**Analyzing Benedict: “Much Ado About Nothing” by William Shakespeare**

In “Much Ado About Nothing” by William Shakespeare, Benedict is in denial and hiding the fact that he is interested in love and marriage. He uses language that is contrary to what he feels to keep it hidden for fear of rejection.

According to McDonald, “The confirmed bachelor Benedick justifies his unexpected attraction to Beatrice with the words, ‘The world must be peopled’.” This is an ambiguous statement because Benedict could be insinuating a male paradigm that suggests that because she is a woman it is her purpose to marry and breed children because that is what women do because it is expected of women. In the alternative, his statement is simply a justification for his attraction to her and if she is to bear children, they should be, or might as well be, his children. He denies having an interest in love and marriage as though he is trying to convince himself that it does matter. Secretly it does matter to him, but he has does not want to be rejected by her. His sparring with Beatrice is a ruse to hide the fact that he is attracted to her but knowing that she has no interest in marrying he does not want to place himself in a position to be rejected by her and to admit it; he would be just as foolish as his friend Claudio. In Act 2, Scene 3, lines 8-11, Benedict states the following, “Seeing how much another man is a fool when he dedicates his behaviors to love, will, after he hath laughed at such shallow follies in others, become the argument of his own scorn by falling in love – such a man is Claudio”. Benedict’s own words condemn him to appear as a fool should he declare love for any woman since has proclaimed himself immune from such a trivial emotion. His adamant “bachelor for life” is a cover-up for the hidden fear of rejection.

Beatrice is a complex character and does not fit the gender norm of a submissive female and her ability to spar with words when she and Benedict communicate is indicative of the affection she secretly feels for Benedict. She does not exhibit the gender-specific traits of a woman who is trying to secure the affection of a man, she is not docile or quiet. She claims to not be interested in marriage and is very outspoken about her opinions about marriage (2.1). When she speaks her mind quite vehemently, her uncle, in modest reproof states, “Niece, thou wilt never get thee a husband if thou be so shrewd of thy tongue” (2.1.18-19). Her cousin Hero also considers Beatrice’s shrewd tongue an example of her “self-endeared” (3.1.58) nature and says that she is filled with pride and values her wit (3.1.34-35) to the extent that all else pales in comparison. Hero believes Beatrice has a much to high opinion of herself (3.1). When Ursula and Hero set their trap for Beatrice the dialogue is worded in a way to appeal to Beatrice’s femininity and her nature. Hero has an understanding of Beatrice’s opinion of herself and knowing this she states this to her conspirator Ursula, “When I do name him, let it be thy part to praise him more than ever man did merit” (3.1.19-20). Hero’s purpose is to incite Beatrice’s interest in what Ursula is saying about Benedict. They proceed to speak of his valor, his good name, and Benedict’s good looks. Hero states, “I will go to Benedict and counsel him to fight against his passion, and truly I’ll devise some honest slanders to stain my cousin with” (3.1.87-89). Shakespeare appears to have an understanding of people, women in particular. Sometimes they don’t want the person in front of them but as soon as someone else shows an interest, they decide they want that person. This wordplay that Shakespeare uses reveals human nature. It attacks Beatrice’s self-worth and high opinion of herself because what the ladies say about her causes her to take a look at herself and assess her behavior. It affects her to know that Benedict is appealing to other women. In addition, listening to Ursula speak kindly about Benedict would cause her to reassess Benedict's value as a man deserving to be loved.

