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The Monster that is A Man: A Feminist View of William Shakespeare's *Much Ado*

About Nothing and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

William Shakespeare's comedies are assumed to be stories of humorous misunderstandings that usually result in double or triple marriages, and his plays *Much Ado About Nothing* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are no exception. In *Much Ado*, the storyline follows a young woman named Beatrice and her acclaimed rival Signior Benedick in Messina, Italy. They begin the play by quarreling, but fall in love by the last act. Along the way, they help unveil a plot to dishonor and shame Beatrice's cousin, Hero, in order to prevent her marriage to Count Claudio, a close acquaintance of the Prince. Similarly, in *A Midsummer Night's*, two young couples consisting of the main heroine of the play Hermia and her beloved Lysander as well as her best friend Helena and her unrequited love Demetrius, are trapped in a love quadrangle. The four lovers become the victims of the Fairy King Oberon's love games until Demetrius is made to love Helena and the two marriages are finally approved. As expected, once again, everyone lives happily ever after. But what if these plays were not meant to be a show of all fun and games? What if Shakespeare had hidden a secret message within them; one that showed that his views on the amount of freedom a woman should have were far ahead of his time?

The British playwright and poet William Shakespeare was born in April 1564 and raised in the town of Stratford-upon-Avon, England. Throughout his lifetime, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, a woman who gave him at least three known daughters at the age of eighteen in 1582. Due to lack of documentation, not much else is known about his early life, daily life, or schooling, and it can only be speculated that he learned to read and write in both Latin and English at a common “grammar school” in his hometown. However, the little documentation that is accessible indicates that he had begun to gain recognition as a renowned playwright and actor by 1592 and as a published poet by 1593. Shakespeare died in April of 1616, just thirteen years after the death of the proclaimed Queen Elizabeth I of England (“Shakespeare’s Life”).

The British Queen Elizabeth Tudor I is famously known as the “virgin queen” and reigned over England from 1558 to her death in 1603. Her major achievements include ending the religious turmoil between the Protestants and Roman Catholics in England and defeating the Spanish Armada in 1588. She is also known for holding peace within England for the entirety of her reign and largely promoting the arts and artists, including the playwright William Shakespeare. England under her rule, despite her high position of power and independent achievements, still functioned as a patriarchal society (“Queen Elizabeth I Biography”).

Women during sixteenth-century England were expected to depend on men both emotionally and physically. Socially known as the inferior gender, women were expected to obediently complete the duties of a housewife and bear at least one child every two years. In addition to this, they were only allowed to enter professions of domestic service and the arts; if the man in charge of them, usually a husband or male family member, allowed them to work (Sharnette). It is because of these social normalities that Queen Elizabeth stood out as, and still stands out as, a symbol of feminist power in her time. Not only did she hold the highest chair of

both position and authority, but she also refused to get married and did not have children, thus destroying the social ideal that motherhood was the most prideful accomplishment of an Elizabethan woman. Her independent position and authority showed women that dependence on a man was not vital for survival and that they were capable of becoming more than a childbearing slave to society (“Queen Elizabeth I Biography”).

While these ideals were not directly spoken aloud in England during that time, they were quietly promoted through the arts, or more specifically, through literature. William Shakespeare was one of the many writers and playwrights who promoted feminist values within their work during the late sixteenth century. The actions and dialogue of the female characters within his comedies, specifically *Much Ado About Nothing* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, provide direct and discreet parallels with the feminist theories of the twenty-first century. His works show that females do not need to depend upon men to survive, and should be able to have their own opinions and ideas, even if that means holding a position of higher power. Shakespeare's use of symbolism through his characters' words and actions as well as the metaphorical verbiage used throughout the plays *Much Ado About Nothing* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* reinforce Shakespeare's feminist views that were certainly ahead of his time.

