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Making the Way to Marriage: Language and Love in Shakespeare's Plays

The language in William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and *Much Ado About Nothing* turns love into a passion and a game through opposing sentiments of adoration and cynicism between Romeo and Juliet and Beatrice and Benedict, while differing dictions show opposing interpretations of courtship practices. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo and Juliet's youthfulness and intensity highlight their immature yet adoring dialogue; however, the social challenges they face are detrimental because they physically affect Romeo and Juliet's ability to be together, and Romeo and Juliet respond emotionally rather than reasonably, which leads to death at the hand of their own urgency and secrecy. The word choice of Beatrice and Benedict in *Much Ado About Nothing* creates an inverse reaction, where negative interactions precede a successful courtship because their maturity allows them to overcome their fears and realize the theoretical idea of marriage through the open involvement of their friends. Each couple employs various literary devices in their language to add new interpretations to meanings of words while progressing through the stages of courtship, showing their love in contrasting ways.

Romeo and Juliet is well known among archetypal stories of ill-fated lovers, but Shakespeare presents his lovers within a context of youthful ignorance and intense emotions made more evident through their use of metaphors during their first interaction that shows disregard for societal practices. Juliet, not yet fourteen and having not thought about marriage before, is suddenly thrust into the idea by her parents to "think of marriage now" (Shakespeare, *Rom.* 1.3.71). After the talk of marriage, her first interaction with a man is with Romeo, where their first conversation is a shared sonnet. Their ability to connect through language as strangers is possible by relating religious sentiments with their emotional desires of love. The sonnet

“lends words the power of prayer” (Greenblatt, Headnote to *Rom.* 959) through religious metaphors that present Romeo as the devout believer taking a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and Juliet as an idol, playing with the idea of a Petrarchan lover. Within this conversation, their emotions overshadow the reality of what their words imply. The Elizabethan Anglican Church held that the worship of such images [of saints] was blasphemy; [...] therefore, Romeo’s description of his love could sound like idolatry (Shakespeare 983n7). Romeo’s idolatrous implications mimic a perfidious act against religion, which transposes to his fickle relationship with women because his interaction with Juliet occurs on the same day that he weeps with courtly love for Rosaline. Although Romeo and Juliet’s love displays intense emotions, the reality of their words is concerning. They disregard societal practices and etiquette by seriously offending the church and create a love based on frivolous attraction and a desire to be married.

Juliet continues the disregard for societal practices by deconstructing the meanings of family names, established by social interactions, to instead lend emotions as creators of the defining terms. In Act 2, scene 1, Juliet’s monologue reveals her understanding that loving Romeo is forbidden due to their family names. Her language first constructs the family names of Montague and Capulet as synecdoches, so the names represent the feud and families as a whole:

What’s in a name? That which we call a rose
 By any other word would smell as sweet;
 So Romeo would, were he not Romeo called,
 Retain that dear perfection which he owes
 Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name,
 And, for thy name, which is no part of thee,
 Take all myself. (Shakespeare 2.1.85-91)

Juliet declares family names as arbitrary representations of a person by comparing a rose's qualities as indifferent to its name. Words are social constructions, communal creations that are neither complete unto themselves nor empty and hence malleable by individuals (Greenblatt Headnote to *Rom.* 961). Juliet wishes to reconstruct Romeo's name based on their intimate interaction and not the families' fights in the street, allowing the young couple freedom from the societal construction and preservation of their families' hatred. Romeo responds to Juliet's intimate request, "Call me but 'love,' and I'll be new baptized" (Shakespeare 2.1.93). The flowery language of Romeo and Juliet is set against the feuding interactions of their families, so by disregarding their negative connotative names for new, emotional definitions, Romeo and Juliet create a new circle of interaction. They become disillusioned with reality after "doffing" the language set up by the physical world for the emotional, which simultaneously sets up a lack of communication and secrecy against the families.

