# “’A Merry War’: Shakespeare’s Revision of Bandello”[i]

By Paul F. Weinhold

Shakespeare consulted many sources as he composed *Much Ado About Nothing* (*Ado*), a comedy that follows the wooing of two pairs of lovers. For the Claudio-Hero plot, Shakespeare’s imagination was informed by Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* and Ludovico Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*. The most proximate source influencing *Ado* was Matteo Bandello’s novella 22.[ii] Bandello tells the story of Timbreo and Fenicia, which parallels the Claudio-Hero narrative. The source presented Shakespeare with an opportunity to revise and, in revising, to invent a new drama. A few examples, by no means exhaustive, will suffice to demonstrate the influence of Bandello upon Shakespeare during the composition of *Ado*. First, Bandello’s novella is set in 13th century Messina, and tells of Timbreo di Cardona, a knight inflamed with desire for Fenicia, daughter of Lionato de’ Lionati, a gentleman in Messina; these characters in Bandello’s story parallel Claudio’s wooing of Hero, the daughter of Leonato in *Ado*. Second, Timbreo offers a marriage proposal only after Fenicia refuses to sleep with him, and his social status far exceeds Fenicia’s; Shakespeare’s Claudio, on the other hand, stands to gain Leonato’s estate through his marriage to Hero (1.1.275-7). Third, the challenger for Fenicia’s love is Girondo Olerio Valenziano, Timbreo’s close friend and fellow knight; *Ado*’s villain, Don John, is not a rival suitor but a rival brother. Fourth, Timbreo curtly breaks his engagement to Fenicia in a letter delivered to Lionati via his servant; Shakespeare increases the dramatic tension by having Claudio spurn Hero at the altar. In his revision of Bandello, Shakespeare altered many details, but novella 22 also contains much of the same thematic content as *Ado*: both involve returning soldiers wooing young ladies; both address the vulnerability of women to male

accusations of infidelity; and both explore the possibilities of love's endurance in the aftermath of such indictments. Among all of Shakespeare's revisions, however, the most notable difference is his invention of Benedick and Beatrice, two lovers sprung from the bard's imagination who offset Claudio and Hero's conventionally tragicomic plot with their witty discourse.[iii]

Though at first Benedick and Beatrice's wit endears them to audiences of the play and not to one another, their witty speech also mitigates against the conventional credulity of Timbreo and Claudio, and it mitigates against Fenicia and Hero's vulnerability to male slander. Benedick and Beatrice's banter opens a liminal space in which their love may either flourish or falter, yet without the dire consequences of conventional wooing. As such, they are Shakespeare's linguistic reinvention of his source's stock characters. My reading of *Ado*, then, will reveal Shakespeare at work, rebutting his sources' understanding of love by providing readers and audiences with an alternative pair of lovers whose wit allows them to develop through verbal play a more substantial relationship than either Timbreo-Fenicia or Claudio-Hero.[iv] "Shakespeare's language," writes Russ McDonald, "functions as a symbolic register, an instrument for recording, transmitting, and magnifying the fictional world that the play represents" (6). Shakespeare's linguistic puissance, which McDonald recognizes generally, is particularly relevant in the case of Beatrice and Benedick. Their banter is Shakespeare's "instrument for recording, transmitting, and magnifying" his source text, Bandello's novella 22. He invents lovers whose linguistic skill allows them to avoid the received paradigm of mistaken perceptions and its dire consequences. Though I grant that Beatrice and Benedick do indeed misunderstand one another's jibes—they have even failed in a previous relationship—nevertheless, because the misperception is a linguistic one, the consequences are slight when compared to Claudio's wrenching defamation of Hero in 4.1. The function of Benedick and

Beatrice's language, then, is to mitigate the shortcomings of Shakespeare's source characters (Timbreo and Fenicia) and their replication in *Ado* (Claudio and Hero). Those shortcomings are the visual mode of their desire and the socially pervasive fears of cuckoldry and slander. Benedick and Beatrice's linguistic potential, however, must be actualized and refined by a communal act of witty speech, and their composition of sonnets ultimately refines their speech and commemorates their desire, assuring audiences of the play that their love will endure because of the authority of the written poetic word.

