

2016

All is Not Fair in Love and Shakespearean Comedy

Shelby Nguyen

Northern Michigan University, snguyen@nmu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://commons.nmu.edu/conspectus_borealis

 Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Nguyen, Shelby (2016) "All is Not Fair in Love and Shakespearean Comedy," *Conspectus Borealis*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 4.
Available at: http://commons.nmu.edu/conspectus_borealis/vol1/iss1/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Conspectus Borealis* by an authorized administrator of The Commons. For more information, please contact [Kevin McDonough](#).

Your master quits you, and for your service done him so much against the mettle of your sex, so far beneath your soft and tender breeding, and since you called me “master” for so long, here is my hand. You shall from this time be your master’s mistress” *Twelfth Night* (5.1.310-315).

This proposal of marriage from Orsino to Viola, after he discovers her actual sex and social class, is essential within *Twelfth Night*, just as the marriage between Beatrice and Benedick is necessary in *Much Ado about Nothing*. The presence of these marriages, as well as the resolutions of conflict and suffering offered by these marriages, allow for these plays to be categorized as Shakespearean comedies. Shakespearean comedy does not have a strict definition, as elements of multiple genres intermingle. However, there are shared patterns that exist within and define plays as comedies. When reading these comedies, identifying the common elements among them allows for the identification of social conflicts that are integral to Shakespearean comedies.

The marriage between Viola and Orsino in 5.2 of *Twelfth Night*, as well as the marriages between Beatrice and Benedick, and Hero and Claudio in 5.4 of *Much Ado*, result from societal influences. These marriages appear to offer the standard festive ending to Shakespearean comedy, but the events leading up to the marriages reveal undertones of melancholy, suffering, societal influence, and societal transformation. Adam Immerwahr defines Shakespearean comedy as a genre of plays that have a shared set of tropes, such as upheaval of social order and plot resolutions near the play’s conclusion. Immerwahr further mentions that Shakespearean comedy is not inherently humorous; at its heart, “Shakespearean comedy is about a conflict between two opposite social groups (rulers and subjects, older and younger, wealthy and poor)”. In consensus with Immerwahr, Richard Levin in *Love and Society in Shakespearean*

Comedy states that the melancholic elements throughout *Twelfth Night* “are less often recognized as integral parts of the play” (Levin 117). Hero’s near-death in 4.1 of *Much Ado*, and Viola’s near slaughter in 5.1 of *Twelfth Night*, highlight the underlying social issues within their respective societies as well as the resolution of these issues. Drawing on these definitions of Shakespearean comedy, this paper examines how *Twelfth Night* and *Much Ado* fit into this genre via the analysis of various relationships, relationships which demonstrate the social constructions of same-sex relationships, patriarchy, misogyny, homosociality, and/or social class.

In *Twelfth Night*, despite presenting heterosexual relationships as the social norm, Shakespeare acknowledges the concept of same-sex relationships. In 5.1, after the discovery of Viola’s and Sebastian’s true identities, Sebastian indicates that same-sex relationships are abnormal and against nature: “So comes it, lady, you have been mistook. But nature in her bias drew in that” (5.1.252-253). If Nature’s will is that Olivia marry Sebastian, then Olivia marrying Viola goes directly against it. Stephen Greenblatt addresses this issue of unnatural relationships and homosexuality in the preface of *Twelfth Night* when he says “The transforming power of costume unsettles fixed categories of gender and social class, and allows characters to explore emotional territory that a culture officially hostile to same-sex desire, and cross-class marriage would ordinarily have ruled out” (Greenblatt 446). The idea of homosexuality is not only present in Sebastian’s words, but due to Viola’s disguise, it is present in Orsino’s actions as well. Orsino develops a close relationship with Viola only when she is disguised as Cesario. He confides in and explicitly declares his love for Cesario, when, angered at Olivia, he says: “I’ll sacrifice the lamb that I do love to spite a raven’s heart within a dove” (5.1.126-127). Although Orsino declares his love for Cesario, he does not pursue a relationship with him. However, once he discovers that Cesario is Viola, he quickly proposes to Viola, stating, “Here is my hand. You

shall be from this time your master's mistress" (5.1.313-314). As was observed earlier, in *Twelfth Night's* society, it is deemed unnatural for a man to desire another man. This social norm of heterosexuality is why Orsino does not pursue a romantic relationship with Cesario even though he is willing to marry Viola.

Although Nature's will overrides same-sex relationships with heterosexual marriages, Greenblatt comments on Shakespeare's decision to end *Twelfth Night* with Viola still in men's clothing (Greenblatt 446). After Orsino proposes to Viola, he refuses to call her by her name until she is in women's "habits", and the play ends before a change in clothing occurs. In the last words of the play, before Feste's song, Orsino says "Cesario, come— For so you shall be while you are a man; But when in other habits you are seen Orsino's Mistress, and his fancy's queen" (5.1 373-375). This statement interrupts the return to normal from social disruption, as Greenblatt states, "with a delicate comic touch" (Greenblatt 446). Same-sex relationships are not directly present within *Twelfth Night*, but Shakespeare utilizes the relationships in this play to draw out the concept of same-sex relationships.

