

Male emotional
instability and the
criticism of the
conventional
relationship in ...



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Much Ado about Nothing focuses on the emotional development of two relationships that endure various levels of deception. Although both couples marry at the end of the play, the deception that occurs during the play exploits the emotional instability of Benedick and Claudio: “ One deception leads to social peace, to marriage, to the end of deceit. The other deception breeds conflict and distrust and leads even Beatrice to desire the heart of Claudio in the market place” (Henze 188). Many critics discuss the emotional flaws of the male characters and suggest that the trickery is necessary in order to expose their true feelings. For example, Benedick must be deceived in order to admit his true love for Beatrice; on the other hand, when Claudio is deceived, his “ love” for Hero is revealed as superficial and destroyed. Moreover, critics argue that the Claudio/Hero relationship is conventional compared to the Benedick/Beatrice relationship; yet, as the deception establishes, the Benedick/Beatrice relationship is based on true love while the Claudio/Hero relationship is not. By doing this, not only is the emotional instability of men exploited, but Shakespeare may have also intended to criticize the conventional nature of marriage between strangers and the distrust and paranoia it creates compared to marriages based on true love. Benedick demonstrates an emotional instability because he refuses to admit his true feelings for Beatrice until he is deceived by his friends. When the soldiers return to Messina, the audience witnesses the first encounter between Beatrice and Benedick. During this exchange, sharp words are delivered by both sides; in fact, Benedick first addresses Beatrice in a hateful manner: “ What, my dear Lady Disdain! Are you yet / living?” (Shakespeare 1. 1. 112-113). Benedick questions the life of Beatrice and continues to insult her as she insults him. Although their conversation is strained, Benedick later

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reveals his true feelings for Beatrice to Claudio. Benedick disagrees with Claudio's perspective of Hero; instead, he describes the physicality of Beatrice: "There's her cousin, and she were not / possessed with a fury, exceeds her as much in beauty as / the first of May doth the last of December" (1. 1. 180-182). Although Beatrice has a wicked tongue, Benedick admires her physical beauty, but before the audience can speculate on his romantic feelings towards Beatrice, he quickly changes the subject to his love for bachelorhood. He claims he does not want to marry and denies any future love in his life, for "not to love at all is an anti-social and anti-romantic vow that matches Beatrice's assertion that she would rather not listen to a man say that he loves her" (Henze 189). Benedick demonstrates his emotional instability by denying his true feelings for Beatrice because he is afraid of rejection. He verbalizes his true feelings for Beatrice to Claudio; yet his insecurities cause him to suppress his sentimentality. This refusal to love ceases after Don Pedro deceives Benedick into believing Beatrice loves him. Again, Benedick discusses the positive qualities of Beatrice in a loving way: They say the lady is fair – tis a truth, I can bear them witness. And virtuous – tis so, I cannot reprove it. And wise, but for loving me. By my troth, it is no addition to her wit – nor no great argument of her folly, for I will be horribly in love with her. (Shakespeare 2. 3. 222-227) Although Benedick has already mentioned the endearing attributes of Beatrice, he reiterates these qualities because he is able to admit his love openly now. He becomes secure with his love for Beatrice because he is deceived into believing she is suffering due to her love for him (similar to the way he has suffered loving her without being able to tell her). Furthermore, Benedick attempts to deceive the audience into thinking that <https://assignbuster.com/male-emotional-instability-and-the-criticism-of-the-conventional-relationship-in-much-ado-about-nothing/>

his love for Beatrice develops only because she has been exposed by Hero. Yet Don Pedro's trick would not have been possible if Benedick did not harbor real feelings for Beatrice: "To say that [Benedick and Beatrice] are duped into loving one another by false representations or appearances is surely insufficient. More to the point is the notion that the plotters, creating appearances, spoke the truth about the artificially masked emotions of the pair"(Babula 12). Benedick tries to portray his love for Beatrice as coincidental, but without underlying feelings, the deception would not have been successful. Although this provides another example of emotional instability because Benedick refuses to admit his initial feelings for Beatrice, the relationship progresses as both characters finally voice their love for each other. At this point, Benedick is finally able to emotionally develop because he is no longer constraining his love for Beatrice; instead, he is expressing his affection openly. On the other hand, Claudio proclaims his love for Hero based solely on appearances and social ideologies. He does not understand the complexities of love; yet, he openly discusses his "deep" feelings for Hero with the other male characters. Unlike Benedick, who refuses to admit his love, Claudio is willing to share his feelings, but his feelings have no foundation: "[Claudio] had not yet met [Hero]. He had seen her from a distance, so he is familiar only with her outer appearance" (Scheff 161). Claudio has not had verbal contact with Hero; yet, he is infatuated with her. When discussing Hero with Don Pedro, he expresses his infatuation as a real emotion: "That I love her, I feel" (1. 9. 214). Claudio's superficiality is problematic because he is confusing his infatuation of Hero with actual feelings. Moreover, Claudio enlists the help of Don Pedro in order to woo her. Claudio's avoidance to pursue the woman he "loves" illustrates his

