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Arrows and Traps in *Much Ado About Nothing*

by Grace Horn

(English 1102)

In the play, *Much Ado about Nothing*, by William Shakespeare, Beatrice and Benedick's relationship is not as strong as Hero and Claudio's relationship. Most of the characters in the play are in romantic relationships and some seem destined to fail. A good relationship is based on mutual respect for differences, kindness, and forgiveness. However, a relationship based on passion soon burns itself out.

Beatrice is a strong-willed woman. In the beginning of the play, she is happy being single and would never consider being a married woman. At the beginning of Act I, Beatrice has been arguing with Benedick about love. Benedick argues to Beatrice that he is not simply looking to woo a lady, and that he does not have as hard a heart as she insists. In reply to Benedick, Beatrice says, "A dear happiness to women. They would else have been troubled with a pernicious suitor. I thank God and my cold blood I am of your humor for that. I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me" (Shakespeare 15). This quote shows that Beatrice has no interest in Benedick, and is quite content where she is. She is enjoying being single and no matter how hard Benedick tries to court her, he is not going to win over her heart. Beatrice does not see herself being committed to anyone else in her lifetime, and she is happy to admit that. In *Much Ado about Nothing: A Modern Perspective*, Gail Kern Paster says, "If betrayal is the universal fate of the married, it is no wonder that Beatrice regards marriage as a form of repentance" (216). Paster points out the fact that Beatrice is afraid of marrying and thinks of it as a problem. She is one of the only women that is not married. She refuses to get married until the very end of the play and is uncompromising towards the thought of getting married because she is afraid of commitment; she thinks it will lead to unfaithfulness as demonstrated by the set up of Hero and how it ruined her marriage relationship with Claudio.

Beatrice's relationship with Benedick is very rocky throughout the play, they don't seem to agree on anything with regards to relationships or marriage, and they even have differing opinions on the other characters in the play. When Benedick sees Beatrice, the tension stirs and an argument almost always erupts. The two fight at every chance that occurs, and they hold disagreeing opinions. This doesn't make for a particularly healthy relationship because that only adds to the tension. This tension can be seen in their actions towards each other throughout most of the play. Paster agrees and does not believe that Beatrice and Benedick are a compatible match. Paster says, "Beatrice and Benedick are given the function in this play of wittily enacting for our benefit the conventional postures of mutual antagonism so that their eventual union will seem both to ratify the irrational force of desire (no matter how it is brought into being) and to dissolve the larger social tensions exemplified by their mutual mistrust" (220). Throughout the play, they continually point out each other's faults and pick fights with each other. When they ultimately marry, their future relationship is sure to be full of tension.

In contrast, Claudio is able to win over Hero's heart at first sight. After Claudio first comes to Leonato's home and lays eyes on Hero, they instantly fall in love. Claudio says, "In mine eye she is the sweetest lady that ever I looked on" (Shakespeare 17). Claudio is instantly awestruck by Hero, which is contradictory to how Benedick feels for Beatrice. Although Benedick and Beatrice seem to be somewhat "friendly" towards each other throughout the play, as they talk and spend time together, they do not have the instant spark that Hero and Claudio feel. They do not realize their true love for each other until they overhear conversations between other groups of people and finally Benedick

proposes at Hero and Claudio's second wedding. B. K. Lewalski says, "Claudio fits the pattern of Bembo's typical 'young' lover who acts primarily in terms of sense knowledge...and is moved by desire and passion..." (246). This quote by Lewalski is showing that Claudio acts on his emotions. This demonstrates that Hero and Claudio's relationship is more stable, because he is not naïve and he knows what he wants in a relationship. He knows what he is looking for in a woman and when he finds Hero, he is passionate about her and pursues the relationship with her.

Every relationship is going to have its bumps in the road, but the relationship between Hero and Claudio seems to be much healthier than the relationship between Beatrice and Benedick because Hero and Claudio fall in love on their own. Beatrice and Benedick are tricked into falling in love by many different characters in the play at different times. An example of this is after Beatrice overhears a conversation by Hero and Ursula. The two women leave to get ready for supper and Hero whispers to Ursula, "If it prove so, then loving goes by haps; Some Cupid kills with arrows, some with traps" (Shakespeare 91). Hero and Ursula are setting Beatrice and Benedick up, trapping them, into falling in love. Beatrice and Benedick do love each other, but it takes overhearing other people's conversations about how much the other loves them to admit their true feelings. If two people need to overhear someone else talking about them to realize how they really feel, then are those feelings really genuine? In *The Friendly Shakespeare: A Thoroughly Painless Guide to the Best of the Bard*, Norrie Epstein says, "Tricked by friends into admitting their love, Beatrice and Benedick at last reluctantly do so, with Benedick's grudging offer to marry Beatrice 'out of pity'" (89). Epstein is noting how Benedick courts Beatrice the whole play, and then decides to marry her because he feels bad that all the other women are married and she isn't. Also, he overhears conversations and realizes that she truly loves him, even if his feelings aren't as strong as his might be for her, he decides to make the commitment to marry her. They weren't truly in love until they are tricked into falling in love with each other; this is no way to have a true relationship because it doesn't show that the real feelings are there.