In the 2012 film version of Des McAnuff's stage production of *Twelfth Night*, Des McAnuff highlights the idea of same-sex relationships during Feste's song in 2.4. McAnuff's interpretation of this scene emphasizes the close relationship between Orsino and Viola, who, at the time, is disguised as a man. Viola, sitting at Orsino's side while dressed as Cesario, rests her head on Orsino's lap. Orsino's face depicts his surprise, but it does not show disgust or the urge to move away from Viola. However, McAnuff does remove Shakespeare's "delicate comic touch" in the end of the play as Viola is shown standing next to Orsino wearing a long golden gown. This removal of Viola remaining dressed as a man contradicts McAnuff's earlier emphasis on same-sex relationships. Perhaps McAnuff wanted to highlight the disruption of the

heterosexual norm, as it is ingrained within Shakespeare's text, but as a director he also wanted the ending to be grand and pleasing to his viewers. Feste's joyful music, the showing of happy couples, and Viola's depiction as a beautiful woman results in a standard happy ending, where McAnuff's audience can be satisfied, and all is right in the play as the heterosexual norm of this play's society has been fulfilled.

The relationship between Viola and Orsino emphasizes same-sex relationships and heterosexual norms within *Twelfth Night*, but Beatrice and Benedick's relationship also highlights societal influences present in *Much Ado*. Greenblatt poses in his preface to *Much Ado* that "marriage is a social conspiracy" (Greenblatt 318). Both Beatrice and Benedick actively resist a romantic relationship to achieve freedom in a controlling society, but ultimately deep underlying pressures encourage them to conclude individually that marriage is the better option. Beatrice, in her unique position of freedom, understandably had reasons not to marry Benedick. Benedick certainly had reasons not to marry Beatrice as well, considering that Beatrice is a poor orphan. However, as Shakespeare's title *Much Ado about Nothing* cleverly implies, both characters noted or eavesdropped on Don Pedro's conversations. As Greenblatt further mentions, these characters are obsessed with noting the behavior of others, where sensitivity to shame and honor has a strong presence among them. Both Benedick and Beatrice are very aware of the social interactions going on around them. This sensitivity to various social pressures is what drives their marriage forward. Benedick convinces himself that marriage is the best course of action, saying "I must not seem proud", and "The world must be peopled" (2.3.201-202; 2.3.213-214). As for Beatrice, she reasons with herself to marry Benedick after Hero's critique, stating, "Shall I stand condemned for pride and scorn so much? Contempt, farewell: and maiden pride,

adieu” (3.1.109-110). Thus— after direct social manipulation, and various social pressures— Benedick and Beatrice get married, as Benedick observes, “against my will” (5.2.57).

Beatrice and Benedick are two characters directly affected by social manipulation, but societal influences are present among other characters within *Much Ado* as well. The first interaction between Leonato, Don Pedro, and Benedick consists of a joke centered on cuckoldry anxiety, which signifies a husband’s fear that his child is not his own (1.184-88). These words appear to be Leonato’s attempt at being humorous and fitting in among younger males, but the fact that Leonato would joke about his child potentially not being his and how quickly Don Pedro brushes it off as a joke, shows how their society perceives men and women, as women are demonstrated as being unfaithful. While they make uncomfortable jokes like this one, the play proves that spousal unfaithfulness is no laughing matter. This perspective on the nature of men and women is what ultimately drives the play to 4.1, where Hero’s death nearly occurs. Leonato’s words are only the first example demonstrating the belief that women always cheat and are unfaithful. Benedick reinforces this belief when he remarks on Claudio’s desires to marry Hero by saying:

Is ’t come to this? In faith, hath not the world one man but he will wear his cap
with suspicion? Shall I never see a bachelor of three-score again? Go to, i' faith,
an thou wilt needs thrust thy neck into a yoke, wear the print of it, and
Sigh away Sundays. (1.1.160-163)

Benedick reacts by defining marriage as male suspicion. He asks Claudio why he would tie himself down when he could live free as a single man. These instances demonstrate the fundamental beliefs of the men in this society: that women will be unfaithful to men, and that they will ruin the men’s reputation and honor.