Benedick and Beatrice's verbal play is Shakespeare's reinvention of desire. He refutes visual desire, offering instead a liminal space in which love can develop through speech. In Bandello's novella 22, Timbreo's love for Fenicia blooms after she "began for her part to *watch* him and bow discreetly to him," and Timbreo's love burgeons likewise: "the more he *gazed* on her the more he felt his desire . . ." (Bullough 113, my emphases). Claudio's desire for Hero is also visual, though he woos her indirectly via Don Pedro. "In mine eye," Claudio avows, "[Hero] is the sweetest lady that ever I looked on" (1.1.177-8). Their betrothal occurs before any speech, and after they are betrothed in 2.1, there is a full pause in which they are struck dumb with love. As I imagine the scene's performance, they gaze fixedly into one another's eyes during that moment:

LEONATO Count, take of me my daughter, and with her my fortunes. His grace hath made the match, and all grace say amen to it.

[PAUSE]

BEATRICE Speak, Count, 'tis your cue (2.1.277-80)

When Beatrice snaps Claudio out of his love-induced hypnosis, his first words are an apology for his lack of words: "Silence is the perfectest herald of joy; I were but little happy if I could say

how much" (2.1.281-2). As beautiful as this moment of rapture is, and although Claudio's remarks about a lover's inability to fully express his love ring true, Beatrice's prompting hits upon a very real problem in Claudio and Hero's relationship: visual attraction, even when it is a fixed gaze of mystically understood love, is beautiful only for a moment, but love must also be verbalized. Otherwise, the mode of desire—sight—can become the very reason why a relationship falters, as happens in *Ado* and Bandello's novella. The malicious deceptions performed by Borachio (*Ado*) and Girondo (novella 22) are visual, and both Claudio and Timbreo fall for the trick because of visual "evidence" that seems to prove the infidelity of their beloveds.

Like Claudio and Timbreo, Benedick's desire for Beatrice is not without visual attraction. In fact, he maintains that her beauty far surpasses Hero's—although his praise may be exaggerated because he is attempting to persuade Claudio not to marry Hero (1.1.180-2). Likewise, Beatrice indirectly acknowledges Benedick's handsomeness, even as she critiques his garrulity: "He were an excellent man that were made just in the midway between [Don John] and Benedick: the one is too like an image and says nothing, and the other too like my lady's eldest son, evermore tattling" (2.1.6-9). But the main portion of Benedick and Beatrice's desire is verbal. This desire is Shakespeare's invention, a verbal flirtation between witty characters who mask their affection in euphuistic discourse. It stands in sharp contrast to the lover's gaze that silences all speech. The flirtation begins with the opening scene, before Benedick arrives in Messina. A messenger arrives with news of a recent military action, and Beatrice asks, "I pray you, is *Signor Mountanto* returned from the wars or no?" (1.1.29-30, my emphasis).[v] Her enigmatic question is periphrastic, allowing her to inquire of Benedick without directly referring to him. It is ostensibly insulting to Benedick, which ensures that her question will not be

regarded as a sign of affection, but despite its scornful tone Beatrice's inquiry is into Benedick's health. Is he still alive? If she really had no interest in Benedick at all, she would not have asked the question. She uses the word "mountanto" in her jibe, which technically means an upward thrust in fencing. "Mountanto" is thus a description of Benedick's whole personality; he is simultaneously marshal, sexual, and verbal, thrusting with sword, phallus, and wit. Upon Benedick's arrival in Messina, Beatrice fires the initial salvo in their war of insults, which continues her process of carefully veiling attraction and verbalizing desire. "I wonder that you will still be talking, Signor Benedick," she exclaims, "Nobody marks you" (1.1.114-115). Though Brian Vickers asserts in *The Artistry of Shakespeare's Prose*, "Comment is not needed here," meaning, I assume, that readers can deduce the tone of Benedick and Beatrice's banter on their own (175), Joost Daalder's work regarding the "pre-history" of Beatrice and Benedick, a subject to which I will return later, actually forces one to carefully parse these opening lines and consider their implications. Beatrice's comment, which attempts to belittle the returning soldier, is laden with irony. She "marks" Benedick in order to address him, thus exercising, even if subconsciously, the trope of *antiphrasis*. Hence, Beatrice's comment, "nobody marks you," becomes, "I mark you." His response is equally telling. "My dear Lady Disdain!" he exclaims in a mock greeting, "Are you yet / living?" (1.1.116-117). Benedick's greeting—Lady Disdain—recalls its parallel in Beatrice's "Signor Mountanto." Disdain becomes his definition for Beatrice, even as he, too, indirectly acknowledges her by the figure of *periphrasis*. Likewise, Benedick's scathing question, "Are you yet living?" contains beneath its surface a subtle recognition and delight in exchanging military combat for verbal combat with his most capable nemesis. Beatrice and Benedick's continuing banter in the following lines not only provides delight to audiences of *Ado*, it functions as the verbal equivalent of Claudio and Hero's gaze. Despite the

