Beatrice: Female Comedic Ingenuity Amid a Patriarchal Society

Quirky and opinionated, Beatrice in William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* is a paradigm of the woman today's feminists strive to become. Despite her existence in the patriarchal society of Messina, she establishes herself as a powerful and worthy female figure in the eyes of the men around her through astute proclamations and quick-witted jesting. Beatrice and Benedick ridicule one another mercilessly, yet the audience picks up on the undertones of betrayal and heartache. Her former relationship with Benedick and a fatherless adolescence has influenced her approach on the topic of love, and for many years she shuns it, vowing to remain a single woman forever. In the play, Beatrice breaks free from the mold society has presented her with, locates independence within herself, and, in some respects, sets an example for women today.

Through a series of slanders from the opening of the play, Beatrice defines her relationship with Benedick as one of carefree and witty banter. After receiving news that he is to return from battle with Claudio, Beatrice slanders him incessantly, exclaiming "O Lord, he will hang upon [Claudio] like a disease...If he have caught the Benedick, it will cost him a thousand pound ere a be cured" (1.1.68-71). She feels a strong compulsion to treat him as if he is inferior in order to establish herself as an individual who is unaffected by the emotion of love. Benedick responds to Beatrice in a like manner. Stephen Greenblatt claims that "Beatrice and Benedick's conversations may be hostile...but in their hearts they are, and have long been, deeply in love"
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(1412). He suggests that Beatrice's taunting has its roots in a previous affair with Benedick in which she was left brokenhearted. The text alludes to this notion. When Don Pedro inquires as to whether or not Beatrice has Benedick's heart, she reveals with a disheartened tone, "'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'" (2.1.242-244). As is revealed by this exchange, her cheery teasing has undertones of sadness. Despite the fact that their disputes are viewed as battles between friends, the audience cannot help but realize Beatrice's serious heartache.

The idea of a past relationship between Beatrice and Benedick is also supported by Marjorie Garber, who asserts, "there has clearly been a sundering or a falling-away, one that has left both players tentative, proud, and perhaps bruised" (375). Both characters are unwilling to admit that the past has shaped their negative opinions on romantic relationships. After Benedick promises: "'And I would I could find in my heart that I had not a hard heart, for truly I love none'", Beatrice retorts: "'A dear happiness to women...I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me'" (1.1.102-108). The two scorn love in an attempt to protect themselves, but as Ejner J. Jensen points out, "Those who claim to have no wish to marry...find the path of matrimony smoothed before them, by friends intent on bringing them together against their will" (48). Indeed, such a trick occurs in the play.

Sensing the tension between Beatrice and Benedick, Leonato, Claudio and Don Pedro devise a plan. As Benedick wanders the garden, the three pretend they are unaware of his presence, and Don Pedro questions Leonato: "'What was it you told me of today, that your niece Beatrice was in love with Signor Benedick?'" (2.3.84-86). As they paint the perfect picture of a love-stricken woman who is bound to be rejected by a heartless man, Benedick decides it would not be all that difficult to "'be horribly in love with her'" (2.3.207-208). All Leonato, Claudio, and
Don Pedro have to do to convince Benedick to cease his condemnation of love is to claim his unworthiness of such a woman as Beatrice. Hero and Ursula deceive Beatrice in an identical way, and much like Benedick, she is determined to prove the ladies wrong by submitting herself to his courting. The two conversions experienced by both Beatrice and Benedick are imperative to the plot, as Maurice Charney elucidates, "Since they are so well suited for each other, Beatrice and Benedick...only need to be convinced by outside persuasion of what they know for certain in their hearts" (43). Because they are unable to see the love they have for the other, Beatrice and Benedick need those uninvolved to set the relationship in motion.

Key to Benedick and Beatrice's relationship is their incessant ability to counter the other's statement. Oftentimes, a simple snide remark from the first can result in a drawn out conversation where the second plays off the original idea through puns and metaphors that continue lines and lines later, as is revealed in the following example:

Benedick: God keep your ladyship still in that mind. So some gentleman or other shall scrape a predestinate scratched face.

Beatrice: Scratching could not make it worse an 'twere such a face as yours.

Benedick: Well, you are a rare parrot-teacher.

Beatrice: A bird of my tongue is better than a beast of yours.

Beatrice: I would my horse had the speed of your tongue, and so good a continuer. But keep your way, i' God's name. I have done.

Benedick: You always end with a jade's trick. I know you of old. (1.1.109-117)

Albeit their ripostes are stinging, they also give off brilliance that indicates an intense interconnection. Beatrice and Benedick's relationship is closer-knit than they are willing to confess. Robert Ornstein supports this analysis, claiming that "Beatrice and Benedick are the
most attractive pair of lovers in the comedies- the only ones perhaps who are equally matched in intelligence, humor, and humanity (119). Only later does it become obvious to Beatrice and Benedick how perfectly they fit together, a truth that the audience is aware of almost immediately.

It is only on a rare occasion that one of Shakespeare's female characters is fatherless. Beatrice herself is one of the few, an orphan who was raised by her uncle Leonato. In the midst of a male-dominated society, the effect on Beatrice appears to be long-term. Diane Elizabeth Dreher acknowledges this, claiming that she is "defensive and hesitant to commit [herself] to men" (13). The combination of growing up without a male role model and a failed affair with Benedick has given Beatrice the ability to take a blind eye to the patriarchy surrounding her and to deny the existence of love. She brags about her objection to marriage, but when she overhears Hero telling Ursula that "[Beatrice] cannot love, Nor take no shape nor project of affection, She is so self-endeared", Beatrice is embarrassed that her friends regard her in such a way (3.1.54-56). While the audience knows that Hero and Ursula are setting her up to be with Benedick, Beatrice's determination to prove that she is worthy of his love reveals a conversion of her character. Hero's serving woman, Margaret, observes of Beatrice, "And how you may be converted I know not, but methinks you look with your eyes, as other women do" (3.4.75-77). The change of heart and mood Beatrice experiences is noticed by the ladies she surrounds herself with, as the assertive woman finds herself believing in true love once again.