Being tricked into falling in love isn't going to build a strong relationship. Love is meant to happen naturally and considering how much Beatrice and Benedick argue, their relationship in the future won't be as strong as Hero and Claudio's is. David Bevington makes a good point and states that "Beatrice and Benedick have been playing the game of verbal abuse for so long that they scarcely remember how it started -- perhaps as a squaring off between the two intelligences worthy of contending with each other, perhaps as a more profoundly defensive reaction of two sensitive persons not willing to part lightly with their independence. They seem to have had a prior relationship with each other that ended unhappily" (217). This is a good point: if Beatrice and Benedick possibly had a relationship in the past and ended for any reason, then this doesn't predict a healthy relationship in the future. However, the relationship between Hero and Claudio is a lot more stable because they haven't had that period of being together and ending their relationship. Beatrice and Benedick argue a lot and that doesn't indicate a stable relationship. Hero and Claudio know their love is true because they weather many storms, including the framing of Hero by Don John, a fake death of Hero, and Benedick's disapproval of their love at the beginning of the play. They still end up getting married and love each other as deeply as they did before Hero's staged death. This is seen when Hero un.masks at their second wedding and Claudio is overjoyed at the sight of her. He can't believe that it is "another Hero" and they get married right away (193). This illustrates that their love is still as strong for each other as it was before.

Beatrice and Benedick, however, do have strong feelings for each other and Benedick would do anything for Beatrice. In Act 4, Beatrice makes a harsh request of Benedick. Beatrice asks Benedick to "kill Claudio" (Shakespeare 143). With Benedick and Claudio being friends, this is not a simple task for Benedick to accomplish. However, he loves Beatrice so much that he says he will "challenge him" despite how much it will hurt him to do so (144). Norrie Epstein says, "Throughout the play...it's obvious to everyone but themselves that they are drawn to each other" (89). Other

people in Messina see that Beatrice and Benedick will make a good couple and that despite their arguing, they would be really good for each other. Beatrice and Benedick obviously don't see this because they keep arguing and purposely picking fights with each other. From the outside it appears to be a strong love; however, the two argue frequently and Beatrice seems to be using Benedick to get her revenge for the "death" of her cousin.

At the end of Act V, a wedding for a different Hero and for Claudio is taking place. Once Hero's veil is removed and Claudio realizes that his bride really is Hero, they are both overjoyed that they can be together at last. Right after they are wed, Benedick finds Beatrice and asks her if she loves him. Beatrice replies, "Why no, no more than reason" (Shakespeare 193). Why would Beatrice lie? One reason for this might be the fact that that many people in Beatrice's position might feel it to be imprudent to confess that she really does love someone after she denies over and over that she "could not endure a husband..." and wants to remain single (39). Yet the truth is Beatrice and Benedick both refuse to admit their love for each other because they are afraid. If they truly love each other enough, they would want to be together so badly that they would profess it right away. They are so stubborn it takes others to bring evidence in the form of written papers with their love confessions to show that they really do have feelings for the other. Lewalski, in *Love, Appearance and Reality: Much Ado about Something*, says, "Beatrice and Benedick endeavor to come to terms with the world through wit, intellect, reason: both are frequently described by their friends as wits, and they engage in constant skirmishes of wit between themselves. As witty, sophisticated rationalists both consider that love produces foolish, mad, fantastical behavior which is quite unworthy of them" (242). Lewalski describes Beatrice and Benedick as "witty," and this doesn't make for a good relationship because they will continually be making humorous remarks back at each other, which will turn into arguments as they have shown earlier when Beatrice was rejecting Benedick at the altar.

The future relationship between Beatrice and Benedick won't be as strong as the future relationship between Hero and Claudio not only because of their stubbornness, but also because they were tricked into falling in love. Passion will soon burn itself out. By human interference in nature's job of matchmaking, people's relationships can be eternally ruined.

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