MR. "PRINCE'S JESTER" AND MS. "DISDAIN": THE MALE POWER AND WOMAN'S RESPONSE TO IT IN *MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING*

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Abstract: Shakespeare's play *Much Ado About Nothing* demonstrates how male power is limited through association of love in marriage. This paper will discuss marriage as an equal balance of power between the genders rather than an experience that makes women silent victims in a male-dominated society. Love and commitment will also be focused on in terms of the social duties of both sexes in a romantic marriage.

Key Words: Male Power, Marriage, Love, Commitment, *Much Ado About Nothing*

Özet: Shakespeare'in oyunu *Much Ado About Nothing* erkek gücünün evlilikte aşkın olmasıyla nasıl sınırlandığını gösterir. Bu makale evliliğin kadınları erkek-egemen bir toplumda sessiz kurbanlar haline getiren bir deneyim olmaktansa, cinsiyetler arasında eşit bir denge olduğunu anlatmaktadır. Ayrıca, romantik bir evlilikte aşk ve bağlılık (sadakat) her iki cinsiyetin sosyal görevleri olaması açısından da vurgulanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Erkek Gücü, Evlilik, Aşk, Bağlılık, *Much Ado About Nothing*

In Act I, scene 1 of *Much Ado About Nothing*, Beatrice speaks her first line asking if Benedick is safe even though she refuses to admit his bravery and good service in wars. She, then, demonstrates her bitter attitude when she first meets Benedick: "I wonder that you will still be talking, Signior Benedick, nobody marks you." As Leonato (Beartice's uncle) says there is a "merry war" between Beatrice and Benedick. What makes the relationship between these two witty characters quite interesting is the power of their conversation referred as "skirmish of wit" by Shakespeare. Benedick: "What, my dear Lady Disdain! are you still living?" (I.i.119) Beatrice: [talking to Benedick masked] "..he is the prince's jester, a very dull fool...." (II.i.137).

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Benedick is a professed tyrant to the opposite sex, an "obstinate heretic in the despite of beauty" (I.i.234-35), and Beatrice, too, a confirmed "batchelor": "I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me" (I.i.131-32). Thus Beatrice, and Benedick is of a similar mind: "God keep your ladyship still in that mind! so some gentleman or other shall scape a predestinate scratched face" (I.i.133-35). They give each other no quarter in the merry war. Benedick is a braggart, a stuffed man, little wiser than a horse, as fickle as fashion itself, caught like a disease, the prince's jester, a dull fool; it is a dear happiness to women that he loves none. Beatrice is Lady Disdain, Lady Tongue, a parrot teacher, a chatterer, a harpy; he will go to the world's end rather than hold three words with her. However, though they maintain loudly that they cannot stand each other it does not require superhuman powers of perception to observe the marked interest, little short of obsession, they take in each other.

One of the issues Shakespeare deals with in his comedies is the notion of romantic pre-marital relationship as a union of lovers to be a part of society and attain happiness in the future as well. This paper will discuss Beatrice's relationship with Benedick, as an equal balance of power between the genders rather than an experience that silences and victimizes woman in Much Ado About Nothing. It will also emphasize love and commitment--touchstones to establish social order--in terms of the social duties of both sexes in romantic marriage.

However, Friedman, argues that Beatrice, in accepting to be Benedick's wife, gives up her most striking characteristic--clever talkativeness due to her wit--and becomes a silenced woman: "...far from preserving her autonomy, ultimately sacrifices the verbal mastery which constitutes her power in exchange for a hushed existence as Benedick's wife" (1990:351). Another critic, Cook, focuses on the gender differences between Beatrice, who becomes an embodiment of "feminine alternative" to conventional masculine behavior through her "entrapment" in her society, and Benedick, whose "masculine anxiety" is based on the fear of losing male power. She also insists that the "masculine ethos"--a mode in which women are "ciphers"--remains unchanged at the end of the play.

These readings, shedding a light to my interpretation of Much Ado, are quite different in many ways. In my view, as in that of Cook, the play sustains "masculine prerogative" to some extent; however I do not agree with Friedman's interpretation of Beatrice--a woman who is "hushed on purpose to grace the harmony of the relationship." In fact, in order to attain this harmony, Beatrice, like her mate Benedick, submits, not to the male power, but to love and commitment in marriage. And, this submission does not

constitute silence, which is one of the moral values women are expected to have.

