

# [Shakespeare challenge elizabethan society’s ideas about gender in "much ado about...](https://assignbuster.com/shakespeare-challenge-elizabethan-societys-ideas-about-gender-in-much-ado-about-nothing-essay-sample/)

## Shakespeare Challenge Elizabethan Society’s Ideas about Gender in “ Much Ado about Nothing” Essay Sample

Much Ado About Nothing is a Shakespearian comedy set in Elizabethan society where men were dominant though they had a wide range of attitudes to the positions of women as is explored by the key male characters in the play. In order to detach it from the English audience it is located in Sicily, which meant the play was able to dispute stereotypes about gender without offending or enraging its addressees. Women were meant to be submissive, obedient and silent which are all virtues employed by Hero but deliberately ignored by Beatrice. These two opposing characters are what unmask the true sentiments of the other characters in the play.

The play begins with the men returning from war victorious, which immediately sets them all up as heroes. All except Don John who is introduced as a bastard therefore making him a stereotyped Elizabethan villain. The dominant male is Leonato who immediately shows he is a misogynist: when questioned about Hero, his daughter; he says, “ Her mother hath often told me so”, which implies that women cannot be trusted. The only woman to speak in Act one Scene one is Beatrice and even she says little; as it seems that the men have taken centre stage from the very beginning.

Don Pedro’s associate Claudio immediately falls for Hero even though she has not spoken a word to either of them. He falls for her beauty, “ how fair young Hero is,” she has not yet spoken so they cannot have fallen for her wit or intelligence. They both treat her as property “ thou shalt have her” and Don Pedro allows Claudio to have Hero which not only shows that he does not care about her feelings but also allows him to use his role as Prince to control the lives of others, thus conforming to the stereotype of governing males being authorized to do as they wish. Leonato also treats Hero as a possession when he speaks with his brother, Antonio; he is pleased to hear that the Prince may be interested in his daughter.

Hero and Claudio are a very conventional young couple and are happy to conform to the accepted rituals of aristocratic Elizabethan courtship and marriage. Hero’s name represents faithful love so when Claudio accuses her of cheating she is distraught and does not understand how he could be so mistaken; she exclaims “ Oh God defend me, how I am beset!” This shows that when she agreed to marry him she was perfectly contented with the role she was to take on and would not dream of betraying her father and fiancï¿½e. It is clear that Hero is innocent as she has played the patriarchal woman throughout: she has only spoken seventeen times in the company of men before the wedding and a person in her role would never be unfaithful. She does show more individuality and charisma when speaking with female friends, which denotes her capacity to change her manner depending on her audience although still she speaks of how in love she is; proclaiming, “ my heart is exceedingly heavy”. She does not get involved when Beatrice and Margaret argue about the place of a woman in Act three scene four. Beatrice mocks Margaret’s reliance on men by saying:

“ Ye light o’love with your heels, then if your husband have stables enough, you’ll see he shall lack no barns”

A woman in Hero’s position may actually have different views on love from those she displays but she seems satisfied to wear her mask and be typecast.

Claudio is extremely courtly as a lover but has no faith in women and is most easily lead by other men. First he is informed that the Don Pedro loves Hero and although he seems upset, wanting to be alone as shown when he says “ I pray you leave me”, he puts on a front when around the other men and seems not to care. When Don Pedro informs him the accusations are not true, he springs back to his former posturing self, quoting lines such as “ Silence is the perfectest herald of joy” which may be a discreet suggestion to the behaviour of Hero as he sees her as an object of happiness even though she barely speaks a word; though this line seems to have no significant meaning other than for him to show off. He is again tricked by Don John and believes that Hero has cheated on him. At their wedding he shames her in front of many friends and family and absolutely refuses to believe her pleas of innocence.