Romeo and Juliet's marriage is clandestine and designed through secret vows. By the seventeenth century many couples did not follow formal ways of announcing a marriage, but it remained binding nonetheless because "marriage was transacted between husband and wife...through vows and sexual consummation" (Dolan 622). Juliet's response to Romeo when they profess their love in the balcony scene is a representation of her vows, since the audience does not witness their marriage:

If that thy bent of love be honorable,
Thy purpose marriage, send me word tomorrow,
By one that I'll procure to come to thee,
Where and what time thou wilt perform the rite,
And all my fortunes at thy foot I'll lay,

And follow thee, my lord, throughout the world. (Shakespeare 2.1.185-90)

Juliet professes her love and demonstrates her eagerness to be a loyal wife by providing a plan to procure their marriage. As part of marriage practices, a messenger or broker played a role to connect two individuals in marriage. Juliet sends the Nurse as a messenger who becomes privy to the marriage plan and aids in the intention of secrecy by preventing the public from seeing Romeo and Juliet together. The Nurse's occupation as a servant permits her to have "a characteristic feature of more peasant societies strictly concerned with the initiation of marriage rather than with the more general conduct of courtship" (O'Hara 101). The Nurse does not broadcast their marriage intention, which is a crucial step in courtship practice for moral implications, but supports the ruse of secrecy, allowing Romeo and Juliet to marry without objections with the help of Friar Lawrence. The Nurse and Friar Lawrence act as go-betweens that were "considered to be the very voice of his [or her] sender, whose words carried the presumption of consent to any proposals he [or she] delivered" (Cook 109). Through the presumption of consent, the Nurse mistakes Romeo's "protest" with "propose" (Shakespeare 2.3.108), which prompts Romeo to quickly respond "Bid her devise some means to come to shrift this afternoon, / And there she shall, At Friar Lawrence's cell, / Be shrived and married" (Shakespeare 2.3.164-6). Romeo speaks instructionally, and his timeliness shows the same urgency as Juliet's vows, while using religious practice as an excuse to meet, which is reminiscent of the religious metaphor that covered their first lovely encounter.

After Tybalt's death, which rekindles hatred towards the Montagues, Juliet must play the role of supporting daughter in the guise of grief and anger towards Romeo for her cousin's death and her love despite his actions. Her use of a double entendre indirectly expresses her love for Romeo while sharing her family's anger:

Oh, how my heart abhors

To hear him named, and cannot come to him –

To wreak the love I bore my cousin

Upon his body that hath slaughtered him. (Shakespeare 3.5.99-102)

To her mother, Juliet's language is full of vengeance within the context of a murdered cousin. Capulet's wife believes Juliet's anger towards Tybalt's murderer is equivalent to the love she felt for her cousin; however, Juliet also grieves for her husband, which permits her to secretly confess her relationship with Romeo. Juliet uses a double entendre for fear of her parents' protests against the marriage and being disowned by her family. Her immaturity and ignorance of marriage legality spawns her unnecessary secrecy because "couples who had married themselves might be brought before a church court for their 'irregularity' and punished for their misconduct by excommunication, penance, or a fee" (Dolan 622), but as a young girl who only hears of marriage as arranged by the parents, Juliet was oblivious to the parent's limited power over annulments. The marriage could only be dissolved in specific circumstances and, during the Elizabethan age, it would be the non-consent of a parent for a minor at the time of the announcement; however, there was little to be done after the marriage, like in Juliet's case, except for disownment. Possible divorce from one's family carries special weight in a tragedy where house and name bear so much significance (Cook 101). So Juliet retains the secret out of fear of her family's reaction and also for social self-preservation.

Romeo and Juliet's love indirectly causes their deaths because it spurred their youthful intensity and urgency to experience their emotions together, which is evident through their death soliloquies. In Romeo's death soliloquy, he kills himself due to the realization that his love is now futile since Juliet is dead, but only to experience the same feeling of death, not due to a

belief in the afterlife. Romeo says “Here, here will I remain / With worms that are thy chambermaids; oh, here / Will I set up my everlasting rest” (Shakespeare 5.3.108-10). He intends to experience the same process of decay and remain in the same tomb as a representation of his commitment to Juliet, but does not mention the ability to behold Juliet again in a spiritual sense. Romeo “emphasizes only his material, corporeal fate: he repeats three times in the space of two lines that he will remain ‘here’” (Targoff 33). He also emphasizes the physical action of decay by worms as death’s presence in the physical world. Romeo’s quick conclusion of death after seeing Juliet’s body showcases his intense distress over his lover’s death in the most extreme way. As a young person in love, Juliet also wishes for death after seeing Romeo’s body, the poison, and his lips and dictates, “Haply some poison yet doth hang on them / To make me die with a restorative” (Shakespeare 5.3.165-6). Juliet seeks the poison that will act as “restitution” or “repayment” (“Restorative”) to imitate Romeo’s suicide, which aligns their identical displays of commitment. When the poison fails, Juliet commands the dagger to “...there rust and let me die” (Shakespeare 5.3.170), reflecting the idea of witnessing physical decay in the material world after death. Romeo and Juliet’s love causes their deaths, but they will not go so far as to hope for a reconnection in the afterlife based on their literal interpretations of decay. The lovers’ intense, emotional reactions to death create continuity in their language compared to the beginning of the play. The couple still physically commits themselves to each other using an action that is damnable in the church’s view and ignores the religious belief of life after death, which demonstrates their private circle of interaction that is exempt from religious or social influence. Expression with serious, intimate language is the ultimate display of love to Romeo and Juliet. “The intensity of the young lovers matches the intensity of the play itself, a play that is singularly obsessed with the pressure of time, with the urgency of the moment” (Targoff 35) through the

