The Spectre of Marriage: Gender Discomfort in *Much Ado About Nothing*

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William Shakespeare’s Much Ado About Nothing, ostensibly a romantic comedy about falling in love Renaissance-style, does in fact make much out of its own language. Nowhere do language and wit, or the ability to use words more heavily into Shakespeare’s characterization than in the lovely Verona of the play. Thus, the topic of wit in the play has received its due attention. So, too, has the topic of gender difference been addressed. These areas—language and gender—seem to be inseparable in Much Ado About Nothing. Many scholars have argued for this connection: Carol Cook makes clear Beatrice’s appropriation of masculine privilege in speech through her use of wit; Michael Friedman suggests that the marriage of Beatrice and Benedick figuratively and literally silences her; Harry Berger Jr. examines the views of Hero and Beatrice concerning marriage and how those views are communicated through language. Two conclusions seem to be rather unanimous: one, ability in wit and language is the single key factor in the play which determines the character’s social rank and success within the hierarchy of Verona; and two, language is characterized as a phallic, penetrating force. Thus, Beatrice’s ability in wit—equaled only by Benedick—is in effect an act of appropriation of masculine privilege on her part.

In this essay, I intend to continue this interrogation of language as a signifier of gender difference; however, I use “difference” as indicating “distance”—the distance between the idealized masculine and feminine and the positionality of gendered identities of Benedick and Beatrice, respectively. The language of the play closely allies Beatrice and Benedick in the opening scenes through common images and, more importantly, as removed from their respective gender codes. What follows in the action of the play is the deception of friends which eventually reveals the true feelings of each and paves the way for the marriage of the two. It is at this point that Cook argues for the affirmation of the “masculine ethos” by Beatrice and that Friedmann suggests that Beatrice is “silenced” by marriage. However, would like to argue that, just as they are pushed into love by their friends, Beatrice and Benedick are pushed into gender codes by the spectre of marriage.

The expression of this involuntarily assumed (gendered) position is found in Beatrice’s fervent description of herself in opposition to man and Benedick’s constant identification of his masculine privilege—one centered in language and language in the single key factor in the play which determines the character’s social rank and success within the hierarchy of Verona—and two, language is characterized as a phallic, penetrating force. Thus, Beatrice’s ability in wit—equaled only by Benedick—is in effect an act of appropriation of masculine privilege on her part.

The coupling of Beatrice and Benedick in Act Four comes as no surprise to the audience. The two are tied together by similar images and by the distance they place them from the idealized gender codes of the society as manifested by Hero and Claudio. This connection begins in very first scene of the play, as both state their aversion to love, Benedick’s declaration of “Then is courtesy a turncoat. But it is certain I am loved by 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” is answered quickly by Beatrice: “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 humour for that” (II.i.110–116). Ironical to showing resistance to love and marriage, Benedick is characterized as a phallic, penetrating force. Thus, Beatrice’s ability in wit—equaled only by Benedick—is in effect an act of appropriation of masculine privilege on her part.

In Act Two, scene three, Beatrice is figured as quite the picture of womanly despair and suffering: “Then down upon her knees she falls, weeps, sobs, beats her heart, and with a fury in her eyes, cries ‘My heart is in the cause’” (II.iii.138–140). Hero—perhaps with the single exception of Act Three, scene one—does not speak enough to be characterized as other than the virtuous maid. Here I agree with Cook in that “[H]ero becomes, in effect, a sign to be read and interpreted by others” (194). What follows in Act Two is Beatrice and Benedick begin to push into love by Hero’s realization that “[Beatrice] were an excellent wife for Benedick” and his subsequent plan to break with her and with her father, “And thou shalt have her” (II.iii.274–278). Not only is the speech of each manipulated—through a shared ability in language and wit, is pointed out specifically for each character. Beatrice identifies herself in I.I, saying, “I was born to thine eye, and all my beauty is my heart” (266). Benedick is identified by Pedro in II.i: “I will only be bold with Benedick for his company; for, from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot, he is all martial” (7–9). It is true that Beatrice and Benedick are allied together outside of a society concerned with—now that the war is over—love and marriage. In banding together as dissident, the two create new ways of marriage and love by Pedro’s realization that “[Beatrice] were an excellent wife for Benedick” and his subsequent plan to break with her and with her father, “And thou shalt have her” (II.iii.274–278). Not only is the speech of each manipulated—through a shared ability in language and wit, is pointed out specifically for each character. Beatrice identifies herself in I.I, saying, “I was born to thine eye, and all my beauty is my heart” (266). Benedick is identified by Pedro in II.i: “I will only be bold with Benedick for his company; for, from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot, he is all martial” (7–9).

