

Much ado about
nothing



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“ Much Ado About Nothing” has a very similar style to our contemporary romantic comedy. And while the romance and obstacles to the union of Claudio and Hero form the main plot, the action in “ Much Ado About Nothing” is mainly about Benedick and Beatrice, and their relationship. That sub-plot is about the “ merry war” of the sexes between Beatrice and Benedick who “...are not teenagers, but possibly in their late twenties or older” (Lukacs 92). This “ merry war” (“ Much Ado About Nothing” I. i. 56) between the two is given through their witty word play:

Benedick. What, my dear Lady Disdain! are you yet living?

Beatrice. Is it possible disdain should die while she hath

such meet food to feed it as Signior Benedick?

Courtesy itself must convert to disdain, if you

come in her presence.

Benedick. Then is courtesy a turncoat. – But it is certain

I am loved of all ladies, only you excepted: and I

would I could find in my heart that I had not

a hard heart; for, truly, I love none.

Beatrice. A dear happiness to women: they would else have

been troubled with a pernicious suitor. (“ Much Ado About Nothing” I. i. 111-120)

The play suggests that Beatrice was in love with Benedick before the play but he had deceived her and their relationship ended. Benedick now claims that he will never get married. Beatrice is an intelligent girl. Meader asserts that “ Most of Shakespeare’s lovers appear to fall in love at the first meeting” and that “ Beatrice who has apparently been in love with Benedick before the action of “ Much Ado About Nothing”, may have had formal courtship earlier” (Meader 82):

Pedro. Come, lady, come; you have lost the heart of

Signior Benedick.

Beatrice. Indeed, my lord, he lent it me a while; and I gave

him use for it, – a double heart for his single one:

marry, once before he won it of me with false

dice, therefore your grace may well say I have

lost it. (“ Much Ado About Nothing” II. i. 266-272)

Whenever Beatrice and Benedick come together, they seem to have a fight through their witty insults. They are as if competing in intelligence. Beatrice, like Benedick, does not want to marry which is because she has not yet found the right man and because she does not want to give up her freedom with marriage.

According to Benedick, a man who gets married will “ wear his cap with suspicion” (I. i. 184), and will have doubts that his wife has once had other

lovers. He says, if the Count marries, the Count will “ thrust [his] neck into a yoke, wear the print of it and sigh away Sundays” (I. i. 186-87) (Friedman 78).

Benedick speaks ill of marriage in the following lines:

The savage bull may; but if ever the sensible

Benedick bear it, pluck off the bull’s horns and

set them in my forehead; and let me be vilely

painted; and in such great letters as they write,

‘ Here is good horse to hire’ let them signify

under my sign, ‘ Here you may see Benedick, the

married man.’ (“ Much Ado About Nothing” I. i. 246-252)

He imagines himself with horns on his head. – Cuckoldry was very typical in the Renaissance – He is worried that he will be cheated by women if he gets married. Friedman explains it as:

Benedick’s fears of cuckoldry and emasculation through marriage tend to be confirmed by Beatrice, whom Don Pedro has picked out as “ an excellent wife for Benedick” (2. 1. 329) ... Beatrice speaks openly and sharply of her preferences in a spouse, which draws the disapproval of her uncles Leonato and Antonio, who complain that she is “ shrewd of [her] tongue” and “ too curst” (2. 1. 17-18). Beatrice ... implies that, were she to marry, she would

make her partner a cuckold, for she claims that she will have “ no horns” only if God sends her “ no husband” (2. 1. 23-24). (Friedman 81)

As for Beatrice, her irreluctancy for marriage is stated as follows

What should I do with him? dress him in my

apparel, and make him my waiting-gentlewoman?

He that hath a beard is more than a youth; and he

that hath no beard is less than a man: and he that

is more than a youth is not for me; and he that is

less than a man, I am not for him.(“ Much Ado About Nothing” II. i. 33-38)

Through these lines, Beatrice explains why she should not marry. The reason for this is that there is no equal man for her. Beatrice states that “ she “ could not endure” a masculine “...husband with a beard on his face” (2. 1. 26-27), but “ a husband that hath no beard, ” who is therefore “ less than a man, ” is only fit to be dressed in women’s apparel and employed as her “ waiting-gentlewoman” (2. 1. 29-33)” (Friedman 81).

Both Benedick and Beatrice seem to avoid marriage. As Benedick says “... it is certain / I am loved of all ladies, only you excepted: and ... I could find it in my heart that I had not a hard heart; for, truly, I love none” (“ Much Ado About Nothing” I. i. 116-119), Beatrice mocks him saying “... I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow / than a man swear he loves me” (“ Much Ado About Nothing” I. i. 123-124).