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emotional insecurity because he claims to have a real emotional connection to Hero and wants to marry her, but he is afraid to approach her. Due to his reluctance to speak with Hero and his emotional instability, Claudio becomes the perfect target for Don John's trickery. The first instance occurs at the masquerade party. Although Claudio had enlisted the help of Don Pedro earlier in the play, Don John is able to manipulate Claudio's emotionality because his love is superficial. After Claudio is deceived into believing Don Pedro is interested in Hero, he abandons his initial feelings: "This is an accident of hourly proof / Which I mistrusted not. Farewell, therefore, Hero!" (Shakespeare 2. 1. 166-167). Rather than approach Hero and profess his love, he deserts his sentimentality concerning her. This sudden change illustrates another example of Claudio's emotional instability, for in contrast to true love "Infatuation... involved little or no knowledge of the other" (Scheff 162). Since Claudio has had no verbal contact with Hero, he knows little about her aside from the information provided by others. This leaves him vulnerable to the outside influences of others - such as Don John - because he is exposed as a superficial, unstable man. Claudio's avoidance parallels Benedick's refusal to love due to fear of rejection; yet, Claudio openly discusses his "love" for Hero with no previous knowledge of her other than her social standing and outward appearance. Benedick denies his love because he fears ridicule and rejection from Beatrice, but his fear is based on his belief that she despises him - perhaps due to a previous, unhappy experience. Similarly, Claudio abandons his "love" for Hero, but he has no knowledge of Hero's desires, illustrating his superficiality and emotional confusion. This emotional conflict continues even after this problem is resolved. Claudio makes no attempt to contact Hero; instead, he

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proclaims to Don Pedro that he wants to marry immediately: " Tomorrow, my lord. Time goes on crutches till / Love have all his rites" (Shakespeare 2. 1. 329-330). Rather than learn about Hero and develop his relationship, Claudio decides he wants to be married to a stranger: " Claudio does not know his Lady's inner qualities and obviously feels no need to discover them through discourse of reason; significantly, he neither suspects nor expects his lady to be wise. Rather he simply assumes that the fair exterior connotes and images forth her inner beauty and virtue" (Lewalski 247). Claudio's refusal to gain knowledge of the woman he " loves" keeps his relationship in a vulnerable position, because his only perspective of Hero is of a superficial nature. Without any further knowledge of her personality, wants, desires, etc., Claudio can only make assumptions and listen to outside sources. Again, Don John acts as an outside source and attacks Claudio's insecurities by deceiving him into believing Hero is lecherous. Then, Claudio responds by publicly shaming and " killing" the woman he " loves." Unlike Benedick, whose love progresses as he is deceived, Claudio's superficiality is exploited because Claudio humiliates a woman he claimed to have deep feelings without ever asking for her perspective. Rather than discuss what he saw with Hero (similar to the issue at the masque), Claudio quickly jumps to an unfair conclusion and slanders an innocent woman. Since his " love" is based on infatuation, as discussed earlier, he is vulnerable to deception and lies, and he illustrates his idealization of Hero through his obsession with her sexual honor. Claudio is exposed again as an insecure man because he does not trust the woman he claims to love; instead, he feels justified " killing" her for her unfaithfulness: " Claudio effectively shows what happens when superficial romance and selfish, suspicious social concern are combined"

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(Henze 193). Even though he is married to Hero at the end of the play, Claudio exemplifies the difference between the stability of love and the erratic, uninformed nature of infatuation. Compared to Beatrice and Benedick, Claudio and Hero are agreed to be the “conventional” couple by many critics due to the arrangement of their marriage; yet, as demonstrated through the previous discussion, Claudio’s emotions are superficially based while Benedick has true feelings for Beatrice. Although he cannot describe his motives to the present audience of *Much Ado*, through these relationships, Shakespeare may have intended to criticize the typical, emotionally detached relationship compared to a relationship based on love. When discussing the public shaming of Hero, many critics claim that Claudio’s actions would not be uncommon in the historical context of the play: “[Claudio’s] rejection of Hero would not have seemed as cruel as it seems to us; his acceptance of another marriage partner would not grate on an Elizabethan audience accustomed to a businesslike attitude towards marriage” (Babula 13). Shakespeare provides his audience with a “typical” male reaction and response to such matters as sexual honor and chastity; yet, by doing this, he exposes the harshness and injustice that can result due to a man’s insecurities and emotional instability. Furthermore, Shakespeare illustrates an interesting contrast between love and infatuation through Benedick and Claudio. From the beginning of the play, Claudio claims that he loves Hero; yet, as he is deceived, he is exposed as a superficial man who bases his emotions on the physicality and chastity of women. Since Claudio refuses to speak with Hero about his concerns, he allows his distrust and paranoia to increase. Although they are married at the end of the play, the relationship is still based on superficial ideals. This type of marriage is <https://assignbuster.com/male-emotional-instability-and-the-criticism-of-the-conventional-relationship-in-much-ado-about-nothing/>

conventional for the arranged marriages of Shakespeare's society and is clearly one of Shakespeare's targets. By portraying Claudio as superficial – unlike Benedick, who is exposed as having true feelings for Beatrice and developing their relationship based on love – Shakespeare criticizes the conventions of his society and the basis of “ typical” relationships. Overall, through his male characters and their relationships, Shakespeare may have intended to criticize the conventions of male sentimentality and arranged marriages. Benedick's character illustrates the male insecurity of admitting true love, yet once he is deceived, he accepts his feelings and develops a relationship with Beatrice based on real emotion. On the other hand, Claudio's character demonstrates the superficial ideals of men and their lack of sentimentality. Claudio's eventual marriage to a woman he barely knows, but claims to love, mocks the conventions of arranged marriage. By providing a comparison of these males and their relationships, Shakespeare criticizes man's emotional depth and the values of love in a relationship.

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