

Shakespeare's presentation of the courtly world of messina in the play's opening ...

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The concept of the courtly world goes beyond the mere setting of the royal court and is largely presented as a life style, especially with regards to romance. This idea has transcended time, with Chaucer's Canterbury Tales depicting a similar courtly world in the Knight's tale, a story that possessed broadly similar features to Much Ado About Nothing. This world is set firmly in a period where the monarchy was the centre of English life. This, perhaps, explains why some aspects, especially the apparent degradation of women until they become objects, are somewhat uncomfortable for modern readers as our liberal society views this as sexist, far from a Victorian audience's view that this was normal life.

The structure of the play is instrumental in establishing the recurring themes of a courtly world, most notably the hierarchical and patriarchal structures that operate in this setting. This is most obvious from the dramatis personae, with its order beginning with men at the top and women at the bottom highlighting the gender roles within the courtly world and love itself as it is men who essentially do the courting. This idea is alluded to in the war-like scenes of 'take her hearing prisoner' as war is usually the domain of men and by referring to love as a battlefield, it is therefore inferred that love is the domain of men, with the reference to a woman as a 'prisoner' reinforcing the passive, helpless female role. This point is further emphasized by the fact that most scenes are initiated by a male as this establishes the idea that men come first and are the dominant presence, a concept that is perpetuated through this courtly world.

The form is repeatedly used to reinforce the features of the courtly world to the audience. Being a play, the dominant role of men is highly apparent though their overrepresentation in the dialogue, nowhere more so than in conversations with Hero. Her lack of a response to 'Speak, cousin; or if you cannot, stop his mouth with a kiss' encapsulates the idea that women weren't valued for their opinions, but merely their sexuality as a wife and childbearer as the 'kiss' suggests - Hero can only communicate with men through sexual appeal rather than her intelligence or personality. Ironically, despite being outspoken, Beatrice is only able to do so by adopting 'masculine' traits such as the scorner of love persona emulated by Benedick. The mere fact that the only way that Beatrice is able to speak up is through being 'one of the guys' reinforces the idea that it was unnatural for a woman of the courtly world to be opinionated as it was a trait primarily associated with men.

The language used, in itself, is largely representative of the features of the courtly world. The men, in particular, use witty, almost poetrylike phrases, such as 'My visor is Philemon's roof; within the house is Jove/ Speak low if you speak love'. This passage is almost in ballad form, which, being the poetry of love, reinforces the romance associated with the courtly world. The fact, however, that such poetic language is used, is somewhat representative of the idea that the courtly world is a fantastical aspiration for most people as, like poetry, it is the construct of an individual's imagination and is not really representative of real life. The masquerade ball, talk of which dominates much of the first part of the play, further encapsulates this idea. I

say this because the idea of dissembling is highly apparent in the ball and dissembling is not too far from the idea that the view portrayed of the people, like the courtly world, is mainly a construct, yet underneath, the reality is a lot less perfect than the what audience actually sees.

The main feature of the courtly world appears to be power as this idea recurs in many ways throughout the play. The witty language used by the men is not only symbolic of the constructed courtly world, but is used mainly a tool for them to show off and gain power over one another. The same can be said for the structure as the *dramatis personae* is essentially a power list going in descending order. What is most interesting about this, however, is the fact that women are always at the bottom which suggests that this is less about power than it is playing to gender roles where men are required to assert themselves, just as woman are required to remain passive. This idea would sit at odds with a modern audience, as our post-feminism society finds fault with everything that separates men and women into gender roles and this patriarchal courtly world would be considered highly sexist in our modern day.