A Feminist And Gender Criticism On Much Ado About Noting

Much Ado About Nothing is one of Shakespeare's most famous comedies. It is a story of deception, betrayal, manipulation, and love. There are enough drama and plot twists to rival modern-day Telenovelas. The main plot of Much Ado About Noting revolves around four main Characters: Claudio, a young soldier who has won great acclaim during the recent wars, cursed with a suspicious nature, Benedick, a quick-witted soldier and friend of Claudio's who swears that he will ever marry, Hero, the beautiful young daughter of a duke, epitome of the feminine ideal, and Beatrice, the cousin of Hero with a sharp tongue. Arguably, the main couple is Claudio and Hero, as their actions motivate much of the play, but Beatrice's and Benedick's quick-witted banter has made them the more popular one. This play centers around gender roles, women's sexuality, and the power of shame. Shakespeare also uses our gendered expectations an subverts them to make a more impactful commentary on Elizabethan society. By looking at Much Ado About Noting through the lens of feminist and gender criticism a greater understanding can be had of the characters as well as the overall content of the story.

Beatrice is one of the most blatantly feminist characters in any of Shakespeare's writing. She isn't some passive Elizabethan woman, she is engaging and fearsome with a silver tongue, something unexpected for women of her period. She is a woman who sees the sexism around her and is ready and willing to call it out, even if that means breaking gender roles. Banter and wordplay are a significant part of this play. Whether it be Benedick's and Beatrice's merry war of words, or just dialogue between two characters, it is the banter that provides the entertainment and much of the plot development. From the first scene, it is cemented that banter is a tool used to secure male friendships as well as belittle women to keep them out of male circles. One example of this was when Leonato first introduces Hero to Don Pedro and his soldiers. The interaction goes as such:

"DON PEDRO You embrace your charge too willingly. I think this is your daughter.

LEONATO: Her mother hath many times told me so.

BENEDICK: Were you in doubt, sir, that you asked her? (A1, S1)"

Here Leonato makes a joke that Hero may not be his daughter, implying that his dead wife was a whore. The joke was not said maliciously, but in his desire to impress these men he demeans the women around him. For men like Leonato, Don Pedro, Claudio, and Benedick humor act as a weapon to discreetly keep women in their place as well as protecting their masculinity. However, Beatrice flips this idea of banter upside-down. Like the men she also uses her humor as a weapon to keep people at arm's length. Unlike the men, she uses the men's sexism against them. When someone jabs at her she can artfully turn their own words against them. In other Shakespearean comedies, this masculinization of a female character would imply that she was wild and needs to be tamed, but in this play, Beatrice's actions are never presented as a problem to be solved. In fact, by the end of the play Beatrice's behavior has not changed at all, she is still as fiery and sharped tongued as ever. The only area in which her attitude is changed is her opinion on marriage. Her awareness of the position women held in society lent her to an

attitude of wariness towards marriage. She understood that once she was married any autonomy that she held now would be stripped away and she would be forced into the role of wife and mother. She uses her wit and sarcasm to hide the fact that she does, in fact, desire marriage and love, but objects to the lack of power this position offers. Instead, she hides her heart in favor of a detached attitude towards such things. This is quite a masculine take on love. Women are often stereotyped to be overly emotional, swept away easily by flights of whimsy. Yet, out of all the characters, Beatrice is the most steadfast. Her banter is rational, if sarcastic, and her heart does not lead her head. This rejection of gender roles shows Shakespeare's intentions with this play. He means to commentate on Elizabethan society by subverting gendered expectations of the characters.