The opening scenes of the play figure Beatrice and Benedick as transgressors of their respective genders; allied in their differences, they experience a different type of alienation as soon as they begin to be pushed together by societal forces. Beatrice and Benedick begin to push into language of wit by Pedro’s realization that “[Beatrice] were an excellent wife for Benedick” and his subsequent plan to break with her and with her father, “And thou shalt have her” (II.iii.274–278). Not only is the speech of each manipulated—through a shared ability in language and wit, is pointed out specifically for each character. Beatrice identifies herself in I.I, saying, “I was born to thine eye, and all my beauty is my heart” (266). Benedick is identified by Pedro in II.i: “I will only be bold with Benedick for his company; for, from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot, he is all martial” (7–9).

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In addition to showing resistance to love and marriage, Benedick is figured by others as occupying a different position than that of Claudio. Beatrice identifies him as a “stuffed man” in the first scene (51); Pedro calls him a “cheater hereafter” in another scene (II.ii.160). And, ironically, Benedick is presented as the man who is most afraid of a constant concern in the play, cuckoldry. Whereas Claudio is the character who eventually takes action against the suggestion of cuckoldry, it is Benedick who is most often the object of jokes and who expresses loudly the danger women present to marriage, Benedick as transgressors of their respective genders; allied in their differences, they experience a different type of alienation as soon as they begin to be pushed together by societal forces. Beatrice and Benedick begin to push into language of wit by Pedro’s realization that “[Beatrice] were an excellent wife for Benedick” and his subsequent plan to break with her and with her father, “And thou shalt have her” (II.iii.274–278). Not only is the speech of each manipulated—through a shared ability in language and wit, is pointed out specifically for each character. Beatrice identifies herself in I.I, saying, “I was born to thine eye, and all my beauty is my heart” (266). Benedick is identified by Pedro in II.i: “I will only be bold with Benedick for his company; for, from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot, he is all martial” (7–9).
Benedick has a "good name" immediately identifies his situation with that of Claudio, who asked about Leonato’s heirs before committing to Hero. It is at this point in the play that the gender of Beatrice and Benedick seems to be taken from their hands. The two, now seen as a couple, begin to be judged by the play in terms of gender. Transgression is thrust into the foreground of the play when Benedick challenges Claudio for the honor of Hero, and the gender tension within their new roles.

This tension erupts in the conversation of Beatrice and Benedick in Act Four, scene one, and it is this scene on which I will concentrate here. After Claudio’s accusation of Hero, Beatrice and Benedick, left alone on stage, reveal their love for one another in the midst of Benedick’s attempts to mitigate Beatrice’s anguish. When Benedick refuses to kill Claudio for Beatrice, her frustration pours forth: “O that I were a man! What beat her in hand until they come to take hands, and then with public accusation, uncovered slander, unmitigated rancor—O God, that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the market place” (IV.1.298-302). A few lines later, she explodes once more: “O that I were a man for my sake! or that I had any friend who would be a man for my sake! But manhood is melted into cursies, valor into compliment, and men are only turned into tongue, and trim ones too” (IV.1.312-315). By establishing herself for the first time in the play as in opposition to masculinity, Beatrice does a curious thing. In stating “O that I were a man,” she clearly identifies herself as not a man, however, she simultaneously constructs masculinity in a way that excuses her tendency to appropriate masculine language. Beatrice constructs masculinity in terms of action, not words—she tells Benedick, when he offers his hand in love, to “Use it for my love some other way than swearing by it” (IV.1.320). In her view, language and wit are not part of masculinity. This distinction leaves a space for Beatrice to claim privilege in language and to maintain the necessary label of femininity. The audience, however, sees all of this as jarring. The version of masculinity constructed by the play itself does include wordplay as a prerequisite. Thus, Beatrice’s version falls flat; the audience is struck by the paradox of a woman who, in this play—even their irony cannot create one, for it participates in the assumptions that shape Messina. (200)

Perhaps—but certainly Shakespeare, in allowing this gender tension to surface with the advent of marriage, challenges readers to question the assumptions which shape her or his world.