claims which both make to the contrary, Beatrice and Benedick complement one another because each can sound the depths of the other with the lead and line of repartee. Though the development of their love will require the wit that Don Pedro and the rest of the Messina community enact, both Benedick and Beatrice already take pleasure in their banter, for both continue to initiate it. There is a certain adolescent quality to this teasing, in which even the most vitriolic insult becomes a display of wit designed to attract the desire of the other. For Claudio and Timbreo, then, physical beauty is a sufficient cause for love, but Benedick and Beatrice's verbal play is Shakespeare's assertion that beauty is necessary but not sufficient. The advantage of this Shakespearean addition of verbal flirtation is that it allows both parties to slander one another without the dire consequences of Don John, Borachio, and Claudio's slander of Hero.

By inventing Beatrice, a woman whose wit allows her both to penetrate the many male "masks" throughout the play and to articulate her wit in the conventionally male manner of verbal play, Shakespeare's revision of Bandello also attenuates the pervading fear of infidelity found in the source tradition, which is transferred into *Ado*.[vi] Cuckoldry is a pervasive theme, as is the converse vulnerability of women to male slander.[vii] Think, for instance, of Benedick's aversion to marriage or of Beatrice shouting, "O that I were a man for his sake!" in response to Claudio's defamation of Hero, which is the most striking instance of female vulnerability to male slander in the play (4.1.315). Scant evidence suffices to dupe Claudio, leaving Hero unprotected by a chivalric code of honor supposedly in place to protect women, but which actually requires male friends to inform one another of a lascivious woman and then to reject her completely. Hence, Don John can slander Hero in the pretended interest of Claudio's honor (3.2.104), and Claudio can reject her—in front of her own father, no less—without fear of repercussion (4.1.31).

But the play asks its audience to contemplate a question about that code of honor: what happens when one's perception is skewed by lies or misinterpretations? Males in the play can levy accusations of infidelity but women have little opportunity for rebuttal. Shakespeare's solution to Bandello's problem is Beatrice, a woman more than capable of engaging men on ground that is conventionally theirs—slander. While Hero remains a victim of slander and deceit, Beatrice's wit allows her to level the playing field by slandering back, though within the acceptable confines of witty banter. She approximates herself socially to Benedick, engaging her wit in an asymptotic progression, a continual questioning of his veracity that leads to an increasingly accurate understanding of his character. Thus, while Russ McDonald rightly observes that *Ado* "explores the human damage that language can do" (122), I would add that Beatrice's verbal play, and the many benign fictions fabricated during the play, demonstrate that language can also prevent and even heal that human damage.

Beatrice, then, is Shakespeare's revision of Fenicia and Hero, who cannot defend themselves against accusations of infidelity. A telling example of Beatrice's wit is her response to a Messenger's report of Benedick's return:

> He set up his *bills* here in Messina and chal-
> lenged Cupid at the *flight*; and *my uncle's fool*, reading
> the challenge, subscribed for Cupid and challenged
> him at the *bird-bolt*. I pray you, *how many hath he*
> *killed and eaten in these wars?* But how many hath he
> killed? For indeed I promised to eat all of his killing. (1.1.37-42, my emphases)

Beatrice's witty description, which compares military and romantic conquest, takes the form of a *conceit*. In it, Benedick challenges Cupid to a game of "flight," an archery contest. Her "uncle's

fool” then stands in the place of Cupid and offers a different game, the “bird-bolt,” a fowling game with blunt-headed arrows. The mocking tone of Beatrice’s insult seems clear, but just exactly what she means by this statement is polysemous. It is plausible, however, to interpret Benedick’s “bills” and his challenge to “Cupid at the flight” as an indicator of his reputation as a lady-killer, a “good soldier to a lady” (1.1.51). One should then understand “my uncle’s fool” as Beatrice herself, who has accepted Benedick’s challenge in the past, but who changes the game to “the bird-bolt.” **Fowl**ing with blunt-headed arrows becomes **foul**ing with the taut bowstring of wit and the sharp arrows of insult. While Timbreo and Claudio act on their suppressed fears of cuckoldry, Beatrice’s arsenal of verbal weapons allow a social reversal in which *she* can investigate Benedick’s constancy. Beatrice continues the interrogation with her question, “How many hath he killed and eaten in these wars?” Her inquiry implicitly insults Benedick for lacking courage in his recent military combat, but “these wars” also hint at Beatrice and Benedick’s “merry war” of words (1.1.58).[viii] Readers and audiences of *Ado* thus learn from the beginning of the “skirmish,” which opposes the rapier’s wit of Benedick and the stabbing “poniards” of Beatrice, that their action is not the wooing of new lovers (as with Claudio and Hero) but the reconciliation of estranged ones (2.1.237).[ix]

