

Analysis of When Women Have Power And When They Don't in 'Much Ado About Nothing'

In 'Much Ado About Nothing' it is to be concluded that overall, Beatrice is the woman with the most power and capability to influence the actions of others. This particular ability is shown in Act 4 Scene 1, when she tells Benedick to 'Kill Claudio.' This particular demand is extremely arduous for Benedick as he has been loyal to Claudio for so long; Benedick seems disbelieving and reluctant when she first proposes that he murder his friend, however by the end of the scene we see that he has agreed to "challenge him," showing that Beatrice has the power in their relationship to manipulate and influence Benedick's actions. We see that in Beatrice and Benedick's relationship, there is more of an equal share of power between the couple than perhaps would have been expected of the 16th Century, as women were dominated by males, who "prescribed obedience, chastity and domesticity for women as a strategic method of preserving men's limitless, unchallenged power,"¹ this analysis of women's position in the Shakespearean era by Zomparelli is very accurate and is further proved by the fact that the males in the play continually make reference to female chastity, and seem preoccupied by its importance. This preoccupation is a theme throughout the play, due to the Elizabethan euphemism of 'nothing' being female genitalia; characters make both bawdy puns and subtle reference to the term, when Hero is slandered, Don Pedro proclaims that "on my honour, she was charged with nothing" which ironically means that she did have sex with another, however, actually she did nothing.

Beatrice and Benedick's relationship diverges from the expected stereotypical relationship of the time that heavily promoted the sexist idealisms of courtly love; Hero and Claudio represented this idealistic notion of love in the play. Just by observing the two couples, we can see that courtly love is a contributory factor in the subjugation of women as the women are expected to conform to the subservient role as demonstrated by Hero; she is a very quiet and submissive character, who from the beginning of the play accepts that she is to "be queenly to Leonato without question. This is in complete juxtaposition with Beatrice who ends up attempting to stand up for Hero, by telling her to tell her father "as it please me" to which Hero is silent, displaying the extent of her lack of power. It is therefore suggested by one article that discusses the implications the genre of the play that "there is little doubt that the aristocratic men and women of the Middle Ages began to act out in their own loves the pattern of courtly behavior they read about in the fictional romances,"⁴ which is quite likely to have happened, as courtly love was a very popular ideal at the time that many aspired to.

Interestingly, due to Beatrice being an extremely opinionated and strong character, we see that structurally and plot-wise she has a lot of power. This is apparent when we are first introduced to her as an audience in Act 1 Scene 1; she "quickly shifts the play's focus from Claudio's deeds of war to Benedick's deeds of love,"² introducing the theme of love and simultaneously suggesting Beatrice's love for Benedick as the first thing she says is regarding his welfare, albeit in a somewhat sarcastic manner, "is Signor Montanto returned from the wars, or no?" This immediately introduces the 'merry war' between them as 'Montanto' is a term for fencing meaning an upward thrust, which is an example of one of Beatrice's few bawdy jokes throughout the play, as the up thrust of the sword is an undeniable phallic image; phallic innuendos and bawdy humour was more accepted in the Sixteenth Century than compared to present day, which is ironic