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### Feminist Criticism in *Much Ado About Nothing*

Shakespeare's plays have become classics in English literature courses. Throughout the education system, students have studied Shakespeare and his plays. There are many criticisms that have been used to analyze Shakespeare's plays. One of these criticisms is the feminist criticism: "Feminist criticism investigates how Shakespeare's plays relate to the codes and conventions of the gender system specific to the early modern period" (Howard, 413.) By using the feminist criticism, readers can examine the roles Shakespeare's female characters play in his play. One play where readers can use the feminist criticism is *Much Ado About Nothing*. There are two main female characters in *Much Ado About Nothing*: Beatrice and Hero; the two characters show the different perspectives on gender norms for females: Hero models women who follow the social norms for women and Beatrice models women who argue against those same social norms. Jean Howard uses the feminist criticism to argue that women were shown in a different light than they would have in those times: "Many feminist critics have argued that in the middle portion of his comedies Shakespeare offers a 'world upside down' in which women have powers not usually granted to them in the 'real world' of Elizabethan England" (Howard, 414). By using the feminist criticisms, readers can examine *Much Ado About Nothing* and how the gender norms for women are represented and ignored.

Before understanding how females' roles were represented in *Much Ado About Nothing*, readers must understand how women were treated during this time period. It is important to

understand how gender plays in part in how individuals are viewed in society. Gender in society relates to the differences between the sexes and what this allows individuals to accomplish (Howard, 411). Jean Howard makes an excellent point about gender by stating “Though gender systems vary, however, what does not change from culture to culture, period to period, is the persistence of gender difference as a central system for organizing society” (411). Gender norms may differ through time periods or cultures, but the one thing that does not change is that there are gender norms throughout society. Relating these gender norms back to Shakespeare’s time period, there were four categories of women based on their marriage statuses: maids, wives, widows, and whores. “Whores” were described as “women assumed to be forever outside the marriage state” (Howard, 413). Society labeled women as whores when they didn’t conduct themselves to social norms, i.e. having sex before marriage. However, it is important to note that men do not have classifications based on their marriage statuses; men’s statuses were based on their power, rank, and influence in society.

*Much Ado About Nothing* allows readers a perspective into how women were perceived during Shakespeare’s time. Through the play, readers can observe the difference in the two main female characters, Hero and Beatrice. While Hero is shown to be the stereotypical woman of this time period – obedient, polite, ready to be a wife --, her cousin Beatrice is the complete opposite; Beatrice is shown as being “curst” and “shrewd” (Shakespeare 2.1.16-17). Hero is described as being excited to meet and marry Claudio. When Claudio accuses her of unfaithfulness, Hero faints and proceeds to be heartbroken. On the other hand, Beatrice readily argues with Claudio about his false accusations. Unlike Hero, Beatrice is willing to argue with anyone and refuses to bite her tongue. Shakespeare shows Beatrice’s personality and how others respond to her personality in scene 2, act 1:

Leonato: By my trough, niece, thou wilt never get thee a hus-/band if thou be so shrewd of thy tongue.

Anthony: In faith, she’s too curst.

Beatrice: Too curst is more than curst. I shall lesson God's / sending that way, for it is said, "God sends a curst cow short / horns, but to a cow too curst, he sends none."

Leonato: So, being too curst, God will send you no horns?

Beatrice: Just, if he send me no husband, for the which / blessing I am at him upon my knees every morning and ever- / ning. Lord, I could not endure a husband with a beard on / his face. I had rather lie in the woolen. (Shakespeare, 2.1.16-26)

This scene reflects how Beatrice does not fit into the social norm. Unlike others, including her cousin Hero, Beatrice has no interest in marriage or a husband. She argues with her father and uncle stating that she has no interest in marriage and by being curst, God would not send her a husband. Beatrice represents an independent woman who does not want to be held down by a husband.