Benedick and Beatrice’s backstory raises an important question: is wit actually an obstacle to Benedick and Beatrice’s relationship? Don Pedro’s benign deception, after all, leads Benedick and Beatrice to soften their vitriol and to perceive the other’s as a façade that conceals true love. What I have argued, however, is that Benedick and Beatrice’s continual banter already contains, in latent form, the desire that Don Pedro’s scheme—itself an instance of witty verbal play—actualizes later in the play. I read Benedick and Beatrice’s response to Don Pedro’s ruse, their surprisingly instantaneous requital, as indicative of an attraction that began during what

Daalder refers to as their "pre-history," faltered because of some unknown conflict, and continued in latent form until the moment of their overhearing in 2.3 and 3.2. After all, if Benedick and Beatrice really despised one another, then learning of the other's love would result in disgust, not requital. Furthermore, I read Benedick and Beatrice's banter primarily as a Shakespearean invention that revises the fears of infidelity and slander found in Bandello; wit is then not an obstacle but a much-needed defense against false accusations and false love. Don Pedro's ruse, therefore, never overcomes wit, since Benedick and Beatrice remain witty to the end of the play. Their final words to one another illustrate the point:

> BENEDICK 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 (5.4.91-96)

I grant that these teases have been purified of their former vitriol, but they are nonetheless instances of verbal play, proof that wit need not be purged for Benedick and Beatrice to marry and, as I read the play, that banter is preferable to the desire of the eye.

Even Benedick and Beatrice's earlier vitriol, however, can be understood in light of Shakespeare's revision of Bandello. Vitriol allows them to create situations of imagined infidelity and slander that substitute for the fears and slanders of the source tradition. For example, both Benedick and Beatrice express vitriolic wit in 2.1 during the masquerade scene. Their conversation begins *in medias res*, with Benedick masked:

> BEATRICE Will you not tell me who told you so?

BENEDICK No, you shall pardon me.

BEATRICE Not will you nor tell me who you are?

BENEDICK Not now.

BEATRICE That I was *disdainful* and that I had my good wit out of the *Hundred Merry Tales* – well, this was Signor Benedick that said So. (2.1.113-19, my emphasis)

Without revealing his identity, Benedick acts as messenger of insults from an ostensibly anonymous source. He is, of course, the supplier of these invectives. His jabs continue earlier insults upon Beatrice's character and intelligence. Beatrice is "disdainful," echoing the earlier greeting, "my dear Lady Disdain" (1.1.116). She is also unoriginal. What others perceive as intelligent retorts Benedick now declares forged from a collection of kitsch anecdotes—the *Hundred Merry Tales*. Benedick's intention is that his mask should shield him from Beatrice's rebuttal, but her parry and counter-thrust inverts what would otherwise be female vulnerability to male slander and leaves *him* vulnerable to her caustic frankness because her words seem to be her real opinion of him. Benedick thinks that his identity is unknown to Beatrice and is deliberately attempting to goad her. What Beatrice knows is less obvious. One could argue that Beatrice does not recognize Benedick, in which case her invective is genuine. This reading would understand Beatrice as a self-consciously and deliberately vicious character, a shrew in need of taming. I do not find the argument persuasive, however, because I read Beatrice's invective as masking real attraction to Benedick throughout the play, and I also read her as perceptive enough not to be fooled by Benedick's trick. She calls Benedick "the prince's jester, a very dull fool" (2.1.125). In other words, Benedick is amusing but not significant. Further, Beatrice executes her own "jade's trick" by undercutting any retort Benedick might make in the

lines, "He'll but break a comparison or two on me, which, peradventure not marked, or not laughed at, strikes him into melancholy . . ." (2.1.133-5). Any reply Benedick might make only serves to prove Beatrice's prediction correct. Though Benedick seems to exit unscathed, Beatrice's words penetrate his mask and cut him to the heart, since he does not know that Beatrice knew his identity. His response is to blame Beatrice's opinion upon her "bitter disposition" (2.1.190). Though Beatrice's words vex Benedick deeply, readers must also be aware of the relative mildness of such invectives in comparison with the utter betrayal felt by Claudio and Timbreo. Insults sting, but they leave one's honor intact. The masked exchange between Beatrice and Benedick also reveals the strength of Beatrice when compared to Hero or Fenicia. Although both Hero and Fenicia are chaste, beautiful, and noble, neither displays the same ability to vie with men on the field of wit. Beatrice's wit thus allows her to interrogate Benedick as a potential slanderer and to demonstrate her ability to counter accusation.