Although unavoidable in the time period of which Beatrice lives, it is unfortunate to see her consistently beaten down by the oppressive male figures surrounding her. Beatrice retaliates with tart criticisms that reveal a sliver of bitterness in her attitude towards men. There is no doubt that she holds her own, stands her own ground, yet her rejection of marriage indicates something
deeper. Garber provides an affirmation to this statement, revealing that "[The men's] remarks underscore her position as an unmarried woman dependent upon the hospitality of her uncle" (377). Essentially, the gentlemen deny Beatrice's independence only because she refuses to take a husband. Beatrice's opinion of love was unconventional at the time, as she was expected to marry in order to eventually fulfill the role of wife and mother. Leonato attempts to remind her of what is anticipated of a woman, remarking "'Well, niece, I hope to see you one day fitted with a husband'", to which Beatrice counters "'Not till God make men of some other mettle than earth. Would it not grieve a woman to be overmastered with a piece of valiant dust...No uncle, I'll none. Adam's sons are my brethren, and truly I hold it a sin to match in my kindred" (2.1.48-54).

Beatrice possesses the ability to spin any frustrating situation into one of amusement through her quick wit, which was frowned upon in her day. However, feminists today rejoice at her vigor and courageousness, perceiving her talent as a gift that women should try to achieve. Shakespeare builds Beatrice's character perfectly, for her personality would be unbelievable if she was alive in a different time period or if she was not so clearly lacking positive masculine role models in her life.

Beatrice adapts in personality when she attempts to open her heart to Benedick once again, yet the spunk that is characteristic of her personality never dims. When Beatrice's cousin Hero is disgraced by Claudio, the former weeps at the injustice accusations. Benedick promises Beatrice he will "do anything for thee", and she requests that he "'Kill Claudio'" (4.1.286-287). Although a conversion has taken place in Beatrice, both her personality and strong opinions are retained, and she speaks her mind just as she would on any other given day. The request that has been made of Benedick is one of great proportions. Claudio is his very best friend, yet if he refuses to commit the deed, he will have failed to prove himself in Beatrice's eyes. After Beatrice
conveys the sincerity of her hatred of Claudio for the turmoil he has caused Hero. Benedick proposes that he shall challenge the slanderer to a duel. Garber has a firm belief that "This is a play that several times comes dangerously close to tragedy. Beatrice's command to her lover, 'Kill Claudio', is a turning point" (390). The lines of loyalty are crossed at this point in the play when Benedick promises to turn against his Claudio and Don Pedro. As Garber relates in her interpretation, through a stroke of luck, the tragic battle between Benedick and Claudio never occurs. In a confrontation between the men, Benedick threatens: "You are a villain. I jest not...Do me right, or I will protest your cowardice. You have killed a sweet lady, and her death will fall heavy on you" (5.1.143-147). Benedick breaks ties with Claudio and Don Pedro, but has no need to fight Claudio, as the latter is in a battle with his conscience. Although Beatrice herself is not physically present in the confrontation, the presence of her assertive nature resounds throughout the room.

If Beatrice were to lack the strong will she so greatly possesses, the play would be considered a tragedy, rather than a comedic performance. Seemingly effortlessly, she works her magic and everything falls into place in the end. Leonato professes to Claudio that Hero has passed, having been slandered so brutally, and gives Claudio an opportunity to redeem himself by marrying his niece. Benedick requests Beatrice's hand in marriage from Leonato, asking her uncle to "stand with [Beatrice and me] this day to be conjoined In the state of honourable marriage" (5.4.29-30). Two extremely different weddings are foreshadowed in the last act of the play. Ornstein's description of the two nuptials proves their critical differences, as he states: "[Claudio and Hero's] reconciliation, like their falling in love, is expressed in silent looks and embraces, not in words. The lovers' dialogue belongs to Beatrice and Benedick, who express their mutual affection with mock dismay and teasing questions and answers" (139). If Hero
wishes to marry, Claudio is her only option, as the times called for an unjustly disgraced woman to wed the man who emotionally abused her. On the other hand, Benedick and Beatrice have a love that is shockingly sincere, although they playfully refuse to admit its existence even in the end. Benedick assures Beatrice, "I take thee for pity", Beatrice snaps back by saying, "I would not deny you... I yield upon great persuasion, and partly to save your life, for I was told you were in a consumption", and Benedick ends the debate by sealing it with a kiss (5.4.92-95). It is through this act of affection that Beatrice is silenced for the very first time. The play closes with ceremonial dancing and happiness is restored in Messina. It is only Don John, the bastard and criminal who initiated Hero's downfall, who finds himself alone, payment for his treacherous deeds.

Beatrice's role in Shakespeare's comedy *Much Ado About Nothing* is that of a woman who refuses to be brought down by the males who so heavily influence the society and time period during which she lives. The complexity of her character cannot be mistaken. Beatrice swears off love, yet she longs for Benedick, remaining ignorant until Hero and Ursula force her to look inside of herself and succumb to love. Beatrice succumbs to love, yet pressures Benedick to validate his feelings by performing a deed of her request. As the play closes, it is clear that although Beatrice modifies her marital beliefs, her inner character is never altered, which is the very element that makes her one of Shakespeare's greatest comedic heroines of all time.
Works Cited