In sixteenth-century England, to not be married was a taboo action within society. As seen in Shakespeare's plays, marriages were usually arranged by parents and relatives rather than the bride and groom themselves. The groom would often suggest whom he wished to marry, but under no circumstances was his choice certain. The bride's family would then have to approve the request and often chose the groom based on his wealth and social status in order to either gain a better reputation or forge an alliance between the two families. Women, throughout the entire process, had no choice or say. Even after marriage, women and everything they owned

was considered to be under the legal ownership of their husbands. They were not allowed to own property, could not have legal guardianship over their children, and were not allowed to do anything without their husband's permission (Layson and Phillips). William Shakespeare, realizing that this was an extremely sexist and unfair practice towards a woman's safety and economic power, spoke out about women's right to marry by choice rather than force in *Much Ado About Nothing* through a defiant female character. The heroine of the play, Beatrice, is directly introduced to the audience as a young woman who despises men and abhors marriage, exclaiming that she "had rather hear [her] dog bark at a crow / than a man swear he loves" her (*Shakespeare, Much Ado* 1.1.129-130). In the play, Beatrice has no known immediate living relatives, with her cousin and uncle being unable to have complete custody of the young woman. Therefore, her response to even the thought of being bound in marriage shows that she full well knows how much freedom she will lose once she says "I do" and that "she is a strong-willed woman who knows her mind and is not afraid to speak it. She is content...to remain unmarried, suggesting a Shakespearean link (as some scholars have theorized) to Queen Elizabeth I, who never married" ("Much Ado About Nothing", 620). Beatrice's defiant stance against marriage is so nonexistent within her society that her uncle Leonato and his guests, the Prince and Count Claudio, look upon her stance as a joke. They sarcastically state that "O, by no means [should she get married]: she mocks all her wooers / out of suit" (*Shakespeare, Much Ado*, 2.1.341-342). Thus, they trick good Beatrice into becoming a part of a scandal to get her to fall in love.

Another example is this is seen through Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Hermia, who is almost forced into a marriage with someone she does not love by her father Egeus and the Duke of Athens Theseus, publicly denounces her father's wishes and tells Theseus that "so will I grow, so live, so die, my lord, / Ere I will my virgin patent up / Unto his lordship whose unwishèd yoke

“/ My soul consents not to give sovereignty” in order to avoid unwanted union with Demetrius (*Shakespeare, Midsummer Night*, 1.1.81-84). The order of the words within the first line and Hermia’s careless tone in her response indicate her defiance against a forced marriage; she will not stand to be threatened into a marriage with someone she does not love. Furthermore, not only does Hermia take this stance against two powerful men, but she also shows her defiance by running away to the forest with the man she does wish to marry, Lysander, to escape these men’s wrath. Hermia’s actions here show that firstly, she trusts Lysander enough as a man to respect her boundaries and keep her safe, and secondly, that “Female intractability, foreignness, and rebelliousness, are expressed in terms of one another, but they do not betoken simply threatening and undesirable terrains which must be rejected or outlawed. Simultaneously they also provide opportunities for conquest and for the exercise of sexual, colonial, or class power” (Loomba, 184). Shakespeare’s representation of Hermia parallels his thought that females should be able to choose their futures for themselves and should not be forced into that which they are uncomfortable with. The way Hermia handles her father and Theseus in the play, as well as Lysander whom she convinces to elope, shows her intelligence as a woman and her ability to calmly and cleverly handle threatening situations, thus putting her in a higher position of power and control than a man.

Another way that Shakespeare promotes his feminist views is through the showing of disrespect towards powerful males by women within the plays. In the sixteenth century, women were expected to live their lives for and around men; everything they did had to have a purpose that would benefit the man they belonged to. They were expected to look upon men like father figures “as a god, / One that composed your beauties, yea, and one / To whom you are but as a form in wax / By him imprinted, and within his power / To leave the figure or disfigure it”

