THE ‘PRE-HISTORY’ OF BEATRICE AND BENEDICK IN MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Shakespeare implies in a fascinating way that before the main action of the play there was what I shall call a ‘pre-history’, namely a story of an earlier involvement between Benedick and Beatrice. It is this ‘pre-history’ which I wish to examine and clarify here, as I think that it is usually overlooked, or at least not adequately understood. The implied scenario logically fits in with – and is fundamental in presenting – Shakespeare’s view of gender issues in *Much Ado*. It is hinted at in a series of passages of unusual linguistic complexity, which today need painstaking analysis to extricate their meaning.¹

Before considering Benedick’s and Beatrice’s ‘pre-history’ specifically, I shall first provide a wider view of its context. One of the striking aspects of *Much Ado About Nothing* is its concern with gender differences, by which I mean differences in conduct or psychology which can be imputed to the gender of a person rather than that person’s individual characteristics. I believe that, for example, both Claudio and Benedick, as would-be male lovers, differ greatly from Hero and Beatrice, and that Shakespeare portrays the difference as due to gender, not character. It is difficult to know whether Shakespeare saw differences between the genders as inherent or as the result of conditioning, and I shall not be concerned to try and distinguish between those two important matters. I do think, however, that Shakespeare considered the psychology of men to be very different from that of women, for whatever reason, and it is one aspect of that psychological difference which I wish to draw attention to, viz. the ability of young women to commit themselves readily and wholeheartedly to a member of the opposite sex, whereas young men are incapable of doing so.

Shakespeare portrays this difference between young women and young men in a good many of his plays. For example, in *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet is still very young at the beginning of the play and has never given marriage a thought, but as soon as she meets Romeo she falls in love with him, and it is she who first broaches the subject of marriage. Romeo is not slow to fall in love when he meets her, but before that moment he saw himself as in love with another young

¹ All quotations in this paper will be from Sheldon P. Zitner’s Oxford Shakespeare edition of *Much Ado* (Oxford, 1994). The passages implying the ‘pre-history’ I am concerned with are listed in the Appendix presented below, and discussed in the course of the article. Among other editions I have consulted I have derived great benefit from those by J. Dover Wilson and A. Quiller-Couch, in the New Shakespeare (Cambridge, 1923), R.A. Foakes, in the New Penguin Shakespeare (Harmondsworth, 1968), A.R. Humphreys, in the Arden Shakespeare (London, 1981), and last but not least F.H. Mares in the New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge, 1988), which to my mind is a better and more significant edition than some of the more influential reviews have suggested.
woman, Rosaline. Shakespeare appears to have believed that it takes a young man longer to focus decisively on a woman of his choice, and he implies, in *Romeo and Juliet*, that Romeo’s infatuation with Rosaline, such as it is, is something like an apprenticeship in love, a stage the young male lover must inevitably go through before he can fix his affection more enduringly on Juliet.

So one pattern in a young man’s development which Shakespeare’s work presents us with is that of the young lover moving toward a proper affection through an initial less solid phase. There is also another pattern, however, which Shakespeare frequently offers us, namely that of a young man who appears to be thoroughly in love with a particular woman, and who then proceeds to treat that woman very badly by retreating from her before, later, returning to her with better insight. It is this pattern which Shakespeare explores in the case of the two young male lovers in *Much Ado*. In the case of Claudio and Hero, we can see and understand the pattern quite readily, and it will help us to pay some attention to that pair of lovers first.

In 1.1, Claudio explains that before the war from which he and Benedick have recently returned, he looked upon Hero ‘with a soldier’s eye’ (287). In other words, he feels that he was not yet ready for love. However, he considers that he has changed:

> But now I am returned, and that war-thoughts
> Have left their places vacant, in their rooms
> Come thronging soft and delicate desires,
> All prompting me how fair young Hero is,
> Saying I liked her ere I went to wars. (290-4)

In other words, Claudio believes that potentially he was in love with Hero even before the war, but that now he can allow his affection to blossom.

Unfortunately, Claudio is less mature than he considers himself to be, and when events in the play test him out, he is found wanting. He does not in any sense know either Hero as a person or himself as a lover, and he is afraid of his new emotion, which means that his seeming security can readily be shaken. That happens when he comes to believe, on no good evidence, that Don Pedro has wooed Hero for himself, rather than for Claudio’s benefit. In a fit of panic, Claudio concludes, in 2.1, that he should believe Don John’s words about Don Pedro’s supposed interest in Hero. Claudio states: ‘Tis certain so; the Prince woos for himself’ (175). He offers an explanation for what he sees as Don John’s disloyalty which is important:

> beauty is a witch
> Against whose charms faith melteth into blood. (181-2)

