

Shakespeare's Use of Romantic Relationships: Western Romanticism Causing Inaccurate Readings and Misinterpretations

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Introduction

A basic search of the web quickly provides endless articles and websites devoted to the idea that William Shakespeare wrote the greatest love stories of all time. For example, the web article "9 Famous Quotes on Love by William Shakespeare" tells the world that "The most well-known playwright in the world was a true romantic." Similarly, *Romeo and Juliet* is often pointed to as one of the truest, most selfless, and epic love stories ever created. Despite its tragic ending, American society tends to succumb to its western ideals of romance and skips over the multiple red flags within the otherwise pure and heart-breaking story of two young, star-crossed lovers. Examples of the world's love-affair with Romeo and Juliet can be found in many places. In "How Silver-Sweet Sound Lovers' Tongues': The music of love and death in Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*," Samantha Yin focuses her entire performance review around the idea of how the music, based on love as defined in the twenty-first century United States, is what keeps the audience in tune with the emotions Shakespeare intended between the love-struck Romeo and Juliet. Brittany L. Wright and her colleagues, H. Colleen Sinclair and Kristina B. Hood, have a belief in this iconic love that is so resolute they conduct an entire research study on how the strength of a twenty-first century couple is affected when faced with the kinds of "social disapproval" about which Shakespeare wrote.

Much Ado About Nothing is another of Shakespeare's well-known plays, beloved for its light-hearted, comedic romance. Although the content and circumstances differ greatly from that of *Romeo and Juliet*, the couples in *Much Ado About Nothing* are similarly revered by their audiences for their relatable and heart-warming relationships. For example, Dolora G. Cunningham writes of both the primary couple, Benedick and Beatrice, and secondary couple, Claudio and Hero, as men and women whose "movement from error and self-

concern toward love's truth is initiated by forces outside themselves" which is "carried onward in spite of their pride in what they think they know and feel" (263). Even though Thomas J. Scheff argues in his article, "Gender Wars: Emotions in 'Much Ado about Nothing,'" that the relationships "take place within a framework of physical violence" and involve "emotional violence," Scheff also works within the mindset that each couple contains a devout love by the end of the play (152).

While it is widely believed *Romeo and Juliet* and *Much Ado About Nothing* show Shakespeare to be a romantic genius, a thorough investigation into the eventual marital unions within both plays suggests these beliefs to be falsely based. Love, as it is known and defined by a twenty-first century American audience, is nowhere to be found within either of these plays. Certainly, there are copious instances of infatuation or lustfulness between characters, but Shakespeare does not develop any of the three mentioned couples' interests into a mutually held love. Instead, it appears Shakespeare writes in the suggestive glances, loaded exchanges, and obsessions to further one of his other, ulterior literary aims.

This article argues *Romeo and Juliet* and *Much Ado About Nothing* show Shakespeare uses women and their various attributes as a means to an end for men, an end other than romantic love. Drawing on specific relationships of characters in both main and supporting roles, this article questions whether Shakespeare's plays contain elements of true love or the ulterior selfish motives of his male roles. Through the analysis of the romantic relationships in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Much Ado About Nothing*, it becomes clear the main motive of each of Shakespeare's male characters can be classified into one or both of the categories of physical enjoyment and easing societal pressures.

Twenty-First Century Love

Before moving further into the analysis of Shakespeare's use of love and romance, twenty-first century love needs to be given a definition. As the measuring stick against which this article judges Shakespeare's couples, the kind of love deemed healthy in the twenty-first century comes from a mutual attraction and affection from both parties. While love itself might have been defined differently during Shakespeare's life in the sixteenth century, the efforts of feminists, beginning in the late twentieth century and continuing into today, are continually changing the way women are looked at in relationships. Romantically, this change rolls over into a different power dynamic from the male-dominated unions from earlier centuries.

Women gain increasingly more power in every aspect of their lives as the Western society continues to be influenced by dedicated feminists. For example, journalist Gloria Steinem is responsible for countless pieces of intensive journalism and the founding of or involvement with numerous foundations, all of which further women's rights and education. Steinem, and others like her, support the empowerment of women, in whatever form that may take ("Gloria"). Because of this move for equality, status no longer holds significant weight when a man and a woman decide to join together in marriage. While Shakespeare's female characters would not have been able to boost their status through marriage, twenty-first century women also give the idea of raising their status through marriage little thought as today's women do not need a man to climb the social ladder. With the move for empowered women filling today's western society, twenty-first century love holds no place for status climbing.