(*Shakespeare, Midsummer Night*, 1.1.48-52). This led to females being unable to voice their true thoughts and opinions, as it would not benefit the man and would go against what a man was saying, therefore disrespecting them. However, Shakespeare rejects this idea in *Much Ado* and shows that a woman should also be able to speak their mind, whether it offends the men around her or not. Beatrice, the heroine of the play, not only openly states her opinions, but also insults the men whom she does not like in person, going so far as to say that Benedick is “the prince's jester, a very dull / fool; only his gift is in devising impossible slanders. / None but libertines delight in him, and the com- / mendation is not in his wit but in his villany, for he / both pleases men and angers them, and then they / laugh at him and beat him” (*Shakespeare, Much Ado*, 2.1.135-139). Not only does she accuse Benedick of being a homosexual to his face, but she also describes him as being the lapdog and essentially a laughing stock for other men, thus effectively insulting his manhood and his history as a well-renowned soldier. Beatrice then continues voicing her opinions by stating that while her aforementioned husband would go to hell if she were to be married, she would go “to the gate, and there will the devil / meet me, like an old cuckold, with horns on his / head, and say 'Get you to heaven, Beatrice, get you / to heaven; here's no place for you maids” (2.1.43-46). By openly stating her opinions about marriage to her uncle Leonato, Beatrice denounces the “movement towards satisfying men’s psychological needs, as Shakespeare perceived them,” and proves that her opinion as a woman matters just as much as that of a man; therefore through these examples of Beatrice, Shakespeare demonstrates that women should be unafraid to voice their opinions (Garner, 127). Another demonstration of an independent female thought can be found through Hermia from *A Midsummer Night's*, who Shakespeare uses to prove that women should be able to stand up for their beliefs. In the play, when Hermia wakes up in the forest and cannot find Lysander, she verbally attacks Demetrius

because she thinks Lysander was hurt by him. She is so frustrated of having to fight back against an unwanted marriage with Demetrius that she upon seeing him exclaims: “If thou hast slain Lysander in his sleep, / Being o’er shoes in blood, plunge in the deep / And kill me too,” once again openly exhibiting that she would rather die than be without her Lysander (*Shakespeare, Midsummer Night*, 3.2.48-51). By clearly and fiercely stating what she wants and believes, Hermia in this scene shows her strength as a woman. She knows exactly what she desires and “In that desire, what truly stands out is the irresistible sexual dominance that Hermia is supposed to exert upon Demetrius and all those who approach her. It is this sexual dominance” that allows her opinion to be clearly heard amongst a crowd of men who only wish to hear their own (Girard, 229). Through Hermia, Shakespeare is able to show that women can have their own opinions and characters, and do not need a man to survive.

In addition to the defiance of marriage and disrespect of males, comes Shakespeare’s promotion of the complete rejection of men. The expectations of the patriarchal society in the late 1500s was that every directive of a male was to be followed by a female; no matter how extreme or how horribly it affected a woman, it was to be followed because it was thought that women could not make emotionally stable decisions for themselves (Layson and Phillips). However, Shakespeare directly rejects these concepts by having the female characters in *Much Ado* and *A Midsummer Night’s* reject their male suitors’ advances, showing that females should be allowed a free will of action. The rejection begins when Beatrice refuses to give Benedick the kiss he so desperately desires of her because “Foul words is but foul wind, and foul wind is / but foul breath, and foul breath is noisome. There- / fore I will depart un-kissed” (*Shakespeare, Much Ado*, 5.2.51-53). She refuses to entertain his romantic whims until he informs her that he has challenged Claudio in her place and that Claudio has accepted that challenge. By allowing