Claudio believes that Don Pedro has been bewitched by Hero’s physical beauty. And it is, in fact, the power of a woman’s beauty which, thus Shakespeare shows us, young men like Claudio ultimately fear: they are afraid of the impact of such beauty on male psychology. Claudio has not experienced this impact before, and as a result he is the more inclined to imagine that the Prince shares his vulnerability to Hero’s beauty.
This fear of female beauty is of course not confined to younger men. It is shared by most of the men in the play, although inexperienced young men seem to feel it with peculiar intensity. In this male view of matters, which does not appear to be totally conscious, women are desirable, but also a threat to male security, because the male who wants a woman is to that extent emotionally dependent on her power. Ultimately, such males therefore fear women as women, and are only too ready to distrust them, and to withdraw from a relationship. This fact explains why unfortunately Claudio is curiously willing to believe, once he is offered the charade acted out by Borachio and Margaret, that Hero is not a pure virgin, but a slut, or to use one of his own expressions, ‘a common stale’ (4.1.65).

It is to an extent possible to excuse Claudio for his mistaken belief that Hero is not loyal to him, for he is, of course, misled by a deceitful theatrical performance. Even so, most of us today find his judgement deficient, and resent the way he treats Hero, not least in withdrawing from the wedding without having sufficient evidence for his belief that Hero is not pure. We feel that psychologically he had not committed himself to Hero fully enough, and that as a result he is far too willing to withdraw from a relationship for which he is not ready.

In Claudio’s case it is not difficult to see that his treatment of Hero is at least partly inspired by fear of her, and hence an unwillingness really to commit himself to a relationship. Shakespeare creates a psychological difference between Claudio as a man and Hero as a woman. By contrast, Beatrice and Benedick usually tend to be viewed as characters who are both not ready to commit themselves until helped to do so by their friends, and even then only with some hesitation. What I wish to stress, however, is that these two seemingly reluctant lovers are not identical in their attitude to commitment, and that there is actually a significant distinction – again, a distinction of gender rather than character – between them. I believe that Shakespeare wishes us to become aware of what I have called a ‘pre-history’ to the main action. In that pre-history to the play, Beatrice, as a woman, was fully prepared for a relationship with Benedick. Benedick pledged his love to her, and she was won over by his pledge. She thus pledged her love to him in return. However, as Benedick, like Claudio, was not really ready for a relationship with a woman, he changed his mind and in effect left Beatrice in the lurch. Hence she grew cautious only as a direct result of his conduct – not because of an intrinsic deep-seated fear of members of the opposite sex.

Let me discuss the main evidence for this putative scenario. Once both Claudio and Benedick are returned from the war, at the beginning of the play, Beatrice asks a messenger:

I pray you, is Signor Montanto returned from the wars, or no? (1.1.29-30)

The expression ‘Signor Montanto’ is a curious reference to Benedick, as Hero realises, commenting: ‘My cousin means Signor Benedick of Padua’ (34). OED
explains that ‘Montanto’ is a fictitious Italian or Spanish variant of ‘montant’, and provides the gloss ‘a “downward” blow or thrust’. However, given the fact that ‘montant’ derives from French *montant*, ‘an upward blow, or thrust’, and the context within which we find ‘Montanto’, I concur with Zitner’s gloss of this very rare word: ‘ironic, taken from the fencing term for an upward thrust; also by extension “aspiring”, or social climbing, both with an unmistakable sexual reference.’ I presume that Beatrice sees – or at least pretends to see – Benedick as a would-be ‘macho’ he-man who is fond of dealing out blows/thrusts in war-like fashion, whether in a military setting or in his dealings with women. In what she says next it becomes obvious that she considers there to be a connection between his war-like prowess and his inadequate attitude to love:

He set up his bills here in Messina, and challenged Cupid at the flight; and my uncle’s fool, reading the challenge, subscribed for Cupid and challenged him at the bird-bolt. (1.1.37-40)

I interpret these words as follows. Benedick used ‘bills’, i.e. advertising placards, to let everyone know that he was ready to match himself against Cupid in a contest of arrow-shooting. He challenged Cupid ‘at the flight’, viz. the flight-arrow, which was used for long-distance shooting. I suggest that Beatrice wishes us to view Benedick as claiming that he can shoot further, if both he and Cupid use flight-arrows, than Cupid can. He claims, in effect, that he, the military man, is more capable than Cupid of wounding a woman so as to make her fall in love with him.

Beatrice then makes the point that ‘my uncle’s fool’ accepted the challenge, and in her turn challenged Benedick ‘at the bird-bolt’. I consider it unlikely that in using the word ‘fool’ Shakespeare is alluding to a jester at Leonato’s court, as has been often proposed. Rather, when Beatrice speaks of ‘my uncle’s fool’, she is, as fewer critics have observed, obliquely referring to herself. She is her uncle’s niece, and, at the same time, she feels that in subscribing for Cupid she acted foolishly.

