

The treatment of love and marriage in shakespeare's much ado about nothing



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A somewhat topsy-turvy presentation is evident throughout this play:

Dogberry and the Watch are very much the “third string” to this play’s bow, and yet have captured the greatest place in public imagination. Likewise, on the romantic front, we may say that it is the second-bow players who have the next most prominent place in people’s minds; for even though the play is essentially about the love affair between Claudio and Hero (the first string to the bow), many play-goers come away with a clearer memory of, and greater empathy for, Benedick and Beatrice. Firstly, we should note the high ideals of marriage maintained throughout the play. John Peck and Martin Coyle (“How to study a Shakespeare play”, Macmillan, 1985) state: “Marriage is the institution which reconciles the demands of society and the nature of individuals....

The good characters are thus brought into a circle of happiness”. It is certainly true that there is no romantic scene in the play that fails to point to marriage as the natural outcome of any love affair. Attitudes in society have changed from the end of the sixteenth century to the present day. A play or film today which introduces the theme of romance, will also point forward to the inevitability of sex – and usually go there too, ensuring that the film censors get some work to do and restrict the film from viewing by younger cinema-goers.

It is not surprising that at the end of the sixteenth century the consummation of the marriage is only lightly referred to (just once in *Much Ado About Nothing*, when Don Pedro promises to remain until the consummation of the marriage before returning to Aragon), whilst the marriage itself, and all its religious and social rites, is seen as the exciting climax to the love affair. In <https://assignbuster.com/the-treatment-of-love-and-marriage-in-shakespeares-much-ado-about-nothing/>

short, Peck and Coyle's point is well made, although changing attitudes in society may have reduced the impact of the marital references on contemporary audiences. That marriage is taken very seriously indeed is also shown by the changing attitudes of family members once betrothal has taken place. Just seconds after Don Pedro has informed Claudio that the lady Hero is successfully wooed, and that the consent for marriage has been given by her father, we find Claudio addressing Beatrice as "cousin".

They are not cousins at all, but she is Hero's cousin – the very act of being betrothed has instantly forged close family bonds not only between the couple, but also between their respective extended families. The same thing is found later in the scene when Don Pedro asks Claudio when the wedding will take place. He answers "Tomorrow, my lord. Time goes on crutches till love have all his rites" – a touching allusion to the way time passes so slowly when the excited groom is longing to meet his bride in the wedding ceremony. However, he is over-eager, and Hero's father, Leonato, answers "Not till Monday, my dear son". He is slowing the process a little, but also greets Claudio as a family member in the use of the word "son".

Malcolm Evans ("Alternative Shakespeares" ed. Drakakis, Routledge, 1985) states that in this play and in all the Comedies marriage is "the moment of social renewal which is accompanied by the dance as a symbol of cosmic harmony". It does indeed seem that the "happy ending" so necessary to a Comedy can be more easily achieved with the addition of marriage. As a consequence of this high ideal, the serious nature of marriage is perhaps also reflected in the shame and potential punishment related to infidelity, even before the marriage has taken place.

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Hero was not unfaithful of course, but the play revolves around the mistaken belief (engineered by the bastard Don John) that she has been seeing another man. The shame of this supposed sin is made clear when Hero faints at the suggestion, and the onlookers believe she has dropped down dead. No-one seems to think this inappropriate either. In fact, even her own father gazing at her apparently lifeless body says that death is the best thing for her: “ O fate, take not away thy heavy hand.

Death is the fairest cover for her shame that may be wished for”. And later he adds: “ Why, doth not every earthly thing cry shame upon her? Could she here deny the story that is printed in her blood? Do not live, Hero, do not open thine eyes, for did I think thou wouldst not quickly die, thought I thy spirits were stronger than thy shame, myself would on the rearward of reproaches strike at thy life” – a suggestion that had his daughter not died, he would have taken her life himself because of her sin of seeing another man. In the end it is the friar who persuades Leonato to go along with the plan which might prove Hero innocent. Even he can only persuade the father to support his daughter in this way, by reminding him that if his daughter does indeed turn out to be guilty, he can always lock her away as a nun in a convent: “ And if it sort not well, you may conceal her, as best befits her wounded reputation, in some reclusive and religious life, out of all eyes, tongues, minds, and injuries”. Finally, after all this high moral ground, and the high ideal of marriage, we must consider whether Shakespeare allows us a glimpse of another attitude to marriage – the popular one.

What we have already read is the strong official line on marriage at the end of the sixteenth century. However, in popular thought it is likely that even <https://assignbuster.com/the-treatment-of-love-and-marriage-in-shakespeares-much-ado-about-nothing/>

four hundred years ago there were mother-in-law jokes, and men slipping out of their houses to join their mates in the ale house and discuss their nagging wives, whilst women gathered in groups to gossip about the many failings of men! This popular culture is hinted at in Balthasar's comic song: "Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more. Men were deceivers ever, One foot in sea, and one on shore, To one thing constant never. Then sigh not so, but let them go, And be you blithe and bonny, Converting all your sounds of woe Into hey nonny, nonny". If this is the portrayal of marriage in the play, then we must also consider the portrayal of love.