What are the conventional roles expected from the sexes in a healthy and stable marriage? Marriage is both a romantic and socio-economic union. Romantic marriage is a successful achievment of love which satisfies the individual and society. Man is to be protective towards his obedient wife who is morally superior to him. Chastity of woman is one of the most important requirements before marriage. One of the two couples of Much Ado, Hero and Claudio, fall in love at first sight; however Claudio breaks up their union upon hearing the false news on Hero's infidelity. Instead of protecting his future-partner, Claudio accuses and humiliates Hero in front of every one calling her "rotten orange." Claudio's excessive emotions of hatred and jealousy are out of his masculine role in his society. He becomes the representative of male dominance that watches, questions and judges woman without giving her an opportunity to express herself. "Both Benedick and Claudio would prefer a spouse who understands her subservient position and knows how to modulate her voice in the presence of her husband" (Friedman, 1990: 354).

In this male-dominated society, men look at women. Women are aware of being watched for they are bound to be gazed and watched according to the moral codes of the society which involve classic decorum, Christian values, and idealized womanhood. As Devereaux states, "To say that the gaze is male refers to a way of seeing which takes women as its object" (1990: 337).

As representatives of the patriarchal society, Claudio and Benedick, two central heroes in Much Ado, see women as fragile, precious beings reducing them into objects of beauty. They talk about Hero, whom Claudio falls in love at first sight:

> **Ben.** "Would you buy her, that you inquire after her"
>
> **Cl**. "Can the world buy such a jewel?"
>
> (I.i. 179-81)

Benedick further makes a comment on Hero's appearance, which stresses the issue of male power upon women: "...she is too low for a high praise, too brown for a fair praise, and too little for a great praise.." (I.i.71-3).

Another male expectation from the woman is subservience, which limits her freedom of speech and behavior. "Young females are expected to taper their

behavior to the vulnerability of the male, and those who fail to do so expose themselves to the censure of their peer" (Park, 1980: 106). In the world of Messina, we see that Beatrice copes with the restraint--male gaze that limits the freedom of feminine behavior. For instance, the social gaze of Messina (her uncle) upon young unmarried woman tells Beatrice that she will remain a spinster if she goes on being satirical of men: "By my troth, niece, thou wilt never get thee a husband, if thou be so shrewd of thy tongue" (II.i.18-9). Shakespeare attaches importance to the silence of women, which is juxtaposed with free speeches of Beatrice, in Much Ado. When the match between Hero and Claudio is about to be concluded, Beatrice asks both of them to express their feelings. However, Claudio is so excited that he replies, "Silence is the perfectest heralt of joy"(II.i.305). "Beatrice's audacious speech might seem a serious violation of Messina's conventions of gender, but it is significant how little she actually threatens Messina's men, who regard her generally as rather a good fellow" (Cook, 1986: 191). Another example is Prince Don Pedro, the authority figure in the play. He likes Beatrice's freedom of discourse because he never feels its sting. (Upon calling Benedick "prince's jester," Beatrice is left alone and quiet for a while during the masked-dance): "Your silence most offends me, and to be merry best becomes you" (II.i.312).

On the other hand, Friedman argues that Beatrice seems quite ready to submit to Benedick's masculinity [that contradicts to what she has been saying bitterly against marriage]: "subversion is one of the few forms of verbal power left open to the woman who forgoes wielding pointed wit" (356). Why does Shakespeare create a woman with a strong and compelling voice to make her submit to male power?

Beatrice is drawn as a high-spirited woman who has been, apparently, disappointed in love, and consequently, talks bitterly against men and marriage. She does not want to marry "till God make man of some other mettle than earth." Although she makes believe that marriage would "grieve a woman to be overmaster'd with a piece of valiant dust," she is not willing to continue her life as an old maid. Beatrice's aggressive, witty resistance to men and marriage poignantly reveals her desire for both. Beatrice's wish to marry and not to be a spinster is apparent in her words: when the match between Hero and Claudio is concluded, she mourns with cheerful inconsistency, "I may sit in a corner and cry heigh-ho for a husband" (II.i.320). "She challenges others' misreadings of her humorist mask and encourages them to take her as she appears" (Cook, 1986: 191).

Beatrice cannot help thinking about Benedick so that she mocks him behind his back for she needs to hide this interest: "I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me" (I.i.131-2). She pretends, even to

herself, that she holds Benedick in contempt. At the very beginning she refuses to admit that he is a good soldier: ".. he is no less than a stuff'd man..(I.i.58), which reveals her potential attraction for him, so that she can easily isolate herself from the deepest feelings and push Benedick away.

