

Benedick's Insight in Shakespeare's **Much Ado About Nothing**

he accusation of Hero during the marriage ceremony and the events which follow show Benedick in a different light. When his two friends Don Pedro, the Prince of Aragon, and Claudio, whom Hero was to marry, join in the condemnation of Hero as unfaithful, Benedick disbelieves the accusations and urges them to reconsider their position. When Beatrice asks him to kill Claudio for dishonoring her cousin, he is somewhat reluctant, yet agrees to challenge him and to break his ties with Don Pedro and Claudio for her. He does this as a result of a few different interrelated events and decisions: he has realized his love for Beatrice and wants to prove he will do anything for her, he knows the personalities and tendencies of Don John and Claudio, and his character is such that he is more likely than the other males to defend Hero.

The most significant reason why Benedick defends Hero and agrees to challenge Claudio is that he loves Beatrice. Even while he proclaimed, "I will live a bachelor," to Claudio and Don Pedro in the beginning, he was in love with her, but he was also in denial. He displayed his supposed disgust of marriage and being married to the world. Beatrice also displays the same disgust. Their witty banter is, according to Carol Thomas Neely, an expression of "the anxieties about loss of power through sexuality, love, and marriage." Neither of them really are disgusted by those things; rather they are too proud to lose power by engaging in them until they know that their feelings will be reciprocated. When Beatrice dances with him and insults him, without knowing that it was he who was behind the mask, he is hurt. This is proven when looking at his reactions to her words: he says he "would not marry her though she were endowed with all that Adam had left him before he transgressed" rather do the impossible and risk his life than "hold three words' conference with this harpy."¹ He doesn't realize it, but he has brought up the subject of marriage to Beatrice out of the blue, indicating he has been thinking about such a proposal. He also overreacts in a blatant display of pride, deciding

that he is not going to talk to her. This is an action of a person who has been hurt, and in order to be hurt, one must have feelings that can be hurt—in other words, he must have thought well of her and wanted her favor (even though he didn't show it), otherwise he wouldn't have had such an extreme reaction to her words.

After being tricked by the plan of Don Pedro to make him fall in love with Beatrice, the sequence of events to follow shows how he truly does love her, as was made clear when he said to himself, "I have railed so long against marriage; but doth not the appetite alter?" Finally, he admits to himself and to others around him that he is able to and does love Beatrice, coming out of his stage of denial. Beatrice has done the same, having been tricked in much the same way as Benedick. Everything goes well until Benedick is forced to make a choice between his loyalty to his friend Claudio and his love for Beatrice, after she orders him to "kill Claudio." After some consideration, Benedick agrees to challenge Claudio at Beatrice's request, primarily out of his love for her. He doesn't make his decision blindly, though, as we will see. There are other factors that influence this decision.

When Beatrice initially tells Benedick to kill Claudio, he refuses to do it. Here we see that he has no intention of making his friend his enemy over the matter. But then Beatrice threatens to leave him if he won't do so, telling him, "you kill me to deny it." Now Benedick is presented with a true dilemma: should he stand by his friend who apparently has evidence to back him up, or should he support the woman he loves? Ultimately, he makes the choice to support her, as "the greater love eclipses the smaller and Benedick acts contrary to the presented evidence, on the strength of his trust in Beatrice's loyal love."² Although a few different factors come into play, he would never have had to make this choice had Beatrice not asked him to, and would not have chosen to challenge Claudio had she not insisted that he do so to prove his love for her. Beatrice doesn't have any proof that Hero was not unfaithful to Claudio, but she is her cousin and is the closest to her of anyone. She knows the situation is suspicious, and she knows that Hero would never be unfaithful to Claudio. Benedick doesn't have the same sort of relations with Hero, and so he relies on Beatrice's convictions to provide him with enough

proof to turn on his friend. The only evidence he needs is Beatrice's answer of "yea" to his question, "think you in your soul the Count Claudio hath wrong'd her?" So, having the belief of Beatrice to back him up, he decides he will challenge Claudio.

But Benedick doesn't make his decision solely based on his devotion to Beatrice; he also knows the character of some of the others involved. He did not witness the event in question himself, but past events have proven that Claudio is quick to believe that people wrong him and that Don John cannot be trusted. When Don Pedro woos Hero for Claudio at the dance, Don John is able to convince him that Don Pedro is wooing her for himself. Claudio believes him instantly and gives up all hope, believing his friend has betrayed him and saying, "friendship is constant in all other things save in the office and affairs of love." Thus we can see that when presented with a very similar situation, where he believes Hero has been unfaithful, there is definitely a chance that Claudio jumped the gun and believed the worst with a passion similar, if not greater, than that at the time when he believed Don Pedro was betraying him. Benedick knows this and urges the men to exercise restraint and not to condemn Hero so quickly.