Beatrice to reject her beloved Benedick, Shakespeare “deconstruct[s] the gender-ideology of separate spheres [and shows that] strong-willed [women are] resistant to the behavioral restrictions of conventional gender roles,” thus allowing Beatrice full control over her physical and emotional desires in this scene (Gay). Beatrice also demonstrates this control when she refuses a marriage proposal from the prince himself, replying to the Prince’s advances with a firm “no, my lord, unless I might have another for / Working days. Your grace is too costly to wear / every day. But, I beseech your grace, pardon me. I / was born to speak all mirth and no matter” (*Shakespeare, Much Ado*, 2.1.320-323). The way she indirectly compliments the prince’s wealth and gently apologizes to him for saying “no” shows both Beatrice’s cleverness and her authoritative figure. By having her reject him so gently, Shakespeare displays a woman’s intelligent ability to avoid a potentially harmful and unwanted situation while still showing their authoritative figure to get what they want. Hermia replicates this once more by rejecting her own Lysander in the forest when he wants to sleep with her in the forest. She gently dismisses his pleas by telling him that her reasons for sleeping apart are “for love and courtesy, / Lie further off in human modesty. / Such separation, as may well be said, / Becomes a virtuous bachelor and a maid” (*Shakespeare, Midsummer Night*, 2.2.62-65). Hermia uses the concept of female purity to avoid sleeping with Lysander and in doing so uses the misconceptions created by men to limit women to her advantage. She continues to use these ideals when she rejects a proposal stating that “Demetrius is a worthy gentleman,” to marry and she responds with “So is Lysander” (1.1.53-54). By answering the proposal this way, Hermia respects Demetrius’s manhood but also subtly gives praise to the one she loves, Lysander. This curt and clever refusal further enforces Shakespeare’s idea that women are able to make their own independent decisions and should be able to do what they want, even if it means rejecting men.

Another way that Shakespeare illustrates female independence through the rejection of men is through the female refusal to give up ownership of themselves. Shakespeare demonstrates this idea through Queen Titania of the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Titania shows her control over her mind and body when she refuses to give up her Indian boy despite King Oberon's pleas and bargains, firmly stating to him that the boy was given to her and therefore belongs to her, not him. By doing so, Titania does not let Oberon take control of her and her decisions, thus not allowing his "claims to be her lord and she his lady [interfere in her decision and degrading] the ideological affirmations of male supremacy" (Grady, 229). Titania's total rejection of Oberon allows her to demonstrate her ability to make well thought independent decisions without the help of a male and represents women's ability to make a rational decision without the help of a man.

The concept that women can make their own independent decisions without the help of a man and the idea that they should be able to speak their mind has already been clearly demonstrated within Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The question then remains that if women are capable of having their own thoughts and voicing them, why do they not do so? Women do not voice their own thoughts because of the consequences they are forced to undergo if they defy a man, and this idea of "paying the price" is first seen in the case of Hero from *Much Ado*. Count Claudio and the Prince are angered by a dirty trick played on them by the Prince's delinquent brother Don John to make them believe that Hero has lost her virginity to another man before she has married Claudio; "Yet rather than break[ing] off the engagement in private, they wait until [they] all meet at the altar to accuse the [Hero] of 'savage sensuality.'" Without compunction they leave her in a swoon, believing her dead. Even the father, Leonato, would have her dead rather than shamed" (Kubal). Claudio's

public accusation leaves Hero only enough time to pull together a weak defense of “Is [my name] not Hero? Who can blot that name / With any just reproach?” and as a result Hero is effectively prevented from thoroughly defending herself and her reputation as well as solving the misconceptions (*Shakespeare, Much Ado*, 4.1.84-85). Because a man was angered, Hero is forced to pay for a crime she did not commit and as Shakespeare demonstrates, her word is taken with so little value that even her own father does not believe her. By having Hero defiled this way, Shakespeare demonstrates how even if a woman did speak her mind, she was not taken seriously and was still shamed to help cure a man’s wounded ego. This is once again seen with Hermia in *A Midsummer Night’s*. In response to Hermia’s refusal to marry Demetrius, Egeus threatens to “dispose of her, / Which shall be either to this gentleman / Or to her death, according to our law / Immediately provided in that case” (*Shakespeare, Midsummer Night*, 1.1.43-46). His response to Hermia ensures that she knows “for a woman in a solidly-structured patriarchal society such as this one, there are no prospects other than marriage or a barely-tolerated maiden-aunt status,” given that the marriage is arranged by the men involved, not the women (Gay). Egeus will not tolerate being disobeyed, so much so that he is willing to kill his own daughter for going against him simply because she is a female.

