

Much ado about nothing: beatrice and benedick

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Beatrice and Benedick are the two major characters in 'Much Ado About Nothing' that provide comic relief. Their 'merry wars' of words and phrases as described by Leonato, are frequently throughout the play examples of Shakespeare's magnificent ability to bring about amusement in his plays. In Act I and Act II scene I, Beatrice and Benedick are reunited after Benedick and the other soldiers return from war. Beatrice almost instantly jumps into a frenzy of lyrically punishing Benedick, who after a war of men begins a war of words.

From the beginning of the play even before Beatrice and Benedick begin their battle of wit, it is evident to the audience that she has some kind of strong feelings for him, whether they are feelings of hate or of lust or of something in between or that they. Though their insults are biting, their ability to maintain such clever, interconnected sparring seems to illustrate the existence of a strong bond between them. This is shown when the messenger arrives to bring the news that the war is won and the heroes are soon to return. The conversation focuses on Count Claudio and his bravery, 'the figure of a lamb, the feats of a lion,' however Beatrice almost instantly changes the subject by asking the messenger if 'Signior Mountanto returned from the wars or no?'

Although this is an insult, it is evident that Beatrice could not wait to find out how Benedick was. The audience are instantly given the impression that she disguises her feelings for him. She continues talking about Benedick with the messenger and Leonato, who states that 'There is a kind of merry war betwixt Signior Benedick and her; they never meet, but there's a skirmish of wit between them'. Beatrice argues back that 'in our last conflict, four of his

five wits went halting off..... He hath every month a new sworn brother.... he wears his faith but as the fashion of his hat,' meaning that he has no true friends and he changes his faith as often as he changes his hat.

To add to this, the other soldiers who return from battle, who bear prominence in the play are Don Pedro and Claudio. Claudio is instantly paired up with Hero, although this does not officially happen until the party later that night, on stage and in films they stare at each other as if love struck. The same goes to Beatrice and Benedick at the reunion, except they do not stare at each other as if love struck but moreover as if they cannot wait to resume their 'merry war'. This feeling becomes quite obvious when Beatrice speaks almost instantly after Benedick enters the conversation, it is as if he cannot be part of something without her being part of it as well, even if she is bullying him.

Shortly after everyone leaves the stage apart from Benedick and Claudio. Claudio expresses how Hero has caught his eye and Benedick dismisses her as 'too short'. From this conversation we learn that Benedick thinks he will never fall in love and does not believe in marriage. 'I will do myself the right to trust none; and the fine is, for the which I may go the finer, I will live a bachelor', in turn this casts a shadow of doubt over any forecasts that members of the audience could have made about Beatrice and Benedick being paired up. However, from the beginning it is obvious that Benedick is an entertaining character and unlike his counterparts Don Pedro and Claudio, what he says is not taken especially seriously.

Furthermore, at the beginning of Act II Scene I Beatrice also reveals herself as anti-marriage, 'Just if he send me no husband; for which I am upon my knees every morning and evening.' She adds to this statement by stating that she imagines married people go to hell and single people do not, however in addition to this she says, 'he shows me where the bachelors sit, and there live we as merry as the day is long,' this suggests that she hopes to have some kind of fun with bachelors in the future which brings us back to Benedick's belief that he will always remain a bachelor.

From the end of Act I and the beginning of Act II Scene I we have learnt that both Beatrice and Benedick possess anti-marriage views, but given that they are both histrionic and insecure characters, nothing can be taken for granted.

It is noticeable that Beatrice talks about Benedick a lot and often in conversations about subjects that bear no relation to him, she finds a way of interpreting the conversation to make him the fundament - usually criticising him of course. For example at the very beginning of Act II when Leonato and Antonio are having a conversation about Don John's absence at supper, she compares him with Benedick abruptly. This furthers the readers/ members of audience beliefs that she has an interest in Ben.

Beatrice and Benedick are perhaps Shakespeare's most famously witty characters, neither ever lets the other say something without countering it with a pun or criticism. One notable characteristic of their attacks upon each other is their ability to extend a metaphor throughout lines of dialogue.

When Benedick calls Beatrice a 'rare parrot-teacher,' Beatrice responds, 'a

bird of my tongue is better than a beast of yours'. Benedick continues the reference to animals in his response saying, 'I would my horse had the speed of your tongue'. It is as if each anticipates the other's response.

It is suggested in Act I Scene I that Beatrice and Benedick have previously been lovers, but Benedick led Beatrice on, perhaps this is where her viciousness towards him stems from. This is suggested in this quotation:

'Benedick set up his bills here in Messina and challenged Cupid at the flight, and my uncles fool, reading the challenge, subscribed for Cupid,' she describes a battle of love between herself and Benedick which she has lost.

At the masked ball later that night Beatrice dances with Benedick, the audience is unsure whether she simply does not recognise him due to his mask, or pretends not to recognise him. Nonetheless, she cleverly insults him, leaving him a nervous wreck as he cannot reveal himself to be Benedick. 'Why, he is the prince's jester: a very dull fool; only his gift is in devising slanders..... and the commendation is not in his wit, but in his villainy.' She is mocking him and saying that his jokes are boring and nobody finds them amusing.

I believe that Don Pedro's aim to bring together Beatrice and Benedick is reasonably realistic. There are many times in Act I and Act II Scene I that the thought of the two of them marrying seems almost impossible. For example when Benedick swears he will 'live a bachelor', and when Beatrice is on her knees every morning and evening thanking God that she does not have a husband. However, Beatrice and Benedick are both very melodramatic and

provide most of the comedy in the play, this gives the reader the view that what they swear cannot be taken as seriously as for example Claudio. From the beginning of the play, it is obvious that there is a strong bond between them.

It appears that the 'skirmish of wit' between them is a cover up for what is a strong bond underneath all the exchanging of criticisms. In act I, Beatrice shows that she thinks about Benedick a lot, by asking the messenger if he has returned from war and by talking almost every time he says something. This also shows in the first scene of Act II when she brings him into the conversation at the masked ball out of the blue. In the end, Don Pedro's plan was a success.