emotions of children from feuding families who have society set against them and their only respite is in creating a furtive marriage. A quick path to love is followed by a quick marriage and a quick death.

Conversely, *Much Ado About Nothing* creates a contrasting couple to Romeo and Juliet in Beatrice and Benedict, who interact through sharp wit and cynicism, but slowly come to a marriage at the wishes and involvement of their friends. The majority of prose language contrasts with *Romeo and Juliet* because *Romeo and Juliet* “shares... the preoccupations with social pressure and the disruptive power of love, but is written largely...in exceptionally intense poetry” (Greenblatt, Headnote to *Ado* 1398). Beatrice and Benedict’s dialogue create playful games typical of Elizabethan prose to hinder themselves from playing into society’s conventions of courtship; however, persuasion from outside forces create a change in their impressions of marriage, which shows through their diction.

During the play’s first encounter of Beatrice and Benedict, their familiarity and antipathy of each other is obvious through the ease with which they play word games that attack their traits:

BENEDICT. What! My dear Lady Disdain! Are you yet living?

BEATRICE. Is it possible Disdain should die while she hath such meet food to feed it as Signor Benedict? Courtesy itself must convert to Disdain if you come in her presence.

BENEDICT. Then is Courtesy a turncoat. But it is certain I am loved of all ladies, only you excepted [...] (Shakespeare, *Ado* 1.1.96-102)

Their dialogue takes on multiple layers of interaction between the use of an epithet, personification, sarcasm, and exaggeration that each link to the preceding one as a basis for a

new attack on a character trait. Benedict addresses Beatrice with an epithet that reflects her negativity towards Benedict, which reveals their familiarity, but also extends towards men and courtship in general. Beatrice carries the personification of “disdain” to assert her opinions of Benedict through sarcasm and employ a second personification of “courtesy,” indicating that Benedict elicits a dreadful reaction while also combatting his own wordplay. Benedict redeems himself by insinuating that Beatrice is the outlier in regard to women who enjoy his company. Their repartee establishes their relationship as cynical while also alluding to their enjoyment of the game since they continually build off of each other; however, neither wants to form a relationship with the other because they disagree with the construct of marriage.

Beatrice and Benedict use common examples in metaphors and imagery to clearly convey their reasons against marriage. Beatrice’s aversion to marriage is due to the assumption that wives must submit to their husbands:

LEONATO. Well, niece, I hope to see you one day fitted with a husband.

BEATRICE. Not till God make men of some other metal than earth. Would it not grieve a woman to be overmastered by a piece of valiant dust? To make an account of her life to a clod of wayward marl? No, uncle, I’ll none.

(Shakespeare 2.1.48-53)

Beatrice uses a metaphor comparing men to dust or earth material, which refers to men as commonplace and useless as dirt, forming their status to be lower than hers. Her reluctance stems from “a fear that she might no longer be able to speak her mind or assert her will as a wife” (Dolan 630), made even more painful if the theoretical husband is a lesser being. As an independent female character, she fears a husband who will inhibit her personal expression by taking the male gender role as the head of the household. Gender roles based on societal

constructions would indirectly affect Beatrice, giving her no control over her own speech, which she expresses liberally even when disavowing men. Benedict has a similar insecurity believing that a wife can influence his reputation through actions he cannot control. He states, “But that I will have a reheat winded in my forehead, or hang my bugle in an invisible baldric, all women shall pardon me. Because I will not do them the wrong to mistrust any, I will do myself the right to mistrust none” (Shakespeare 1.1.204-8). Benedict explains that the only way to protect himself from becoming a cuckold is by avoiding marriage altogether in order to eliminate the risk completely. Imagery of physical horns represents the head horns that signified a man whose wife was sexually unfaithful. Benedict clarifies the horns to be invisible as “a sign of the cuckold’s ignorance” (Greenblatt 1411n1) and not aligning with any woman is the only way to avoid paranoia. Fear of a partner altering a person’s character through actions, like submission, or implications, like ignorance to infidelity, provokes Beatrice and Benedict to dismiss marriage. Their dismissal of each other is more poignant because Benedict has a commanding presence and Beatrice is clever —each has characteristics that are assumed to be incompatible.