In addition, another way for readers to see the difference in how women are portrayed would be how the two main women are with their significant others. The two main couples in *Much Ado About Nothing* are Hero with Claudio and Beatrice with Benedict. While it can be argued that both couples receive a happy ending at the end of the play, how they get there differ. Hero and Claudio meet and instantly fall in love; both are ready to marry the other. Hero and Claudio represent the tragedy part of the play; due to scheming, Claudio believes Hero to be a cheater and labels her a 'whore' during their wedding day. This reflects how easily a woman could switch labels given to them by society: "While maids and widows were supposed to be sexually chaste and married women sexually faithful to their husbands, whores, by definition, were unchaste and performed for money what wives supposedly performed for love" (Howard, 414). Instead of hearing her out, Claudio's first instinct is an act of revenge; he humiliates her at their wedding by exclaiming "She knows the heat of a luxurious bed. / Her blush is guiltiness, not modesty" (Shakespeare, 4.1.40-41.) By denouncing Hero as a 'whore' and 'unfaithful,' Claudio ruins her reputation and, therefore, her life. This is shown by her father, Leonato, begging her not to wake as her life would be worse if she would awaken (Shakespeare, 4.1.121-124).

Even after her name is cleared, Hero willingly takes Claudio back. Claudio faces no serious consequences for his part of ruining Hero's reputation; he still has his reputation, power, and his wife. This shows that only women are affected by words and false accusations. While Claudio faces no repercussions of his actions, Hero, a woman, faces the consequences of actions she had not committed.

Beatrice and Benedict are portrayed differently. They are often seen arguing and exchanging insults throughout the play. Neither were willing to express their feelings; they were tricked into believing the other was in love with them. At the end, they confess their love and decide to marry. Their declarations of love still show their complicated and enemies-to-lovers relationship. Shakespeare writes:

*Benedict*: A miracle! Here's our own hands against our / hearts. Come, I will have thee.

But by this light, I take thee / for pity.

*Beatrice*: 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. (Shakespeare,  
5.4.91-96)

Beatrice and Benedict fondly argue throughout the book. Though they argue, Benedict is willing to do anything for Beatrice, including fighting his friend Claudio. This act alone shows the difference between the two relationships: Benedict is willing to do anything for Beatrice, even if it's tough for him, and Claudio who is willing to accuse Hero and ruin her reputation. Benedict shows a level of respect towards Beatrice that Claudio does not show to Hero. The respect and consideration Benedict shows Beatrice goes beyond the labels assigned to women; though Beatrice announces she does not want to get married, Benedict treats her as a maiden and not a 'whore.'

Additionally, feminist critics can use the feminist criticism to examine the very act of Beatrice and Benedict's marriage. The very act of Beatrice, an independent woman with no interest in men or marriage, getting married shows the ultimate end goal for women. Jean Howard writes "Even though at

the end of most comedies the hierarchical gender system is typically restored and women returned to their subordinate roles, for a time the plays offer a holiday world of expanded possibility” (414). Though Beatrice was given most of the play to explore herself and show her shrewd personality, by the end of it, she fell back into the gender hierarchy and norms; she proceeded to become a wife, the one thing she never wanted to be. Readers are able to see that women were always returned to their social norms.

Another way to use the feminist criticism while examining *Much Ado About Nothing* is to examine the endings for both Hero and Beatrice. While Beatrice was portrayed as Hero’s opposite, both had the same ending; both were in love and on their way to living as wives. This shows that even if women were shown breaking society’s gender norms, they will eventually realign with the gender norms. Jean Howard explains this notion in their article with the statement “Even though at the end of most comedies the hierarchical gender systems is typically restored and women returned to their subordinate roles, for a time the plays offer a holiday world of expanded possibility” (414). Continuing with this notion, readers can reflect on how the endings of both female characters fit the social norms for this time period. Women were expected to be housewives, obedient, and excited for marriage. Although Beatrice argues against these ideas the whole play, in the end, she proceeds to fall into the same social norm as her cousin Hero. This shows readers that marriage is the end goal for women of this time period, unless they were considered to be ‘whores’: “With marriage as the goal, the interest of the comedies lies largely in the way blocks to marriage are overcome” (Howard, 413).

Shakespeare’s play *Much Ado About Nothing* allows for much reflection on the role of women throughout the play. Using the feminist criticism, readers are able to analyze the importance of women in the plays and how they either follow or break the social norms for their gender. Examining the characters of Hero and Beatrice, along with their relationships with their significant others, allows readers to analyze how women in Shakespeare’s plays were represented and how they were treated. By

the end of *Much Ado About Nothing*, readers are able to analyze how Shakespeare enables and contradicts the social gender norms for women.

Works Cited

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