

How is the
antagonistic yet
potentially loving
relationship between
beatrice and ...



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Although set in Messina, Italy, the conventions in *Much Ado About Nothing* are those of Elizabethan England, where marriage was seen as a business transaction and family stability was vital. This idea is explored through the fate of Hero, who has little say in who she marries because her life is dictated by her father, Leonato, “ It is my cousin’s duty to make curtsy, and say, father, as it please you” (Beatrice - Act2, Sc1, L39). Shakespeare also makes his views on courtly love clear - Claudio falls in love with Hero without saying a word to her but is permitted to wed her by Leonato, only for Claudio to leave Hero at the alter because he mistakenly thinks that she has been unfaithful. Beatrice on the other hand, is subject to no such conventions: she is a rebel. Her uncle, Leonato, says “ By my troth, niece, thou will never get thee a husband if thou be so shrewd of thy tongue”. She is the opposite of her cousin and best friend, Hero. These are characteristics which make her relationship with Benedick fiery and very unusual for the time. As it is a play, the opening scene needs to draw the audience in, hence the quick introduction of this entertaining relationship. Beatrice and Benedick’s past is intriguing and the audience is forced to keep watching in order to find out what happened, as not all is revealed at first. Their banter is fast, furious and comical, making the opening scene a great start to the play. The first clue to their relationship and Beatrice’s first line comes very early in Act 1, Scene 1, by line 23. A messenger has come to inform the people of Messina of the arrival of Don Pedro of Arragon, who has just won a war fought against his brother, Don John, over their inheritance. Don Pedro is portrayed as the “ goody” and Don John quickly emerges as the antagonist of the play, as the illegitimate son. Leonato and the Messenger are discussing Claudio’s feats in

the war, when Beatrice interrupts, again showing how unconventional and bold she is, “ I pray you, is Signor Mountanto returned from the wars or no?” The “ Signor Mountanto” she refers to, is Benedick, another soldier who fought in the war. She uses “ Signor Mountanto”, meaning “ fencer”, in a sarcastic way but the fact that Beatrice enquires about him and uses this nickname shows her possible affection for Benedick and that there is some sort of past between them. His nickname also reveals how she views him, perhaps as sharp and potentially dangerous. Beatrice continues to ask after Benedick, “ How many hath he killed? - for indeed I promised to eat all of his killing” Even though she is mocking him, Shakespeare is showing that she is thinking about him a lot. The word “ promised” suggests that they have met before and at least spoken. The messenger defends Benedick, saying that Benedick is a good soldier, to which Beatrice responds: “ And a good soldier to a lady, but what is he to a lord?” This implies that Benedick is good with women but not at fighting. The way Beatrice delivers the line suggests that she finds the way Benedick is with women disgraceful and that she may have been victim of this in the past. We see early signs of Beatrice’s quick wit when she challenges the messenger over Benedick and again how she does not fit the mould of an Elizabethan woman, something which could result from the absence of her parents. On line 45, Leonato tells the messenger that the verbal fighting between his niece, Beatrice and Benedick is a “ Merry war”. This is an oxymoron that hints that their fighting is good-natured and not too serious. Don Pedro, Claudio, Benedick and John first appear at line 70 of Act 1, Scene 1. Don Pedro and Leonato - the governor of Messina - greet each other like old friends and it appears that Don John has

been forgiven as he is welcomed into Leonato's home. Don Pedro sees Hero and asks Leonato, "I think this is your daughter?" to which Leonato responds, "Her mother hath many times told me so," but Benedick then interrupts: "Were you in doubt, sir, that you asked her?" Leonato says: "Signor Benedick, no, for then you were a child". His interruption of the governor and the Prince in their conversation shows how cheeky Benedick is and the governor's response backs-up what Beatrice has hinted at about him being a "ladies man". This is when Benedick and Beatrice launch into the first bout of their "merry war". Benedick calls Beatrice "Lady Disdain" which is obviously unkind and disrespectful but can also be seen as a nickname that Benedick has for Beatrice, similar to Beatrice calling him "Signor Mountanto". What follows is a kind of tennis match of insults, the words going back and forth between Benedick and Beatrice. They mirror each other's language and use lots of metaphors, particularly relating to animals. For example, Benedick says, "You are a rare parrot-teacher" which could be a sexual stereotype, suggesting she talks a lot. Beatrice responds: "A bird of my tongue is better than a beast of yours", meaning she would rather be a bird than an animal like him. Benedick retorts - continuing the use of animal imagery - "I would my horse had the speed of your tongue, and so a good continuer: but keep your way a God's name. I have done." Benedick is saying that he wishes that his horse was as fast as Beatrice's tongue, he then says he is done. "You always end with a jade's trick: I know you of old," says Beatrice, "I know you of old" confirming the two have a history. In my opinion, the way that they bicker appears to be practiced and familiar, they seem to do it out of habit and it seems like a routine, which is, in a way, like