While Claudio and Don Pedro play a trick on Benedick in Act II scene iii, Ursula and Hero do the same on Beatrice in Act III scene i. Those tricks are intentioned to make the two fall in love with each other. The audience knows that neither Beatrice nor Benedick wants to get married. Their friends' trick is useful at the end. They are both deceived to believe that one is in love with the other. In that case, Cahn states that the play's "...title word "Nothing" may be taken as a pun on "noting," or overhearing, {since] much of the action involves eavesdropping and the partial discernment of truth" (Cahn 629). Moreover, one must note that the overheard conversations are enough for both. According to Cahn, "...in many comedies of Shakespeare, love is influenced by perception" and in "Much Ado About Nothing" in Act II scene iii, when Beatrice calls Benedick to dinner, Benedick "manages in his own mind to twist her words so that they mean what he wants to hear" (Cahn 636). At this time, it is apparent that while she is not in love with him, Benedick "... [harbours] a secret love for Beatrice" (Friedman 83).

They are not actually deluded to think they are in love with each other; otherwise their friends' tricks would not work since both of them are clever enough not to be deluded. They are actually trying to let them discover their present love to each other. Therefore, it is a kind of realization for both of them. Each decides to pity the other at first, however it is interesting they do it willingly. Benedick has made his decision to perform what the audience has "long felt he has always wanted to do: pursue Beatrice" (Cahn 636). He has now changed his mind and wants to marry Beatrice. Beatrice, on the other hand, has also decided to change her mind, as clear in her own words:

Stand I condemned for pride and scorn so

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much?

Contempt, farewell! and maiden pride, adieu!

No glory lives behind the back of such. (“ Much Ado About Nothing” III. i. 109-112)

In Act IV scene i when Benedick and Beatrice are left alone in the church together, they confess their love to each other. According to Lukacs “ By [Act IV scene i], Benedick and Beatrice are the mature responsible adults who must bring this play to a resolution” (Lukacs 92). The tone changes, however, when Benedick says that he will do anything for Beatrice: Beatrice’s asking him to “ Kill Claudio” (“ Much Ado About Nothing” IV. i. 289) shocks Benedick. Benedick’s refusal makes Beatrice angry since she believes that Claudio has insulted Hero. Benedick soon changes his mind and agrees to challenge his friend Claudio both for Hero’s and for Beatrice’s sake. What Beatrice has wanted Benedick marks Beatrice as “ a lady imposing a love test” as Maisan states. Benedick has to choose “ between love and friendship” (Maisan 165). Meader asserts that “ Benedick, urged on by his beloved Beatrice, challenges his best friend Claudio to a duel” and that “ Courage was conspicuously an outward-looking virtue, as the Renaissance valued it (Meader 76).

Benedick is in fact known with his loyalty as a friend but his love for Beatrice becomes strong enough to challenge his friend to a fight and he soon challenges him to a duel. When Benedick accuses Claudio and Don Pedro for Hero’s death – she has not really died but it is what they think, – they think

he is joking. Thus in Act V scene i, not only Hero's innocence but also Benedick's loyalty to Benedick is proven.

In Act V scene ii, Benedick tries to write poetry for Beatrice. However, he is not good at writing. What he can do best is simply his gentle insults which is also appealing to Beatrice. So they go on flirting and mocking each other.

With the last scene of the play, Shakespeare brings a happy conclusion; both of the couples in the play will be married (Claudio and Hero, and Benedick and Beatrice). Now Beatrice and Benedick are happy to get married. Their hatred of the institution of marriage is finally brought to an end. Although the trick is not the main reason for their uniting, it has really been effective. Lukacs summarizes the relationship between Beatrice and Benedick as:

In the end, Beatrice and Benedick grow up and mature. The world in "Much Ado About Nothing" that was out of balance is reined in and balance is achieved. Maturity brings self-knowledge and Beatrice and Benedick shine in the end ... they are [now] husband and wife. Beatrice "duels" with her wits in order to assert herself. The eye contact, the hint of a smile, the fleeting glance, or hand gesture sustain their encounters as these two function as one witty unit. Beatrice exclaims "O God, that I were a man!" (4. 1), but it is only when she reaches out to a man, Benedick, that she can defend her sister's honor and relinquish her alternate personae of a John Wayne-like character who strides about the stage in manly fashion, or of an immature schoolgirl. In the end, "Much Ado About Nothing" becomes much ado about everything that matters in life. (Lukacs 92)

As a conclusion, Beatrice and Benedick have changed both in their attitudes towards the idea of marriage and towards each other since the beginning of the play. One can clearly notice the likeness of their personalities which not only causes the “ merry war” between them but also brings them together. The reason why Beatrice and Benedick could not go along with each other has been because each is too witty and intelligent. However, one must note that they will never get bored of each other while they are having their ‘ war’ so they are definitely a good match.

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