Another example of this can be seen in Hero. On the surface, it seems that Hero is the antitheist of Beatrice. She is feminine, lovely, gentle, kind, and beautiful. The perfect daughter and Elizabethan woman. However, Hero is more like her cousin than it first seems. Both are quick-witted, though Beatrice is louder about it, both are confident and unafraid to take the lead in certain situations, and both display masculine qualities. The difference between them lies in What masculine traits they display. While Beatrice uses masculine language to reject gender norms, Hero prefers to work within the confines of being a woman, using men’s underestimation of her against them to get what she wants. One example of this is when Claudio and Hero first begin to court. When Hero believes that Don Pedro in disguise is Claudio, she directly approaches him and makes the first move saying, “So you walk softly and look sweetly and say nothing, I am yours for the walk, and especially when I walk away. (A2, S1)” Here Hero takes the dominant role in the courtship. She approaches him first and uses language that intentionally feminizes him, words such as softly and sweetly to describe him. In this exchange reverses the traditional gender expectation that men are the ones that make the first move, instead, Hero uses wit to exert her display of choice. She knows she can choose to stay and dance or not and uses that to work the situation to her advantage. Her name even implies masculinity and dominance. Hero is a word from Middle English times, borrowed from Latin which borrowed it from Greek. Traditionally the word has meant A of superhuman strength, courage, or ability, favored by the gods (OED, a1522). Yet, in this story, Shakespeare chose to characterize his arguably most traditionally feminine character with a masculine name that celebrates her strength. While Shakespeare uses Beatrice to introduce the reader to a feminist awareness, he uses Hero as a direct example of how the patriarchy affected women.

If the first half of the play is characterized by Hero’s use of choice, the second is characterized by the lack of it. In events beyond Hero’s control and the politics of men, Don John decides to trick Claudio into believing that Hero is an adulterer. Claudio falls for the trick and becomes enraged falsely accusing Hero at their wedding. After Hero is falsely accused of adultery all of the power and choices she once had were effectively stripped away. She was forced to fake her death and go into hiding until her name is cleared. It’s not until the end that Hero’s honor is restored and even then, it is given back to her by men. If it had been the other way around and Hero had seen Claudio supposedly doing these acts there would have been no question of his honor. If he had said that it wasn’t him, he would have been believed and the whole situation would have blown over, but because it was Hero’s sexuality in question, everyone got a say except her. This accusation demolishes her reputation and in Elizabethan society, reputation was everything. Shakespeare does an excellent job of showcasing the power that shame had over women’s lives at that time. His manipulation of this scenario shows that despite all the power he hands to his female characters, it is still ultimately a man’s world that women have no control over. To go along with that Shakespeare also shows subversion of gender norms in the

men in the story as well as the effect the patriarchy has on them.

Benedick's whole redemption arc is centered around his coming to terms with his privilege from being a man. In the beginning, Benedick is a willful lord, recently returned from the war, who vows that he will never marry. The only woman that he shows any interest in is Beatrice, though their relationship is more bickering than romance. They are constantly trying to outwit, outsmart, and out-insult each other. Despite this, his friends recognize that there is some deeper emotion simmering beneath the surface. Because of this Hero and Claudio create a plot to make Beatrice and Benedick that the other is in love with them. Benedick swears to be "horribly in love with her. (A2, S2)" effectively continuing the competition through their courtship. However, along the way, Benedick and Beatrice truly do fall in love, and because of that he becomes more and more characterized in an effeminate way. He was always a histrionic character, a role usually assigned to women, but before his wit was used as a shield to protect his emotions. He looked down upon his more emotional friend Claudio as a fool in love. However, after their courtship begins the shield is stripped away. During this time, he gains a greater of his emotions, as is evident when he is the first one to admit his love and his openly affectionate manner. This directly contrasts Beatrice's behavior as she becomes even more closed off and secretive. This is a subversion of traditional gender expectations because women are generally regarded as overly emotional, whereas men are considered rational. Another example of this can be seen in Beatrice's and Benedick's banter. Beatrice's jabs at him are usually well thought out and cutting, Benedick's are made in the heat of the moment and are highly emotional.