Shakespeare's revision of Bandello opens the potential for more than merely mitigating the shortcomings of the conventional desire found in his sources. His addition of verbal play offers the potential for a resilient love that will continue to withstand fears, slanders, and mistaken perceptions because that verbal play can be memorialized in poetry. The cooperation of the community in the witty ruse planned by Don Pedro in scenes 2.3 and 3.1 refines Benedick and Beatrice's vitriol, allowing them to express their love in poetry. When Beatrice hears of Benedick's love, her joyful exclamation in verse quickly follows:

HERO If it prove so, then loving goes by haps,
Some Cupid kills with arrows, some with traps.

BEATRICE What fire is in mine ears? Can this be true?
Stand I condemned for pride and scorn so much?

Contempt, farewell, and maiden pride, adieu!

No glory lives behind the back of such.

And Benedick, 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;

For others say thou dost deserve, and I

Believe it better than reportingly. (3.1.111-22)

The lines are nearly a sonnet.[x] The meter is iambic pentameter, and lines 113-20 resemble two quatrains, followed by a couplet in lines 121-22. Though not quite a sonnet, the shift from prose to verse reflects the conversion of Beatrice from "Lady Disdain" (1.1.116) to "Fair Beatrice" (2.3.240). As McDonald observes, "over 70 percent of *Much Ado About Nothing* is written in prose," which indicates that Shakespeare likely invented Beatrice's sonnet-like exclamation as a moment of meaningful juxtaposition (114). Beatrice's tongue, at this moment of extemporaneous utterance, becomes a source of blessing, a fount of poetry.[xi] Similarly, though not with the same degree of success, Benedick attempts to compose a sonnet for Beatrice in 5.2, and the sonnets exchanged in 5.4 are a final and public confirmation of their love for one another. Thus, Beatrice and Benedick not only mitigate the shortcomings found in Shakespeare's sources, but their own verbal play undergoes a refinement. The spoken word of wit, though a corrective to the desire of the eye, must ultimately become the written word of poetry. What is true of Benedick and Beatrice—that the written word refines their speech—permeates the play. The conversation overheard by the night watch in 3.3 must be written during the deposition in 4.2 to condemn Borachio and Don John; Claudio must write an epitaph that publicly vindicates Hero

and reveals her accusers as “slanderous” (5.3.3); and even Dogberry’s comic desire to be “writ down an ass” illustrate the movement in the play toward the written word as the most reliable arbiter of fidelity. This is a Shakespearean invention, a revision of Bandello’s novella that asserts the centrality of language—with poetry as its highest and most effective form—as a sign and seal of fidelity, constancy, and love. Hence, Shakespeare succeeds in making readers and audiences believe that Benedick and Beatrice share a love that will endure because it has been visually perceived, verbally expressed, and poetically written.

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# Notes

[i] I wish to thank my teacher, Dr. Scott Crider, for providing me with the initial occasion for this essay and for his invaluable comments.

[ii] See Bullough, 112-34. Bullough's text, which I used during my research for this essay, is his own translation. It is possible though, that Shakespeare knew Italian well enough to read Bandello and Ariosto. See Cairncross.

[iii] Beatrice and Benedick are traditionally understood to be an original Shakespearean invention. See Gaw.

[iv] For an excellent survey of Shakespeare's general reading habits, see Robert Miola, *Shakespeare's Reading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 152-169. For more specific information regarding *Ado*, see Charles Tyler Prouty, *The Sources of* Much Ado About Nothing: *A Critical Study, Together with the Text of Peter Beverley's* Ariodanto and Ieneura, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950).

[v] All quotations come from the Arden 3rd edition of the play.

[vi] Vickers notes that the large proportion of puns at the beginning of the play "establishes a norm against which Beatrice's wit stands out" (174).

[vii] For more on cuckoldry in *Ado*, see McEachern, 43-50.

[viii] It may also be relevant that McDonald writes, "the give and take of dialogue often acts as a substitute for the sexual coupling promised at the end of most comedies" (176).

[ix] See Daalder.

[x] McEachern, 227.

[xi] McEachern notes that "Benedick" means he who is blessed, while "Beatrice" means one who blesses 147-148.

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