many already-married couples. Shakespeare scaffolds Benedick and Beatrice's relationship from the start by incorporating hints as to their views on love and marriage, Benedick says, " If I do (fall in love) hang me in a bottle like a cat, and shoot at me, and he that hits me, let him be clapped on the shoulder, and called Adam". Benedick's conversation with Claudio in Act 1, Scene 1 is then mirrored in Act 2, Scene 1, when Beatrice outlines her ideal man. Both talk of how they will never fall in love and never get married, creating dramatic irony because the audience knows that Benedick and Beatrice are well suited. These clues successfully lead the audience into believing that Beatrice and Benedick will be together by the end of the play. Even after Act 1, Scene 1, the comedy in Benedick and Beatrice's relationship continues. For example, at the masked ball, Beatrice is talking to the masked Benedick and tells him, " Why is he the Prince's Jester, a very dull fool." She seems to take pleasure from Benedick's reaction, as though her insults have had the desired effect. He believes that she does not know she was talking to him and Benedick tells the Prince that he is hurt by her words; " every stab wounds." If he did not care for her then he would be less insulted by her insults. Also in Act 2, Scene 1, Don Pedro asks Beatrice to be his wife. Beatrice responds, " No, my lord, unless I might have another for working-days, your grace is too costly to wear every day" showing that Beatrice thinks the Prince is too good for her but also that she may be waiting someone else, to ask her maybe Benedick. It would be very unusual for a woman at this time to turn down the offer of marriage from a Prince, especially if the Prince is the seemingly perfect Don Pedro. However, her reason is legitimate. Just before the proposal, she confirms that she and

Benedick used to be together. She says, " He lent me it (Benedick's heart) for a while, and I gave him use for it". This implies that the couple once used to share each other's hearts but the use of the word " lent" suggests that it was something that did not last long. Benedick and Beatrice do eventually confess their love for one another, in Act 4, Scene 1, and while this is slightly predictable, it is a welcome turn of happiness for the audience who have recently seen Claudio tricked, Hero's reputation destroyed " Sweet Hero, she is wronged, she is slandered, she is undone" (Beatrice), and Don John's plan become a success. However, whilst resolving the issue of Beatrice and Benedick's love, this scene raises another problem: Beatrice tells Benedick that in order to prove his love for her, he must " Kill Claudio". After some convincing, he reluctantly agrees, " Enough, I am engaged, I will challenge", revealing his devotion and love for Beatrice. Beatrice asking Benedick to kill Claudio shows that she is strongly against the masculine solidarity which can so easily destroy a woman's reputation and also that she trusts Benedick completely. In Act 1, Scene 1, when Claudio first confesses his " love" for Hero, he uses the idea of Petrarchan conceit when he says " Can the world buy such a jewel?" This is a Petrarchan cliché such as " Hairs like golden wires," that Shakespeare shows he is opposed to through the success of the relationship of Benedick and Beatrice, and through Sonnet 130, that tell us that true love can see beyond faults whereas courtly love, which can lead to superficial unions that can be destroyed with something as simple a small trick, as seen through the story of Hero and Claudio. In conclusion, Beatrice and Benedick's antagonistic relationship is a very successful way to open the play as their bickering is witty and comical, and their past is mysterious.

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Shakespeare successfully layers what will happen to Beatrice and Benedick by engaging the audience in dramatic irony, where they know Beatrice and Benedick will end up together but the characters themselves do not. The title can describe Beatrice and Benedick's relationship, in the end it has been "much ado about nothing," because they have fought for the whole play but eventually end up together and married. The title also has a double meaning, "Nothing" at the time of the play sounded very similar to "Noting" and when Claudio and Benedick discuss Hero in Act 1, Scene 1, both men talk of observing or noting her. Much of the play is based around "mis-notings" as well as "nothings". Shakespeare suggests that the most successful relationships are based on compatibility and spark, a concept that seems decidedly modern.