Through her lively speech, Beatrice wins a considerable measure of freedom in her loyalty and her furious outburst against the victimization of her sex: when her cousin Hero is accused of committing adultery. "O God, that I were a man! I would eat his [Claudio's] heart in the market place" (IV.i.306). Cook relates, "Beatrice longs to take arms against a sea of masculine troubles but, by opposing, would only perpetuate them" (1986:196). She further posits an alternative for Beatrice: "to follow Hero's model of femininity and 'die a woman' in silent grief."

Friedman, from another viewpoint, argues "Beatrice, far from preserving her autonomy, ultimately sacrifices the verbal mastery which constitutes her power for a hushed existence as Benedick's wife" (1990:351). Before taking Beatrice's marriage in hand, let us look at her relationship with Benedick. In fact, before marriage she does use her "verbal mastery" through her anger to punish the domineering male power upon her sex. One of the most striking scenes of Much Ado is where Beatrice asks Benedick to kill Claudio. Her anger is not only towards Claudio but also domineering men in general. She becomes the champion of the "feminine principles." However, her fury is to an extent excessive; she acts violently which echoes the masculine fury of Claudio towards Hero's so-called disloyalty: "Manhood is melted into cursies, valor into compliment, and men are only turn'd into tongue" (IV.i.319).

As soon as she asks him to go against his will, Benedick attempts to break his word at first. For Beatrice, the bond between them is based on a word so that Benedick becomes involved in Beatrice’s order of reality, depending on her word. Interestingly enough, through accepting to challenge Claudio, Benedick seems to submit to female control. When Benedick first reacts to her fury, she tells him coldly: "I am gone, though I am here: there is no love in you" (IV. i.293). Although she uses her "verbal wit and mastery" to fight for the rights of her cousin, Hero, her happiness and trust in him almost seems to break down.

At this point in the play, Shakespeare depicts the issue of equality and friendship in a pre-marriage relationship. Benedick says that they will be friends first. She taunts him saying that he can only stand being a friend with her than fighting with her "enemy"--Claudio. When Benedick does not want to accept Claudio as her enemy she breaks down into tears. This is a scene where Beatrice demonstrates her excessive emotions: anger and love

are juxtaposed together: "She is wrong'd, slander'd and undone" (IV.i.312-3) and Benedick proves his committment to his lover: “Come, bid me do anything for thee”(22). An interpretation of Benedick’s behavior is that with a quick and selfless sensitiveness of perception, he submits to Beatrice's will to take revenge from Claudio. In a traditional romantic relationship, love means partnership based on trust: “Enough, I am engaged, I will challenge him...” (IV.i.331). Beatrice does not become "submissive" for she represses the "verbal mastery" that causes a "sense of loss." Moreover, it is not that "Benedick subdues her" in the scene where they confess their love. In fact, it is the union of love that binds their lives in a destiny.

It is obvious that Beatrice rejects the romantic notions of the opposite sex. She is a woman, unlike her cousin, set free from her father. Her voice is that of the adult world whereas Hero has a little girl's voice. Although Friedman asserts that "When Beatrice, who once advised Hero to contradict even her father's wishes in the choice of a husband, yields willingly to male control, this surrender indicates that masculine domination is natural, correct, and necessary..." (1990:359), Beatrice’s freedom of discourse is one of the ways of the strong, witty woman to express herself. For instance, she gives a piece of advice to Hero: “It is my cousin’s duty to make curtsy and say, ‘Father, as it please you’ but ... make another curts'y and say 'Father as it pleases me'...” (II.i.54-6). Shakespeare draws her picture as a strong woman who will not be easily manipulated, victimized or silenced by masculine power in the male-dominated society.

> Women want to be married but not mastered, and this levels them with men who have always lamented loss of liberty in marrying ...where Beatrice and Benedick both sound the hollowness of single liberty, they relinquish it only because they are confident of liberty within marriage (Dusinherre, 1975: 96).

In the war of the sexes with Benedick, Beatrice's combativeness is self-defence, self-assertion, the armour of a vulnerable pride. But when she says "Would it not grieve a woman to be overmaster'd with a piece of valiant dust? to make an account of her life to a cold of wayward marl?" (2.1.60-63); or replies to Pedro's "Will you have me lady?" with "No, my lord, unless I might have another for workingdays. Your Grace is too costly to

wear every day" (2.1.327-29), we are invited to perceive an added ingredient. She will not have a husband with a beard, or without one; she will not have a husband at all. St Peter will show her where the bachelors sit in heaven and there "live we as merry as the day is long." She will be no meek daughter like her cousin: "But yet for all that, cousin, let him be a handsome fellow, or else make another cur'sy, and say, 'Father, as it please me'" (2.1.53-56). She will be won on her own terms or not at all.