Despite Benedick being characterized as feminine he still has much more freedom than the women of the story. Beatrice may be able to banter with the men, but her behavior will never be normalized the same way that Benedick will. The only reason why Benedick was able to reach this level of openness was because of the privilege he held as a man. He didn't have anything to lose by confessing his love, he would still be an independent lord if they got married, able to go when and wherever he wanted to, but Beatrice had no such luxury. If she confesses her love for Benedick, she is not only at risk of having a broken heart but losing all her freedom altogether. She knows that if she becomes a wife then she will be forced to have children and lose any bodily autonomy she has now. Despite this, or maybe because of this, she shows a stoic front. It's not until Benedick refuses to confront Claudio that we truly see the rage that Beatrice holds for the position in society. She laments saying "Oh, that I were a man! What, bear her in hand until they come to take hands and then, with public accusation, uncovered slander, unmitigated rancor—O God, that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the marketplace (A4, S1)." At this point, Benedick's eyes are finally opened to the struggle that women face in Elizabethan society. Instead of his broken-hearted friend, he finally sees a petty man that ruined a young girl's reputation, and he sees his privilege for the first time. Benedick becomes rightfully enraged by this, vowing to duel with Claudio to the death to restore Hero's honor. At this point, Benedick's allegiances have completely switched to Beatrice and with his recognition of his privilege has come a deeper understanding of the female experience.

Claudio is another man that female coded in the story. He is a young soldier who won great acclaim fighting under Don Pedro during the recent wars. In the beginning, Claudio seems to be a classic example of the Elizabethan man, much in the same way that Hero is an Elizabethan woman. He values friendship and honor but also prioritizes marriage in his pursuit of social standing. However, after his return, he quickly falls in love with Hero. An immature love, albeit; closer to love at first sight than anything. As opposed to Hero's courtship of him, he takes a

much more passive approach. This subversion of gender expectations is highlighted in his first meeting with Hero. He says “Silence is the perfectest herald of joy. I were but little happy if I could say how much!—Lady, as you are mine, I am yours. I give away myself for you and dote upon the exchange. (A2, S1)” Here Claudio takes the submissive role in the courtship by displaying his openly romantic attitude as well as giving Hero all the power in the relationship. He also displayed traits such as jealousy, distrust of his partner, and being over-emotional. Traits that aren’t inherently masculine or feminine but are regularly attributed to women. Like Benedick, his actions and emotions are often irrational and are a catalyst for much of the play's plot. However, unlike Benedick, Claudio only sees the error of his ways after Don John admits that he lied. Instead of believing Hero when she professes her innocence, or even listening to her explanation, he relies on his pride. The masculine persona that Claudio takes on seems to be a reaction to being hurt, a shield that masks the more vulnerable part of his personality. In the end, he recognizes what he did was a mistake. However, he has no remorse for destroying a women’s life until he finds out he was tricked. He acts the way that society expects him to, being cold, distant, and demeaning towards women because he was hurt by Hero’s perceived actions. Claudio’s struggles throughout the story show the dichotomy between the societal expectations of men and the demonization of feminine traits. Claudio’s rejection of his femininity in times of trial shows the toxic coping mechanisms that the patriarchy teaches to young boys. Something that Shakespeare would have probably experienced himself.

As you can see, Shakespeare uses Much Ado about Noting as prose to write a story about the female experience in Elizabethan society. Despite the comedic overtones, he hits political issues such as gender roles and the role of shame in Elizabethan society. He did this by subverting our gendered expectations of the characters. He made Beatrice masculine by having her participate in banter, an activity that men use to degrade and disregard the women around them, and by giving her a strong outspoken personality. Out of all the characters she is the most aware of what the world expects of her. She sees what being a woman means to society and rejects that. Hero is also characterized in a masculine way, but her masculinity caused her to lose all autonomy as society shamed her for being so forward. On the other hand, Benedick and Claudio are characterized in more feminine ways. The key difference being that much like Benedick listens to the women around him and recognizes his privilege. Unlike Claudio who represents the toxic effect that demonizing femininity can have on men.