Another type of consequence that females face for defying a male is a manipulation of them. Shakespeare demonstrates this example through Titania in *A Midsummer Night’s* when he allows Oberon to “watch Titania when she is asleep / And drop the liquor of it in her eyes. / The next thing then she, waking, looks upon / (Be it on lion, bear, or wolf, or bull, / On meddling monkey, or on busy ape) / She shall pursue it with the soul of love. / And ere I take this charm from off her sight” (*Shakespeare, Midsummer Night*, 2.1.184-190). Because he cannot control her directly, Oberon instead drugs her, allowing “The extremes of fanciful and vulgar [to unite]

when the enchanted Titania awakes and falls in love with a course mechanic with an ass's head," causing Titania to give the Indian boy to Oberon without argument (von Schlegel, 30). Oberon is so desperate to get what he wants and so deeply offended that Titania, his own wife, would dare go against him that he resorts to playing dirty tricks on her to both get the boy and teach her a lesson so that she will never defy him again.

Another way that men have found to control women is by using the idea of virginity. Virginity is defined as never having had vaginally penetrative intercourse, and is often considered of greater importance to women than to men. As a result of this, virginity has come to symbolize the innocence and honor that a woman holds. In the sixteenth century a woman losing her virginity was considered as immoral as committing a sin if it occurred pre-marriage. Therefore, being a virgin when getting married was extremely important for a woman, and this is thoroughly illustrated through the character of Hero within Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. Hero, in the play, is unfairly accused of losing her virginity to another man who was not her husband before her marriage to Claudio. Claudio, so enraged at the thought of this does not think first to speak to Hero, but instead exclaims: "Hero itself can blot out Hero's virtue. / What man was he talk'd with you yesternight / Out at your window betwixt twelve and one? / Now, if you are a maid, answer to this" (*Shakespeare, Much Ado*, 4.1.87-90). He is so shocked that her honor had possibly been compromised that he does not wait to hear her side of the story and refuses to marry her. But while it is understandable why Claudio may not want her anymore, it is unforgivable for Hero's father to wish death upon his daughter after simply hearing the allegations against her. It is because of these views and attitudes of the men in the play towards women that it is seen how important it was for women to be careful with their virginity (and with that their honor and self-respect) during the sixteenth century. A loss of virginity before marriage

for women “appears to be a worse crime than murder. There is no mention of a similar pressure on men. Benedick mentions brothels, which implies that he has visited them; and Borachio mentions having an affair with Margaret, Hero's lady-in-waiting. So the standard of chastity seems to apply only to women of the upper classes” (“Much Ado about Nothing”, 625).

Based on these examples it has been clearly identified that while women can be independent, they choose not to because they have exploitable weaknesses and can be punished for having their own ideas; what is acceptable for one gender is considered taboo for the other. Women are expected to be pure, obedient, and honest while men are allowed to sleep around, talk ill of others, and do what they want without consequence. This concept is known as the double standard in society for gender and Shakespeare first directly addresses this concept in *Much Ado* through Beatrice. In the play, Beatrice openly and unashamedly insults Benedick, and in response, the Prince scolds “You have put him down, lady, you have put / him down” (*Shakespeare, Much Ado*, 2.1.278-279). Yet Benedick himself speaks ill of Hero by insulting her beauty and neither the Prince or Count Claudio attempts to chastise him for it. As can be seen, “Although the character of Beatrice could easily be likened to a modern women in that she speaks her mind, ... there still remains in this play the double standard for men and women, as seen in the emphasis put” on how Beatrice cannot insult a man, but Benedick can freely and openly insult a woman (“Much Ado about Nothing”, 625). A similar situation of hypocrisy is also seen in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with Helena and her unrequited love Demetrius. Demetrius chastises Helena for chasing after him into the forest and tells her “Hence, get thee gone, and follow me no more / ... You do impeach your modesty too much / To leave the city and commit yourself / Into the hands of one that loves you not, / To trust the opportunity of night / And the ill counsel of a desert place / With the rich worth of your virginity” (*Shakespeare*,

Midsummer Night, 2.1.201-226). While Demetrius suggestively threatens Helena, he is also simultaneously chasing after Hermia; he scolds and threatens her for the exact same actions that he is undertaking, effectively showing the hypocrisy of the double standard for gender.