Beatrice is a woman who prevents herself from knowing her own feelings by her self imposed fears of pride and fear. In other words, she is afraid of surrendering to love, and it is her pride and prejudice which keeps her "safe", at least temporarily. Benedick, like Beatrice, is aware of the danger of falling in love because of the vulnerability it suggests. He does not want to show his feelings openly. Defending the bachelor state, he talks against women as well as courtly art of music and speech. "I will not do thou [women] the wrong to mistrust any, I will do myself the right to trust none; and the fine is I will live a bachelor" (I.i.244-6).

As a matter of fact, the animosity of Beatrice and Benedick towards each other is a veil for their feelings towards each other. They use their wit to distance emotions which they believe are dangerous. In other words, they think they are safe to spend time with their own sex. Benedick says: “O she misus’d me past the endurance of a block..” (II.i.). He is in a quest to avoid her ironically but has never failed to appreciate her qualities.

Benedick's negative attitude towards marriage echoes that of Beatrice even though the way he is under the influence of his society does not. A feminist interpretation of Benedick's unwillingness for marriage could be related to the masculine fear of betrayal. Cook suggests that the conventional male codes of the society in Much Ado--Messina--put some limitations on male power (anxiety of losing male hierarchy), as well as making the man associate love in marriage with the physical appearance of woman. Cook asserts that the world of Much Ado, Messina, is important because it is a place where the masculine characters are "concerned with self-concealmant and the exposure of other...the abjection of which the cuckold's horn becomes the fearful sign" (1986:187). The use of cuckold jokes in the play shows the "anxiety about women's potential power over men." The horn becomes a "symbol of a man's betrayal and humiliation" which reveals the fear of marriage from the male perspective as well as submitting oneself to a woman.

In the relationship between Beatrice and Benedick, their conventional roles appear unconventional.

> Conventional people and societies often relish to unconventional as safety-valve for repressed instincts...In a society, such as Messina, where the instincts for life are in danger of being drained away in small talk, Beatrice and Benedick offer this outlet (Crick, 1965 35).

Both Beatrice and Benedick are portrayed as fire and gunpowder that cannot be calm but belong together. First, they do come to love through the plot of Don Pedro--the figure of authority. Then, they struggle to maintain the dignity of bachelorhood--a role named as "safety-valve" for power. This is a male-dominated, hierarchial society with clear-cut gender roles in which women do not necessarily capitulate to men, but show their strength and humanity.

Beatrice is a strong woman, set free from her father. She is free to make her own choice of husband and also to dictate the conditions of that choice. She will not marry, "till God makes men of some other mettle than earth" (II.i.59-61). She accepts marriage as a union with a loving hushand who will treat her as a person rather that valuing her physical appearance.

Therefore, Beatrice and Benedick lovers change from being too rational to consider the foolishness of love and marriage into lovers who allow themselves to feel instead of performing conventional gender roles that frighten them. On the one hand, Benedick becomes a different man; he learns to be sentimental, to love music, and to read romantic poetry. He talks romanticly: "I will live in thy heart, die in thy lap, and be buried in thy eyes....." (V.ii.102-3). On the other hand, upon hearing the falseness of news on Hero's infidelity and Benedick's love, Beatrice is ready to be committed to Benedick's love --her exceptional request on risking his life as she would have risked her own. In this sense, she submits to a loving man who proves that he can risk his life [a kind of selflessness], not for depending upon his future-partner's emotional judgment, but for the sake of love. Thus, the ideological messages the play portrays do not constrain the behavior of female characters.

"... Benedick becomes acceptable to her [Beatrice] when he symbolically joins his masculine qualities to her feminine principles by taking up, however reluctantly, her attitude to Claudio..." (Crick; 1965 37).