A ‘bird-bolt’, according to OED, was a simple, blunt wooden-headed arrow. Traditionally, this type of arrow was used by Cupid himself, and it is natural for Beatrice, as a woman supporting Cupid, to choose a weapon less ‘macho’ than Benedick’s flight-arrow. However, in doing that, she also caused harm to herself, for she appears to imply that Benedick wounded her more than she wounded Benedick, if indeed she wounded him at all. In other words, she indirectly explains to us in this sentence that at some stage in the past Benedick made her smart with love, while she could not produce the same effect in him.

A little later, we receive a further hint of what happened between them in the past, in the ‘pre-history’ to the play. In lines 68-9, she says: ‘Who is his companion now? He hath every month a new sworn brother.’ Here she is suggesting that Benedick forms male bonds, but is disloyal to his male friends. Let us

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2 See OED *montant*.
3 OED *flight* *sb.*.10, 15.
consider the sentence ‘Who is his companion now?’ She probably means: ‘Who is his current male friend?’ But ‘now’ could also, of course, mean, ‘at present, now that he has abandoned me.’ And in any case she reveals that Benedick is a disloyal person, for she goes on to say: ‘He wears his faith [i.e. his loyalty] but as the fashion of his hat; it ever changes with the next block’ (71-3). Here, it seems, she is speaking with self-involvement – as someone who knows from her own experience that if Benedick pledges his faith you cannot rely on him.

By this time, if not before, an Elizabethan audience watching the play attentively may well have conjectured that at some stage in the past Benedick aimed to make Beatrice fall in love with him, and that he succeeded. She, for her part, did not manage to inspire quite the same emotion in him. That became evident, it seems, when he showed disloyalty to her after initially pledging his faith to her. He withdrew from his contact with her, and thereafter sought male company instead.

Let us proceed to consider further possible evidence for this interpretation. Still within the same scene – the first scene in the play – Shakespeare seems to allude yet further to an earlier relationship between Beatrice and Benedick. In 1.1.127-8, Beatrice says to Benedick: ‘I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me.’ At first one thinks that she is the kind of truly strident feminist who simply is not interested in men and any offers of love from them. While she may in part intend that, there is surely also another meaning present, namely: ‘The bark of a dog is more pleasing to me than a man’s declaration of loyalty in love – for with the barking of a dog you know where you stand, while if a man swears he loves you he is sure to let you down.’

A little later Beatrice seems to specify just how a man might let a woman down. After some further sparring between her and Benedick, Benedick says: ‘I would my horse had the speed of your tongue, and so good a continuer. But keep your way, o’ God’s name. I have done’ (137-9). Broadly, Benedick is indicating here that he cannot really keep up with her wit, and therefore wishes to withdraw from the dialogue. But Beatrice provides a very interesting rejoinder: ‘You always end with a jade’s trick. I know you of old’ (140-1). In ‘I know you of old’ she is obviously referring back to their earlier contact, i.e. to what I have called their ‘pre-history’. And I think that these words imply not only earlier knowledge of Benedick, but also a degree of weariness and criticism.

Just what does Beatrice mean by saying ‘You always end with a jade’s trick’? Sheldon Zitner, in his note on ‘jade’s trick’, offers the explanation, ‘like a recalcitrant horse, refusing to go on’. This is to the point. A jade was a defective, ill-tempered horse, and the expression ‘a jade’s trick’ thus became proverbial for stubborn, unco-operative behaviour.4 A.R. Humphreys’s Arden edition of the play suggests that the horse-trick which Beatrice accuses Benedick of may be that of slipping the neck out of the collar. If so, she presumably reminds him that at a former time he refused to commit himself when he really needed to do so. In other words, I think we have an indication, here, of just what Benedick did to her in the past. He had led her to believe that he wished to have a rela-

4 OED jade sb.
tionship with her, but when it came to the crunch he withdrew, as he wanted to
preserve his liberty.

We must now tackle the most difficult allusion to the earlier relationship. In
2.1.273-4, Don Pedro says jocularly to Beatrice: ‘Come, lady, come, you have
lost the heart of Signor Benedick.’ To this Beatrice replies:

Indeed, my lord, he lent it me a while, and I gave him use for
it, a double heart for his single one. Marry, once before he won
it of me with false dice. Therefore your grace may well say I have
lost it. (275-81)

This passage has understandably much bewildered many readers, but I intend
to show here that it is not unintelligible. Beatrice says for one thing that
Benedick lent his heart to her just for a while before he took it back. In other
words, he declared that he was in love with her, and thus gave his heart to her,
but – thus we immediately become aware – he took it back again in the sense
that he proceeded to renounce the love which he seemed to offer.

