny in *Much Ado About Nothing*

Often times when the word ‘misogynistic’ comes to mind, it is the idea of prejudice against women being perpetuated through men of a society. The presence of traditional gender roles for men and women is largely considered a direct result of this ingrained misogyny, as it is the basis for the perceptions of disparities between the two genders. However, the concept of misogyny cannot be strictly classified as only upheld by the male gender, as this idea is in itself a stereotype. The argument can be made that misogyny is not restricted to men but is instead internalized within the women of a society as well, and that misogyny must be evident within members of both genders for it to be sustained in the society. A prime example of this is in Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*, where the female characters’ language and actions substantiate the embedded misogynistic ideals in the play, as well as reinforce traditional male and female gender roles.

The concept that *Much Ado About Nothing* upholds misogynistic beliefs itself is easily detectable within the several male characters of the play. Perhaps the most obvious evidence for this argument is through Benedick himself, as many scholars have already made and supported this claim. Though there are number of examples of Benedick’s language being misogynistic, one of the first in the play is in the opening scene. In one of the many back-and-forth exchanges Benedick and Beatrice have, Benedick asserts, “it is certain I am loved of all ladies, only you excepted. And I would I could find in my heart that I had not a hard heart, for truly I love none” (Shakespeare 1.1.122-125). Here, Benedick is under the impression that many women fall for

him, yet he does not reciprocate any of their feelings. One could make the argument that Benedick's blasé attitude towards all these women is a result of his fear of cuckoldry and dependence on women—both underpinnings of misogynistic ideals. Gail Kern Paster makes a case for this claim in her essay *Much Ado About Nothing: A Modern Perspective*. She argues that what unifies all stages of Benedick's life is “humiliating dependence on women, beginning with the infant's dependence on maternal women for life and nurture. But that early dependence, instead of being outgrown, is seen here as the forerunner to the later sexual humiliations of the adult male” (Paster 214). In this example, Paster states that Benedick is afraid of facing humiliation instituted by women, both in early maternal dependency as well as humiliation through cuckoldry. Therefore, if he himself is afraid of possible humiliation caused by women, he is afraid of the power that a woman could potentially hold over him. This could also be Benedick's motive for asserting “truly I love none,” as he is attempting to take on an indifferent attitude towards the vulnerability exposed while being in a relationship with a woman. His vehement distaste for being subject to humiliation from the opposite sex is evidence for the misogyny within Shakespeare's Elizabethan society. This humiliation is essentially an insult to his ‘fragile masculinity,’ therefore proving that Benedick is a characterization of stereotypical misogynistic ideals within the play.

One can see how misogyny ingrained in the play is evident within the male characters, but misogyny in a society is not possible without examining the nature of misogyny and women. While misogyny can be apparent within men, it cannot be accepted in a society without both genders upholding its ideals. Perhaps one of the most obvious examples of this is when characters surrounding Benedick and Beatrice attempt to convince them that the other is in love with them. The nature of the language used between the two parties of characters is what makes

this misogyny clear. In Act 2, Claudio, Don Pedro, and Leonato discuss Beatrice's profuse love for Benedick purposefully to convince Benedick that Beatrice does in fact have feelings for him. The dialogue that Claudio uses in this scene referencing Beatrice's love is "Hero thinks surely she [Beatrice] will die, for she says she will die if he love her not, and she will die ere she make her love known" (Shakespeare 2.3.179-190). The rest of their conversation follows in this manner—with over exaggerated professions of Beatrice's love and largely not much focus on Benedick at all. They do not scorn, speak unkindly of, or attempt to hurt Benedick with their words in any way. However, when examining the dialogue that Margaret, Ursula, and Hero use in a similar circumstance, the disparity becomes more obvious.

Similar to Benedick's situation, in Act 3, Beatrice is hidden while Margaret, Ursula, and Hero converse about Benedick's (so-called) love for Beatrice. What is most striking is the language Hero uses in this conversation. She expresses, "O god of love! I know he doth deserve / As much as may be yielded to a man, / But Nature never framed a woman's heart / Of prouder stuff than that of Beatrice ... She cannot love / Nor take no shape nor project of affection / She is so self-endear'd" (Shakespeare 3.1.49-56). While the men's conversation was centered around Beatrice's love for Benedick, Hero appears to have placed some sort of blame on Beatrice. Her language suggests that Benedick deserves some sort of reciprocation of love from Beatrice, but she is too full of herself to ever return any affection. Unlike the men, the women's specific choice of language demonstrates their internal misogyny which attacks Beatrice, while the men do not find any fault in Benedick.

The expectation that Benedick is deserving of some love is evidence that Hero believes that Benedick is of more value than Beatrice. She seems to accuse Beatrice of being the one who is not making their relationship work. But why is this so, when we know that Hero and Beatrice

are so close? Perhaps because Beatrice is the woman in the relationship, and Hero believes she owes something to Benedick because he has feelings for her. We do not see this mirrored when Leonato, Don Pedro, and Claudio talk of Benedick. And therefore, because Hero is holding Beatrice to higher standards simply because she is a woman, Hero supports the inherent misogynistic ideals within Shakespeare's play. One can see how this scene is an example of the misogynistic ideals embedded in women's language as well, and in this case even more so than in men's dialogue.

While Margaret, Ursula, and Hero make their ingrained misogyny implicit in their language, Beatrice, being an outspoken character, makes hers slightly clearer to see. By Act 4, Benedick and Beatrice have confessed their love for one another just after the fiasco at Claudio and Hero's wedding. Beatrice, in distress for her cousin, asks Benedick to kill Claudio if he truly does love her. However, she says the task "is a man's office" and also exclaims "O God, that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the marketplace" (Shakespeare 4.1.288-321). Beatrice believes that committing murder is 'a man's office' and makes it obvious that she wishes she were a man. Therefore, she is suggesting that had she not been a woman, she would be able to commit these actions. Benedick, who does not disagree with her statements, also makes it clear he believes what she is saying is true, and therefore is upholding misogynistic ideals. In the case of Beatrice, she is a woman, so it is interesting to think that she would be in support of misogynistic ideas. One could argue that this misogyny is not inherent within Beatrice, but instead it has been imposed upon her—effectively casting her as a perpetuator of misogyny in society.

The necessity of women in the ingraining of misogynistic ideals within a society is demonstrated within Shakespeare's play, specifically in the differences in language used to

address women and men. The language that Hero, Margaret, and Beatrice use are a striking contrast to the language used by the male characters—Don Pedro, Leonato, and Claudio. While it is almost obvious that misogynistic ideals are present within these male characters, one can see how the evidence of those ideals being upheld by the female characters is essential to the presence of misogyny in this society. Through women being critical of each other, using more accusatory language towards one another, and women believing they cannot do a “man’s office,” the female characters in Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing* prove that the misogynistic themes of the society must be apparent in both men and women for misogyny to exist at all.

#### Works Cited

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