Shakespeare is very subtle in the purpose of the prince’s conspiring to unite Benedict and Beatrice. He holds Benedict in high regard, he has gone to war with him, and they have fought side by side, and he had the favor of the prince. There is no doubt that he was privy to Benedict's ideals about love and marriage after all they had spent time on the battlefield and were well acquainted with each other. Moreover, when the prince told Benedict that he would see him “pale with love” (1.1.243) before he died, Benedict's response is hilarious. Benedict states, “With anger, with sickness, or with hunger, my lord, not with love… pick out my eyes with a ballad maker’s pen and hang me up at the door of a brothel house for the sign of blind Cupid” (1.1.244-249). The prince also admired Beatrice, he did not consider her to be a shrewd tongued woman but a woman with a “merry heart” (2.1.306). The prince also makes a statement that is subject to interpretation and ambiguous. During a conversation between the prince and Beatrice, the prince tells her he will get her a husband and she responds by saying that if the prince has a brother like himself. The prince responds with this statement, Will you have me, lady?” According to McDonald examples of dramatic comedy can include “intrigue comedy” (82). This statement just made by the prince promotes intrigue in the play between these characters because the prince has just told Beatrice that she has put down Benedict and lost his love (2.1.78-79). When this line of dialogue the prince makes is delivered by a dramatist, it can be performed in different ways. It could promote intrigue by making it appear that the prince is offering himself as a love interest to Beatrice. This would make it appear as though the prince is a suitor. Or, the dialogue can be delivered as playfulness between the characters as they deliver the dialogue in this scene. According to McDonald, “The conventions of comedy, like those of all literary modes, are consistent with the customs of the society in which a comedy is produced” (83). If the prince was portrayed as a love interest for Beatrice it would not have been consistent with the customs of society because a prince in many instances, will eventually be crowned king, and Beatrice is just the niece of the governor and the prince is bound by social and royal restraints according to English custom. The prince’s conspiracy serves a dual purpose, it will unite two people whom he cares about. He likes Beatrice and sees her as a good match for his dear friend, Benedict and to see Benedict succumb to the love he has for Beatrice despite his many denials.

It is the shrewdness of tongue between Benedict and Beatrice that gives this play a humorous tone. In Act 2, Scene 1, Benedict must face his fear of being rejected when he intended to try to fool Beatrice and she acted like she did not know that he was the man in the mask; she made such disparaging statements about him that he vowed he would never marry her. When speaking to the prince of what happens between them, he stated, “O, she misused me past the endurance of a block! I stood like a man at a mark with a whole army shooting at me… I would not marry her though she were endowed with all that Adam had left him before he transgressed” (2.1.236-237, 2.1.247-249). His ploy had backfired, she knew it was him, but he did not know that she had recognized him. It is this portion of the play that is the most humorous because Benedict is so hurt all he can do is lash out verbally and the dialogue is hilarious and he states, “Will your Grace command me any service in the world’s end? I will go… rather than hold three words conference with this harpy” (2.1.259-260, 2.1.265-267). Their barbed tongued comments are the main attraction of this comedy. Benedict and Beatrice are the most dynamic characters in this play with their shrewd witted comments being a focal point and most interesting part of the play. McDonald states that” One of the comedies main attractions is the laughter that derives from wordplay” (82). McDonald captures the essence of Shakespeare’s wordplay in the dialogue for Benedict and Beatrice when he states, wit and desire, provide a spectrum along which we may arrange the major examples of dramatic comedy” (82). The literary structure of the scenes with Benedict and Beatrice have a very humorous tone and give the comic dramatist an opportunity to emphasize certain aspects of the scene during the dialogue with facial and body movement which enhance the comedy in the scene. The structure and movement of this play follow the literary structure for comedies as indicated in McDonald it “moves from confusion to order…from unhappiness to satisfaction, from separation to union… from singleness to marriage (82). The confusion between Hero and Claudio and Benedict and Beatrice is resolved. The prince has succeeded in playing cupid and has become aware of Don John’s duplicity and as McDonald states, “Things are better at the end than they were at the beginning” (82).

Benedict was in denial and hiding the fact that he was interested in love and marriage. He was attracted to Beatrice and that is why he continues to spar with words with her whenever he was in her company. Although he used language that was contrary to what he really felt, it was only because of his fear of rejection.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William, et al. Much Ado about Nothing. Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2009.