Many critics claim that Shakespeare's sexism limits women to an extent. French asserts that: "His sexism lay in a rigid insistence that 'good' women adhere to traditional female ideals of purity, selflessness, gentleness, compassion" (1991: 68). However, the romantic marriage of a man and woman is not merely a manifestation of how the woman conforms to the guidelines of being a perfect wife, or how the man's masculine prerogative is overcome by the feminine principles. Even though Cook asserts that, "Love, and the vulnerability that comes with it, has been a kind of exposure each has dodged through most of the play," it is rather a commitment of two lovers who are willing to surrender to love(1986: 195). When they reveal their love towards each other, their language becomes simple and warm. Benedick: "I do love nothing in the world so well as you.. (IVi.267). And, Beatrice does not hide her emotional needs behind a mask of biting wit that refuses to take anything seriously any more; she submits to love in a romantic marriage: "I love you with so much of my heart" (286).

Friedman states that Beatrice "seems more than willing to abandon her pride and scorn and acknowledge him [Benedick] as the man of superior substance by whom she will allow herself to be overmastered (355). However, her understanding of the purpose of marriage is through her realization of the meaning of love and commitment: "And, benedick, love on, I will requite thee,? Taming my wild heart to thy loving hand" (III.i.111-2). And, Benedick's first reaction to overhearing the truth that his severest critic, Beatrice, is his admirer: "This can be no trick" (122). He is ready to accept the possibility of love and marriage.

Before hearing that she is loved by Benedick, Beatrice's false cry is interpreted as that she "laments that there are no men of substance, by whom she could be overmastered" (Friedman, 1990:354). However, for the first time Beatrice laments on the unfair judgment upon her cousin. Her tears master her and she cannot say anything. Her weeping moves him deeply so that it is for her sake he stays. Now that they are alone he is choked with a sense of his own awkwardness, and can find nothing to say but, "Have you wept all this while?" Benedick thinks of her grief rather than his own honor. In other words, he is willing enough to do what he can, but has not seen yet that there is anything to be done. He asks for orders: "Is there any way to show such friendship?" Beatrice replies, "It is a man's office, but not yours." She won't stoop to ask him, if he will not volunteer to do the deed--the only way of clearing Hero.

Friedman argues that when Benedick announces that he will take Beatrice as his wife, he kisses her to stop her sharp mouth: His stopping Beatrice's mouth with a kiss does not necessarily imply Shakespeare's depiction of women as subordinate to men. Beatrice asserts her self to maintain her

dignity as a woman free from subverting the conventional male aspects of Messina. Beatrice's witty conversation with Benedick still continues until the very end of the play. When Benedick agrees to matrimony and seeks to gain the last word, Beatrice accepts (caustic), and gets, momentarily, the last word:

> **Ben**. A miracle! Here's our own hands against our hearts. Come, I will have thee, but by this light I take thee for pity.
> **Bea**. I would not deny you, but by this good day I yield upon great persuasion, and partly to save your life, for I was told you were in a consumption.
> **Ben**. Peace! I will stop your mouth.
> (V.iv.91-7)

This stopping-mouth-with-a-kiss is not due to the power of masculine domination but a tradition for the union of lovers. When the engagement between Hero and Claudio is settled, it is Beatrice who suggests Hero : "Speak, cousin or stop his mouth with a kiss, and let not him speak neither" (II.i.311).

Shakespeare portrays Benedick as an affectionate husband rather than a domineering man who tries to make his future wife obedient to himself. At the end of the play, Benedick's wish for a kiss and dance is out of his happiness, as a result of the romantic reconciliation between the lovers. Beatrice, like Benedick, also achieves her dreams of matrimony, even though she seems silenced. She has been looking for a hero who will use his strength to punish those who accuse Hero--symbolic of chaste women. Once angry with men who are not kind in their treatment of women, Beatrice does not have any thing left to tease and mock Benedick or protest against marriage. She "yields upon persuasion" because her mask/veil hiding her affectionate feelings is dropped when the lovers confess their love in act IV:

> **Bea**. You have stayed me in a happy hour, I was about to protest I loved you.
> **Ben**. And do it with all thy heart.

Bea. I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest.

(IV.i. 283-7)

Beatrice's tone is flecked with an irony that contrives to be both aloof and playful. What strikes us most forcibly, however, in the opening sentence of the 'merry war' is its implied challenge--a challenge which is amusing but none the less real. Beatrice's interest in Benedick and her mocking resistance to him are communicated simultaneously; and she pictures him in a state of combat, which will result in their happy union in the end.

Consequently, Beatrice and Benedick are not ignorant of the worlds of each other and unaware of the nature of love's bond--the power to embrace the harmony in the world. Their marriage does not require Benedick to be patriarchal or Beatrice to be subservient and silent. This is a mutual love and commitment that will strenghten their marriage in the future.

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