For example, when the all-female Wellesley College opened its doors in the late nineteenth century, it began a tradition which "proclaimed that whoever won the Hoop Roll would be the first to get married" ("Anyone"). Moving into the late twentieth century, the college changed the winner's fate to "she was the first to be CEO," as women took control of their own futures in the workplace ("Anyone"). Reaching the twenty-first century, Western society is at its closest point to equality, and only moving closer, which leaves Wellesley College to now declare "the winner will be the first to achieve happiness and success,

whatever that means to her" ("Anyone can run").

Additionally, the empowerment of women opens up the possibility for women to share in the ability to join with a man for physical enjoyment, thus enhancing the mutual attraction and love. In Shakespeare's plays, the men are driven by their lust for the female characters, but the women do not get to voice whether or not they reciprocate the desire. Women of previous centuries were looked at by their contemporaries as beings meant to be seen and enjoyed. Views have changed each century, evolving into the female empowered twenty-first century, but this change came about slowly. Wellesley's transformation over the past three centuries shows how women now have equal say in whether or not their union is wanted in regards to the physical aspects of marriage; therefore a healthy twenty-first century love involves mutual attraction.

Americans Led Astray by a Shallow Interpretation of Shakespeare's Love Stories

William Shakespeare is a recognized name in the American vernacular. To go one step further, it is a safe assumption that the majority, if not all, of Americans know something about *Romeo and Juliet*. Within a larger list of Shakespeare's works, his next universally known play is probably *Much Ado About Nothing*, another apparent love story. The couples within these two plays, Romeo and Juliet as well as Benedick and Beatrice, are exceedingly different, but they seem to contain several of the classic romance story elements. These elements are only found, however, if Shakespeare's work is glossed over for basic content.

One scholar who agrees that Shakespeare's love stories are not meant to be idolized for their couples' relationships is Ivo Kamps, who "aims to debunk the high school notion 'that Romeo and Juliet are a match made in heaven and that the play is the greatest love story ever told'" (Schuyler 76). Kamps "uses renaissance texts on pathologies that detail how love deceives the eyes, imbalances the humors, destroys the reason, and causes social isolation" (Schuyler 76). While his analytical work looks at Shakespearean texts in a different manner than this article does, Kamps' work also argues Shakespeare's "elements of romance" should be analyzed deeply before assuming they can compare easily to a typical

twenty-first century romance.

Ian Munro is another scholar researching the Shakespearean relationships deemed “romantic” by its audiences. He focuses on *Much Ado About Nothing*'s Benedick and Beatrice. Coming together essentially out of a shared pride more than anything else, Benedick and Beatrice still end the play by willingly getting married. This final act of marriage, although it stems from each character's vanity, tends to leave the audience with the impression Benedick and Beatrice did eventually each feel a level of true love. Recognizing audiences' and critics' repeated folly of definitively claiming the relationship contains a pure love, Munro points to several specific instances within *Much Ado About Nothing* that illustrate how the “sexual and textual relations . . . threaten to dismantle the courtly pretensions of both Benedick and the play itself” (92). In other words, Munro is forcing his readers to confront uncomfortable elements (e.g. the countless innuendos between all of the characters) of the play rather than sliding comfortably past them.

The Most Excellent and Lamentable Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet

Despite the many American romantics professing the perfection of Romeo and Juliet's relationship, Shakespeare's Romeo can also be seen as extremely selfish. This perspective reveals Romeo's desire for the relationship as a practical move because the relationship benefits him far more than Juliet. As Romeo courts Juliet, he reveals his primary driving force: a union with someone of her beauty who will elevate his own status in the eyes of both himself and others. The time period of *Romeo and Juliet* was one in which society looked past the plethora of common, plain-featured women to view a community's few attractive women as the more exotic and suitable options for high status men.

Because of this, the hands of a community's beautiful women were only granted to the most respectable, often rich men. With this in mind, Romeo's ability to wed someone as beautiful as Juliet will instantly grant him status. Because of the patriarchal culture in which Romeo and Juliet live, Juliet does not gain the same respect from this union. Therefore, from the beginning of the relationship, the balance of give-and-take between the two is

already off, thus jeopardizing the idea that *Romeo and Juliet* is a true love story. Shakespearean Brian Gibbons offers a similar conclusion from his analysis into the result of each lover's status after each of their deaths: “Romeo will experience a metamorphosis into shining immortality, yet she seems to think of herself as mortally ephemeral—if she thinks of herself at all—in this moment of intense adoration of her lover” (Schuyler 69). In other words, Gibbons produces a second example of how Romeo acts in a self-serving manner; his death allows his character to be remembered with a higher esteem than he had been able to hold during his life.

Juliet would not have given the idea of elevating her status through this noble death a second thought. Within this male-favoring, sexist culture, it is far less memorable to be a woman dying for her lover. Although it is difficult to provide examples of famous women dying for a noble cause, thus proving the point of them being forgettable, Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* provides examples of women whose lives seem to be little in comparison with a man of stature's perception of his status. Thus, while Romeo could logically factor in a status boost into his decision to kill himself, Juliet has no chance to raise her status through death and therefore could not have used it to personally justify her suicide.