Benedick also knows that Don John cannot be trusted. First of all, Don John and his brother Don Pedro have only recently reconciled after Don John staged a rebellion against him. His past behavior indicates that there isn't a real loyalty toward Don Pedro, and there are also jealous feelings toward Claudio, who Don Pedro treats more like a brother than Don John. Don John, being of the "sour, melancholy, saturnine, envious, selfish, malicious temper" that he is, would devise and carry through with such a malicious plan to ruin the marriage of Claudio and Hero simply out of revenge and jealousy. Benedick assumes that Don John has plotted to ruin Hero's reputation, stating: "two of them [Claudio and Don Pedro] have the very bent of honor, and if their wisdoms be misled in this, the practice of it lives in John the bastard, whose spirits toil in frame of villainies." Benedick knows that Don Pedro and Claudio must have been misled, otherwise they would have never treated Hero so harshly, but Don John isn't an honest man (in fact, he is evil), and is likely to be behind the plan to ruin the marriage.

Finally, Benedick's character is unusual and untraditional, particularly after his transformation into a loving creature after the plan to unite him with Beatrice succeeds. It is the nature of his character that is also a contributing factor in making him believe in Hero's innocence and take the opposite position of Claudio, Don Pedro, and Leonato (at first). Benedick never did truly believe all that he said about love and marriage and particularly those subjects as they related to his feelings about Beatrice, as was proven in the discussion of the love between them earlier. Most of what he said was due to a rather large ego and great anxieties about the loss of power when in a loving relationship. But even if there was any correspondence at all between his words and his beliefs, he no longer had any of those feelings in the end. In the end, he "repudiates his former mistrust [or apparent mistrust] of women and breaks his bonds with the male friends who shared this attitude." It is because of his attitudes and beliefs that he is the only one (not Leonato, Don Pedro, or Claudio) to believe in Hero's innocence. He is a sharp character, and has been set up by Shakespeare to be willing to comply with Beatrice to provide "a necessary antidote to the play's pervasive misogyny and a necessary rehabilitation of romance from Claudio's corruption of it." In other words, he is the character that Shakespeare has designated to help make the plot flow into a happy conclusion. His actions save his relationship with Beatrice, and they help convince Leonato to go along with the Friar's suggestion that Hero might have been framed and that she truly is innocent after all.

Benedick proves to be the character, then, who strays from the other primary male characters by trusting in Beatrice and turning on Don Pedro and Claudio after they have wrongly accused Hero of being unfaithful during her marriage ceremony. Benedick has realized his love for Beatrice and wants to prove he will do anything for her, and he supports his actions not only with his faith in Beatrice but also on his knowledge of the personalities and tendencies of Don John and Claudio, and his character is more prone to believe Hero than is that of the other males, particularly after professing his love for Beatrice.

Notes

¹ William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing* Act 1, Scene 1, Lines 236-7

² Carol Thomas Neely, *Broken Nuptials in Much Ado About Nothing*, quoted from p. 161 of the 1989 edition of *Much Ado About Nothing* by William Shakespeare published by Penguin Books

³ William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing* Act 2, Scene 1, Lines 248-50

⁴ William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing* Act 2, Scene 1, Lines 268-9

⁵ William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing* Act 2, Scene 3, Lines 233-4

⁶ William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing* Act 4, Scene 1, Line 287

⁷ William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing* Act 4, Scene 1, Line 289

⁸ Donald A. Stauffer, *Shakespeare's World of Images*, quoted from p. 148 of the 1989 edition of *Much Ado About Nothing* by William Shakespeare published by Penguin Books

⁹ William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, Act 4, Scene 1, Lines 326-7

¹⁰ William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing* Act 2, Scene 1, Lines 173-4

¹¹ Charles Gildon, *Argument of Much Ado About Nothing*, quoted from p. 137 of the 1989 edition of *Much Ado About Nothing* by William Shakespeare published by Penguin Books

¹² William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing* Act 4, Scene 1, Lines 185-8

¹³ Carol Thomas Neely, *Broken Nuptials in Much Ado About Nothing*, quoted from p. 167 of the 1989 edition of *Much Ado About Nothing* by William Shakespeare published by Penguin Books

¹⁴ Carol Thomas Neely, *Broken Nuptials in Much Ado About Nothing*, quoted from p. 167 of the 1989 edition of *Much Ado About Nothing* by William Shakespeare published by Penguin Books.