Perhaps one of the strongest themes in *Much Ado About Nothing*, is the power of love to corrupt! The whole plot is built around a series of deceptions (both evil as in the case of Don John, and well-intentioned as in the case of those who trick Benedick and Beatrice) – deceptions which are successful because of the ways in which love alters people's thinking. Indeed Don John (in his first deception) is instantly able to convince Claudio that Don Pedro is wooing Hero for himself, rather than for Claudio. Why should Claudio so quickly doubt his own friend and battle-partner, and believe the scheming bastard John? Well, he provides the answer himself when he says: "Friendship is constant in all other things save in the office and affairs of love". Personally I believe this is overly pessimistic, and I certainly have friends whom I would trust even if I knew we shared the same love; but human experience has also shown that Claudio has often been proved right.

In the end though, all is well, and Claudio regains his senses. When Don Pedro delivers up the prize of Hero, ready-wooed, as promised, his love for

her is more than he can hide. To Hero he says: “ Lady, as you are mine, I am yours. I give away myself for you, and dote upon the exchange”.

As already mentioned, this central love affair is almost over-shadowed by the secondary story of the relationship between Benedick and Beatrice. Rachel Clayton (“ The English Review”, September 2002 edition) says, “ It is the tougher, more outspoken Beatrice who connects with and appeals to a modern audience, whilst Hero is scorned for accepting, or in fact colluding in, her position as a dutiful daughter in the patriarchal society of Messina”.

Whilst agreeing, I would add that this effect may also be because the story of Claudio and Hero begins to look rather immature, and mostly a series of falling in love, mistrusting, arguing, falling out, feeling sad, kissing and making up again – the classic plot of the low-budget teen-romance movie – when compared with the story of Benedick and Beatrice, who seem sophisticated and complex, and really much more serious, despite the comic lines they enjoy. Thus the secondary plot line shows not only the greater robustness to which Clayton refers, but also a greater maturity. This is probably how Shakespeare intended it.

The basic plot of Claudio and Hero, and Don John’s deception, was not a new one. Very similar plays were written around Europe before and after Much Ado About Nothing, and Shakespeare would have been aware that he was re-using an enduring folk-story theme. His unique twist was to add this parallel deception – but a deception which is both sophisticated and happy, compared with the simple and wicked story of Don John’s deception. Beatrice is sworn never to marry anyone – indeed she states that she prays to God

every morning: “ Lord, I could not endure a husband with a beard on his
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face". Then follows her comic exchange with Leonato in which she states that a man with a beard is more than a youth and therefore too old for her.

Yet a lad who does not yet have a beard is less than a man, and therefore she is not right for him - indeed, she says she should dress such a lad in her own clothing like a girl, for without a beard, any boy is less than a man.

Beatrice believes that the devil will send her straight to heaven due to her condition as a virgin (another interesting insight into sixteenth-century views of sex, love and marriage); but if she seems anti-men in general, her strongest condemnation and sharpest wit, is reserved for Benedick. She calls this a dislike of the man, but her friends see more clearly that it is the result of deeply repressed love. As for Benedick, he says that all Beatrice's words are like poniards (knives, or short swords) stabbing at him; he also says that if her breath was as bad as her words then nobody would be able to live near her, and her foul breath would even infect the North Star! In fact, when Beatrice approaches Don Pedro and Benedick, the latter begs his leader to send him away on some errand so that he need not talk to the woman: " Will your grace command me any service to the world's end? I will go on the slightest errand to the Antipodes that you can devise to send me on.

I will fetch you a tooth-picker now from the furthest inch of Asia..... " and so he goes on, longing to be sent away rather than endure the tongue of Beatrice! Yet again, his friends perceive that he is masking a deeply-felt love for her. Things so deeply-felt yet deeply-masked are not easy to reveal. Colin Butler (" The English Review", April 1998 edition) states, " What each needs is confidence in the other's love and privacy to talk about it.

Ironically, they are tricked into confidence by lies from characters who are about to be tricked themselves". It is Don Pedro who masterminds the plan, but he is assisted by Leonato, Claudio, and Hero. First they trick Benedick into overhearing their discussion of how much Beatrice secretly loves him. The self-confessed permanent bachelor, sworn never to marry, instantly confesses that the love of Beatrice must be requited (returned). He acknowledges his faults, also overheard from his friends, and resolves to correct them, abandoning pride and stubbornness, in order to win Beatrice. Next Hero and her lady-maids perform an almost identical trick on Beatrice, who is forced to overhear their discussion of how much Benedick secretly loves her.

So the two young characters who have for years been sparring with one another in a test of rhetoric and wit, finally acknowledge their love for each other. In the final scene of the play, the rhetoric finally ends when Beatrice is interrupted by Benedick kissing her, with the words: " Peace, I will stop your mouth". So Claudio and Benedick both win their fair maidens. The play ends with passing asides which entreat Don Pedro to find a wife as well (showing how the love and marriage bug has gripped the assembly), and also confirm the capture of the villain Don John, and his impending return for punishment. The final line is left to Benedick. Having found love and embraced it, he ends the play with the words: " Strike up, pipers" and the company exits the stage in dancing.