This ultimate belief in Don John by both Claudio and Don Pedro is evidence of the male camaraderie throughout the play and even though Don John is a Bastard and a proven knave they trust him above and beyond Hero and the other women proving how very little faith or respect they have for women and their opinions: Claudio pronounces “ Oh, Hero, what a hero though hast been … on my eyelids shall conjecture hang”. Although it may seem that he has little soul he does show a more caring side when it appears his slander has killed Hero. He agrees to do anything for her father to repent his sins though this may just be to keep him on good terms with Leonato. What a modern audience would find especially shocking is the way in which Hero readily takes back Claudio at the end of the play. Her jejune attitude is typical of the time and comes from the fact that Leonato, her father, is quick to forgive Don Pedro and Claudio so Hero is willing to do her father’s bidding and may actually love Claudio enough to forgive him.

The relationship between Beatrice and Benedick is a focal point of the play even though they do not actually unite until the end. Beatrice’s character completely conflicts with that of Hero. She is automatically granted more freedom as a woman because she lives with her uncle, Leonato, not her parents and so he does not have as much control over her. She is instantly portrayed as stronger than the other females because she speaks in the first scene amongst many men. The signs of a past relationship with Benedick are also obvious early on when she says:

“ He set up his bills here in Messina, and challenged Cupid at the flight: and my uncle’s fool, reading the challenge, subscribed for Cupid and challenged him at the birdbolt.”

This implies that she sees him as a “ fool” and that he hurt her emotionally. Throughout the play she mocks Hero for being so humble and is adamant she does not need a man:”[She] had rather hear [her] dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves [her]”. She is of equal intelligence with most men and readily matches the aptitude of Benedick thus igniting their continuous ‘ merry war of wit’. It appears on the surface that she is a much stronger woman but she masks her true feelings; she cannot help but love Benedick even though he betrayed her and eventually admits that she does and agrees to marry him.

Benedick is also one of the strongest characters and in the beginning represents another type of stereotypical man: he who is an eternal bachelor and a ‘ professed tyrant’ to women. Beatrice says, “ He hath every month a new sworn brother”, indicating that he is not an honest man and has betrayed her in the past. Like Beatrice, he mocks Claudio for changing when in love but when he finally falls for Beatrice he shaves off his beard, changes his dress and wears cologne. This implies that he is willing to change for her and is trying to impress her. The traits and characteristics of Beatrice and Benedick were what brought them together, and also what separated them. They were isolated because they always tried to be independent and not need each other, an outlook which went against the Elizabethan view of the importance of marriage.

While Claudio and Hero represent entirely what Elizabethan marriage was, Beatrice and Benedick clash completely. Romance is a struggle for them; they both let their own egos get in the way of falling in love. They ridicule Claudio and Hero but their union has come about in much a similar way. They were tricked by their peers and while Claudio postures, Benedick changes his appearance in order to impress the woman he is in love with. They both speak in prose as a representation of both their honesty and true commitment, eventually to each other. This contrasts with Claudio, who speaks mainly in verse, a way of exaggerating his false and posturing nature. Towards the end of the play Benedick says to Beatrice “ Peace, I will stop your mouth”. While this could be a representation of his humorous character it could also be that Beatrice had finally decided to conform as she makes no effort to stop him from kissing her and does not speak after this point. They are now about to get married; some have interpreted this as a symbolisation of the establishment of a renewed, harmonious society, but it is questionable whether Beatrice can possibly be truly happy with this conclusion1. A modern audience could not comprehend the thought that such an outgoing, feisty woman could be so easily denounced but an Elizabethan audience would have been contented with this as a clichd resolution.

Claudio and Benedick both represent different types of male stereotypes while Hero plays the classic female subservient character. Beatrice is the only character in the Much Ado About Nothing who dares to be diverse by speaking out about her feelings and opinions of men and humanity. It is thought that she may have been loosely based on Queen Elizabeth, as she was a highly intelligent woman of the time. 2 When Beatrice is ‘ silenced’ at the end of the play, it is Shakespeare’s way of making sure that everyone has fitted into his or her allocated role. The women acquiescent and the men preponderant, Don John the villain is fled yet brought back by the armies and peace seems to have been restored to Messina, as it was in the beginning. Although Beatrice and Benedick try to fight their positions throughout they eventually kowtow to the Elizabethan society’s stereotypes and fit in with all the other characters; who have remained patriarchal all the way through.