Beatrice declares that she ‘gave him use for it, a double heart for his single
one.’ She no doubt means here first of all that initially, when once Benedick
declared his love for her, she was moved by that to love him in return. In other
words, she then gave him her heart. At that stage, each of the two people had
each other’s heart. However, that is by no means all.

As Beatrice proceeds to state further, she is now careful, for at that earlier
time, i.e. ‘once before’, he won his heart of her ‘with false dice’. Her point is that
Benedick pretended he loved her, as a result of which she gave him her heart,
but that in fact his declaration of love was false, so that subsequently he won
his own heart from her by taking it back; and then, because she had given him
her love, he also kept her heart. Therefore, Benedick ends up with two hearts,
or, to use Beatrice’s expression, a ‘double heart for his single one’. He now has
a ‘double heart’ in that he has taken his own heart back, and, additionally,
keeps hers, because, unlike him, she is incapable of taking her own heart back.

In this striking speech by Beatrice Shakespeare by implication makes a funda-
mental statement about the psychology of young men and women. Benedick
thought, or pretended, that he was ready for an amorous relationship, but in
the event wanted to maintain his independence. On the other hand, Beatrice
was fully prepared to commit herself to him, and, once she gave him her love,
could not dissociate herself from him anymore. Of course, what we can see –
better than Beatrice, or indeed Benedick – is that Benedick actually still does
love her, too. But there certainly is a difference, in that he, by withdrawing from
the relationship, took a voluntary step towards independence, while she did not.

The last passage which provides evidence of a ‘pre-history’ such as I have
been sketching occurs in 5.1. Don Pedro there narrates how, at some stage in
the past, Beatrice made comments on Benedick. He commences a speech to
Benedick with the words: ‘I’ll tell thee how Beatrice praised thy wit the other
day’ (157-8). He recounts, during the remainder of his speech, how he com-
mented to her on Benedick having ‘the tongues’ (163), i.e. command of various
languages. He remembers that she sarcastically agreed with this assessment,
saying: 'he swore a thing to me on Monday night which he forswore on Tuesday morning. There's a double tongue; there's two tongues' (164-6). In the context of the play as a whole, it is surely proper to interpret Beatrice's words as accusing Benedick of making her a promise of love one day, and withdrawing that promise soon after. He thus was in that sense guilty of speaking with 'a double tongue'. His original words were untrustworthy: he appeared to say one thing, but in fact meant another.

All in all, then, I think we have to conclude that there is at least one remarkable similarity between Claudio and Benedick. Both of these young men promise love to a young woman who takes that promise of love seriously, but they are not in the event ready to commit themselves. It is from this male deficiency that much of the action in the play springs. Of course Claudio is nevertheless a very different character from Benedick, but I think we shall misunderstand the play significantly if we do not grasp what, in an episode that we have to imagine as occurring before the action, occurred between Benedick and Beatrice.

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APPENDIX

Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing*:
passages implying an earlier commitment

The passages below are analysed in the body of the article, and are here presented separately for the reader's convenience. They are cited from Sheldon Zitner's edition of the play.

1. 1.1.29-40
BEATRICE [To Messenger] I pray you, is Signor Montanto returned from the wars, or no? (29-30)

... HERO My cousin means Signor Benedick of Padua. (34)

... BEATRICE He set up his bills here in Messina, and challenged Cupid at the flight; and my uncle's fool, reading the challenge, subscribed for Cupid and challenged him at the bird-bolt. (37-40)

2. 1.1.68-73
BEATRICE [To Messenger] ... Who is his companion now? He hath every month a new sworn brother.
MESSENGER Is't possible?
BEATRICE Very easily possible. He wears his faith but as the fashion of his hat; it ever changes with the next block.

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(3) 1.1.127-41:
BEATRICE ... I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me. (127-8)

BENEDICK I would my horse had the speed of your tongue, and so good a continuer. But keep your way, o' God's name. I have done.
BEATRICE You always end with a jade's trick. I know you of old. (137-41)

(4) 2.1.273-79:
DON PEDRO Come, lady, come, you have lost the heart of Signor Benedick.
BEATRICE Indeed, my lord, he lent it me a while, and I gave him use for it, a double heart for his single one. Marry, once before he won it of me with false dice. Therefore your grace may well say I have lost it.

(5) 5.1.157-167:
DON PEDRO [To Benedick] I'll tell thee how Beatrice praised thy wit the other day. I said thou hadst a fine wit. (157-8) ... 'Nay,' said I, 'he hath the tongues.' 'That I believe,' said she, 'for he swore a thing to me on Monday night which he forswore on Tuesday morning. There's a double tongue; there's two tongues.' [163-7]