A third example of how Romeo's inclination to enter a union with Juliet is self-serving can be found early in the play. From his first glance, Romeo is drawn to Juliet, but this attraction is not an emotional connection, as it stems from his lust. He first sees her after he and Benvolio sneak into the grand party hosted at the house of the Capulets. Questioning a server about Juliet, Romeo asks “What lady's that which doth enrich the hand / Of yonder knight?” (1.5.38-39). As innocuous as this question may be on its own, connections can be drawn between it and the short, impassioned speech Romeo gives after the server's response of not recognizing the mystery woman. By using the word “enrich,” Romeo is showing that the first and primary thing he noticed about Juliet is her beauty which enhances whatever is near her.

Although the fact that he first notices her beauty can be viewed as a compliment to her, it becomes something far from positive when paired with Romeo's following speech about her looks:

O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!
It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night
As a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear—
Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear.
(1.5.41-44)

Romeo's strong statements about her intense, incomparable beauty and his naming of her as "a rich jewel" alert the audience that while his words praise Juliet, he is really more concerned about what he might gain from being with Juliet. The importance he places on physical beauty over a woman's mental status is revealed, as he is comfortable knowing only one thing about Juliet, that she is beautiful, before deciding he is in love with her.

Additionally, Romeo's use of the specific wording that Juliet "doth enrich the hand / Of yonder knight" shows how he views her as someone, or something, he must have beside him in order to enhance his own looks, presence, and status (1.5.38-39). Romeo's purposeful word choice in this statement reveals again that the important aspect of Juliet is how she will boost his social standing. In the second portion of this line, "Of yonder knight," Romeo shows he cannot finish this inquiry about the mysterious lady without pointing out how she is enhancing the presence of the man at her side (1.5.39). Knowing nothing about her other than her beauty and its positive effects on those around her, Romeo's interest in her can only come from his personal desire to make himself look better to the public's eye.

Another example of Romeo's tendency to view Juliet as something valuable, yet less human than himself, is his appraisal of her "Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear" (1.5.44). His use of the words "rich" and "dear" point directly to something of monetary value. By saying her amazing looks are "too rich for use," Romeo is both showing the value he places on her appearance while also admitting she does nothing of importance except grace the world with her beauty (1.5.44). Though disguised in the form of a compliment, Romeo is devaluing Juliet by his assertion that she is not in a position to do anything other than be appraised by others for her good looks.

Yet another instance of Romeo proving himself to be unable to comprehend deep, emotional love connections occurs even before Romeo meets Juliet. At the beginning of the play, Romeo confesses to

Benvolio, "In sadness, cousin, I do love a woman" (1.1.197). Rosaline, the woman to which Romeo refers, is the object of Romeo's affections despite her denial of him, and Romeo cries to Benvolio that he is "out of her favour where I am in love" (1.1.161). Benvolio attempts to cheer up the somber, depressed Romeo, but Romeo cannot stop himself from talking about his inability to woo her. Even after Benvolio's efforts to the contrary, Romeo ends their conversation maintaining that "thou canst not teach me to forget" (1.1.230).

Despite his woes of this woman, Rosaline, and his declaration that she would always be on his mind, it takes only four scenes of the play for him to entirely forget about Rosaline and focus all of his attention on Juliet. He forgets her so much that he denies his previous love for her when he asks himself after seeing Juliet, "Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight, / For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night" (1.5.49-50). This turnaround from his melancholy state at an unrequited love to the infatuation with an even more impressive beauty shows his immaturity in regards to love. If he knew what romantic love truly meant, he would not be so quick to throw the term around in regards to each attractive woman he encounters.

This new love also benefits Romeo while it in no way helps Juliet. As Romeo's sighting of Juliet immediately makes him forget about Rosaline, it is likely the ensuing relationship with Juliet is driven in part by his need for someone to heal his hurt ego from Rosaline's earlier rejection. Romeo is bringing with him with what he interprets as a broken heart, and Juliet brings only her innocent, unlearned heart to give her Romeo.