Due to this tight-knit patriarchal society that men had cultivated, women had become extremely clever in manipulating societal laws and expectations of themselves, often exhibiting subtle shows of female intelligence. One example of this is Beatrice's manipulation of Benedick in *Much Ado*. Beatrice promises Benedick her love if he murders Claudio in her place by telling him to "Use [his hand] for my love some other way than / swearing by it," and asking Benedick if he has challenged Claudio yet (*Much Ado*, 4.2.341-342). By doing so, she subtly tricks Benedick into doing her dirty work to get revenge for Hero, manipulating his feelings to "threateningly [voice] in her exhortation to Benedick to [murder Claudio] wishing that she [was a man] so that she could challenge him herself" (Suzuki, 149). Hermia also shows her wits in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* when she avoids sleeping with Lysander in the forest by hinting that it may lead to her losing her virginity. Hermia replies "Nay, good Lysander. For my sake, my dear, / Lie further off yet. Do not lie so near" in response to Lysander's pleas to sleep together (*Shakespeare, Midsummer Night*, 2.2.49-50). By telling her beloved that it is for her sake, Hermia implies to him that if he loves her then he will respect her wishes. Because Lysander has competition from Demetrius for Hermia's heart, he is forced to respect her wishes unless he wants to lose her; Hermia compromises his desires in order to keep herself safe.

Based on the way that the women of these plays have been treated and the measures that they have had to take to ensure their safety Shakespeare is able to expose the true plight of a woman in the sixteenth century. One validation of this is the main plot of *Much Ado About Nothing*, which includes tricking and manipulating Beatrice into falling in love with and

marrying Benedick. Beatrice's claims of not wanting to get married are entirely ignored by Leonato, Claudio, and the Prince, who in discussion claim that "she were an excellent wife for Benedict" (*Shakespeare, Much Ado*, 2.1.343). In addition to this, Hero's reputation as an honorable woman is fully restored only when Claudio once again agrees to marry her, revealing "that [Hero's] doubleness does not signify her duplicity, but rather, the violence of patriarchal culture's construction of women as duplicitous, which makes it necessary for Hero to experience a symbolic death in order to reclaim her reputation as a maid" (Suzuki, 149). This idea of a woman's plight is further examined in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* where Hermia demonstrates how women's decisions are entirely dominated by men. While the happy ending of everyone marrying the right person is most obviously displayed, what Shakespeare has so cleverly hidden within the scene "is that the renewal at the end of the play affirms patriarchal order and hierarchy, insisting that the power of women must be circumscribed" (Garner, 127). Despite her defiant and independent attitude, Hermia is only allowed to marry Lysander because Theseus eventually allows it, showing that "from a twenty-first-century point of view, then, the aesthetic harmony achieved in such satisfyingly comedic knitting together of the plots at the end of Act 4 is tinged with the ideology of male supremacy" (Grady, 228).

William Shakespeare has managed to do what could be considered seemingly impossible; he has exposed the struggles of a woman in the sixteenth century in a way that is both understandable and relatable. The pain that the women in his comedies *Much Ado About Nothing* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* feel and the abuse they are forced to undergo reflects that of women today in the twenty-first century. Women today are still criticized for not keeping their virginity and remaining "pure" before marriage, and many are still manipulated into making badly influenced decisions, like Beatrice and Titania. However, there are also many women who

stand up for what they believe in regardless of the consequences, like Hermia. It is the everlasting continuance of this issue that shows that a woman's struggle for freedom from men is truly timeless.

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