Beatrice and Benedict have vague familiar sentiments towards each other, but the rumors that their friends devise eventually bridge the gap in their relationship, causing the couple to admit their love vows to themselves. When Benedict hears the rumor that Beatrice loves him, he muses:

Love me? Why it must be requited. [...] I did never think to marry. [...] They say the lady is fair. ‘Tis a truth; I can bear them witness. And virtuous? ‘Tis so, I cannot reprove it. And wise, but for loving me. By my troth, it is no addition to her wit, nor no great argument of her folly, for I will be horribly in love with her. (Shakespeare 3.1.198-207)

Benedict's rhetorical questions allow him to sort through his emotions and verify that Beatrice's qualities align with those of an ideal wife. His response is a declaration of his love to himself and admonitions that Beatrice is a suitable wife, which he recognizes only after hearing his trusted friends discuss and approve Beatrice's love. Benedict's soliloquy is actually his marriage vow. Romeo and Juliet did not need community support to realize their emotions, but support aides the acceptance of the marriage by society. Beatrice reacts similarly to Benedict after hearing the rumor in the form of a vow:

And Benedict, love on. I will requite thee,

Taming my wild heart to thy loving hand.

If thou dost love, my kindness shall incite thee

To bind our loves up in a holy band. (Shakespeare 3.1.111-4)

Through rhyming poetry, Beatrice composes an expression of love in the most recognizable form. Beatrice's poetry reflects Juliet's poetic vows to Romeo because both women admit a will to be submissive to their future husbands if the man proposes a marriage, but Beatrice's language is more hesitant than Juliet's because Benedict did not profess his love directly. Beatrice suggests that Benedict should make a proposal, but does not give him explicit instructions on how or when to do it. The rumors created by the couple's trusted community prompt the couple to personally admit their attraction to the other, but the rumors also allow the admissions to occur without guilt or secrecy because trusted family and friends supported the idea. Don Pedro assumes the role of the go-between to create a marriage between the couple and engages their friends and family in his plan, which contrasts the Nurse's and Friar Lawrence's actions in *Romeo and Juliet*. The process of marriage formation in this period was one which accommodated both individual expression and family constraint (O'Hara 32). Don Pedro's plan

leads to an open involvement of the couple's community and, subsequently, open approval.

Much Ado About Nothing excludes a marriage scene like *Romeo and Juliet*, but the audience realizes a marriage will occur based on the exchange of vows and presence of witnesses before the end of the play. In the final scene, Beatrice and Benedict deny their feelings for each other in front of the gathered crowd before Hero and Claudio produce handwritten sonnets as their vows' tokens, causing them to admit their love and agree to a marriage. Despite their marriage contract,

Benedict and Beatrice still employ jocular language:

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 5.4.91-6)

Benedict's language maintains the same sarcasm from the beginning of the play, but now includes a cheerful tone and Beatrice responds with a slightly more coarse play on his humor. In front of each other, they use playful language instead of the heartfelt vows they admitted to themselves. The couple maintains their personalities and repartee rather than completely conforming to a marriage social construct of complete adoration, which *Romeo and Juliet* devoutly express as a necessity in their relationship.

Romeo and Juliet's language contrasts with Beatrice and Benedict's language due to differing connotations of interactions through numerous literary devices that create adverse ideas of love and fulfillment of courtship practices. *Romeo and Juliet* ends as a tragedy and diverges from *Much Ado About Nothing* because *Romeo and Juliet*'s youthfulness lends to their ignorance

and intensity towards expressing love, creating secrecy that spirals towards the idea of “’til death do us part,” which prevents extensive community involvement and leaves some courtship rituals unfulfilled, ultimately ending the play in a tragedy. *Much Ado About Nothing* contradicts the manner of intense love with intense loathing between Beatrice and Benedict due to their hesitations towards marriage, which stem from conforming to marriage roles. Community approval influences their decision to agree to marriage, which ends the comedic play with a successful courtship. Each couple’s dialogue contradicts the outcome of each play, so blind adoration does not equate to an enchanted marriage or happy end and disdain permits the opportunity to discover deeper feelings, reason through marriage, and form a mutual agreement to marry.

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