Much Ado About Nothing

Just as with *Romeo and Juliet*, an analytical reading of *Much Ado About Nothing* proves Shakespeare constructed the couples of Benedick and Beatrice and of Claudio and Hero with men benefiting while the women do not. Secondary characters Claudio and Hero are initially seen as a sweet, innocent couple who fell in love at first sight. However, after a closer look into the text, one discovers the shallowness of Claudio's self-labeled love for Hero. After meeting Hero, Claudio's first words to indicate his interest in her came from the

question "Benedick, didst thou note the daughter of Signor / Leonato?" (1.1.130-131). This reaction to the encounter with Hero shows that Claudio, like the famous Romeo, already revealed himself to be a man driven by physical attraction. Keeping in mind the resulting value Claudio places on physical beauty, a reader can better understand Claudio's immediate desire to be married to Hero. The specific wording, as well as the circumstances preceding his question, reminds the audience that his first words about his beloved concerned only her physical appearance. Additionally, declaring his love for Hero before ever speaking to her, Claudio shows the audience that he, again like Romeo, places more importance on the outward beauty of the woman than what may or may not be going on inside her head.

Benedick and Beatrice can, on the other hand, be explained a little differently by taking a look at the societal expectations placed on the play's male characters. Within *Much Ado About Nothing*, as in many of Shakespeare's plays, exists the Elizabethan view that men of royalty should be married by a certain age, and the pressure of this social norm often spills over onto the noblemen of Shakespeare's plays who keep company with royalty. Shakespeare applied this pressure onto *Much Ado About Nothing's* Benedick.

While the matter of whether Benedick and Beatrice enter their marriage with any level of romantic feelings will always be up for debate, it is clear the social pressure Benedick felt from his friends to get married gave him a significant push into the union. An ego driven man, Benedick is initially tricked into the relationship with Beatrice as a result of his friends talking negatively about his actions, actions that he takes because of his determination to stay single. For example, as Claudio, Don Pedro, and Leonato discuss Beatrice's fictional love for Benedick, Claudio is quick to point out that Benedick would not kindly treat the idea of someone being romantically involved with him: "He would make but a sport of it and/ torment the poor lady worse" (2.3.141-142).

Finally, after overhearing the entire staged conversation about Beatrice's supposed love for him, Benedick is brought to action after hearing his friends discuss Beatrice's fear that "she will die/ if he love her not, and she will die ere she make her love/ known" (2.3.156-158). Using Beatrice's supposed fear as the

reason she will not declare her fictionalized love for Benedick, Don Pedro ends the conversation by saying of Benedick "I could wish he/ would modestly examine himself to see how much he is unwor-/thy so good a lady" (2.3.184-186). Benedick's reaction to his friends' words is "Why, it must be required. I hear how I am / censured" (2.3.199-200). This thought shows how Benedick realizes that his beloved bachelorhood is beginning to cause serious issues for his social standing. In order to remove these negative judgments of himself from the minds of his friends, and essentially all of society, Benedick comes to the decision to enter a marital union with Beatrice as he knows marriage will be eventually expected of him.

Conclusion: The significance of these distinctions

Fairly successful in his own time, Shakespeare's popularity has continued to grow in the centuries since his death. Shakespeare continues to keep the interest of his audiences with new, complicated characters and plots for those willing to engage in deeper thinking. His genius shines through his ability to make these innovative literary moves while simultaneously staying true to a few main themes which were central to the societal beliefs of his contemporaries. One key theme which can be found in his greatest works is how women and marriage were viewed by high status men. Living in and writing about patriarchal societies, Shakespeare possessed a view of women and marriage that men should only enter into the union with a woman who will help them achieve a certain goal. For some of these men, physical enjoyment is their main criterion when choosing a wife, so the men wait to marry until they have found a woman aesthetically pleasing to them. Other male characters are driven to wed because they know it is the expectation of society that they join a worthy woman in matrimony, and if they do not, they will have a lower social standing. By identifying which category, or categories, the men in any of Shakespeare's plays fall into, the nature of the romantic relationships becomes easier to identify.

To ignore the male characters' selfish motives detailed in this article would be detrimental to the current and future audiences of Shakespeare's work. Beliefs bred by Western romanticism and ideals naturally cause a skewed interpretation of

Shakespeare's romances *Romeo and Juliet* and *Much Ado About Nothing* and frame the relationships as something for which to strive. If this faulty interpretation persists, twenty-first century relationships will continue to end in heartbreak and unhappiness and leave both people emotionally scarred. Those who encounter Shakespearean works, as time has proven that most Americans will, are at the risk of developing a distorted idea of what a healthy, balanced relationship looks like. In basing their quest for love off of Romeo and Juliet's so-called unflinching love or the backwards and round-about way in which Benedick and Beatrice were pressured into matrimony, a twenty-first century couple will quickly encounter confusion and emotional suffering as they realize they are not in a healthy relationship. It is for the emotional well-being of every individual that these clarifications of Shakespeare's male characters' motives are to be made. If left to continue the current shallow and inherently incorrect readings of the relationships between Romeo and Juliet and Beatrice and Benedick, the American society will undoubtedly crumble as it attempts to emulate the "great," yet unstable, relationships provided to them by the renowned William Shakespeare.

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