In Kenneth Branagh's 1993 film version of *Much Ado about Nothing*, Branagh appears to emphasize the idea of cuckoldry anxiety in the failed wedding scene of 4.1. Leonato originally appears to be a pleasant elderly man who cares for his daughter, and Claudio is presented as a soft-spoken unconfident man. However, Branagh's interpretation of this scene depicts them as violent people. They physically strike Hero when the possibility that she was unfaithful arises. Branagh also shortens Leonato's joke with Benedick in 1.1. As Samuel Crowl suggests, this choice removes part of the presence of male fear in their society and some of the effects of social influence. In addition to cutting Leonato's joke, Branagh sets his film in Tuscany instead of Messina, the original setting of the play. This reduces the presence of patriarchy and social conflict within the play, as Tuscany is known for being a beautiful relaxing city, while Messina was known at the time of the play for its passionate and quick-tempered people. The anger and violence that would be indicative of male fear and dominance is not a strong presence within Branagh's film. Although Branagh seems to skim over the social influences within the play, he does emphasize the anger of Leonato and Claudio in 4.1. Perhaps societal issues are so ingrained within the text, that he felt it necessary to demonstrate the patriarchy and misogyny by utilizing Leonato and Claudio. The jokes create an undertone even to the first half of the play that becomes explicit in the second half. Societal pressures not only exist throughout, but also impact the characters.

Cuckoldry anxiety, along with social expectations, culminate in the incident at 4.1 where Hero nearly dies. Hero's near death was caused by Don John's manipulation of Claudio, which caused him to believe Hero was neither innocent nor faithful. However, the manipulation by Don John ultimately derives from the cuckoldry anxiety present in their society. While Don John does manipulate Claudio and Don Pedro when he says "Go but with me tonight, you shall see her

chamber window entered, even the night before her wedding day”, his plan only works because of Claudio’s ready acceptance of his lies (3.2.94-96). In their society, where men are taught to be suspicious of their wives and joke about cuckoldry, Claudio does not immediately refute Don John’s claims. Instead, he says, “may this be so?” (3.2.98). Further, he goes on to proclaim, “If I see anything tonight why I should not marry her, tomorrow, in the congregation where I should wed, there will I shame her” (3.2.103-105). In addition to not defending Hero, he is also ready to condemn her, as he does in 4.1 where he calls her a rotten orange during their ceremony.

Leonato, believing Claudio, also condemns his daughter when he states, “O fate, take not away thy heavy hand. Death is the fairest cover for her shame that may be wished for” (4.1.112-114). In Leonato’s and Claudio’s actions, societal influences, which ultimately stem from the social constructions of patriarchy and misogyny, become visible. Leonato and Claudio were suspicious of Hero, due to the cuckoldry anxiety ingrained within their society, and, being a subordinate woman, Hero was not able to defend herself.

Hero’s reserved manner may simply be an inherent part of her personality, but it is more likely that it stems from her upbringing. Hero is not just reserved; she is nearly silent in comparison to the other characters throughout the play. She is the most verbose in 3.1, but her increased amount of speech contradicts the idea that she is a naturally quiet person, as she only speaks with Ursula to trick Beatrice into thinking Benedick loves her. Although Hero may be a soft-spoken person, she has been shaped by her society into a girl whose silence is expected. She is not verbose enough to pursue an intelligent conversation, as is Beatrice, but she uses her words to further along a romantic relationship between Beatrice and Benedick at Don Pedro’s urging, where he states “I would fain have it a match, and I doubt not but to fashion it, if you three will but minister such assistance as I shall give you direction” (2.1.319-321). In addition to being

subservient to Don Pedro, she also follows her father's orders. In 2.1, both Antonio and Beatrice comment on how Hero should follow her father's demands. Antonio states, "Well, niece, I trust you will be ruled by your father", and Beatrice responds by saying, "Yes, faith, it is my cousin's duty to make curtsy and say, 'Father, as it please you'" (2.1.42-42; 2.1.44-45). Furthermore, Leonato gives Hero to Claudio like an object without input from her, and then he commands her to answer him truthfully when she is accused of having been unfaithful (2.1.263-265, 4.1.75). He appears only to like his daughter when she is following his orders; otherwise, she is punished. As previously mentioned, Branagh's interpretation of 4.1 is violent. In his interpretation of this scene, Hero is harshly punished when Leonato strikes her and tries to do so a second time. These are merely some of the numerous examples of patriarchy within this society. Patriarchy, and society's expectations that women follow men's rules, may have shaped Hero into a quiet subservient girl. After being accused, her only defense was, "I talked with no man at that hour, my lord" (4.1.85). If Hero was sharp mouthed and argumentative, like Beatrice, she might have been able to defend herself more successfully.

Just as Hero's actions in *Much Ado* reveal the social constructions of patriarchy and misogyny, Malvolio's actions emphasize the importance of social class in *Twelfth Night*. In *Twelfth Night*, Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Maria display a carnival-esque atmosphere through their festivity and/or drunkenness. Sir Andrew hypothesizes that life "consists of eating and drinking," and Sir Toby agrees as he declares "Thou'rt a scholar; let us therefore eat and drink. Marian, I say, a stoup of wine" (2.3.9-10; 2.3.13-13). Although Maria does not drink, she contributes to the carnival-esque atmosphere with her scheming. Annoyed at Malvolio's pride, Maria tells Sir Toby: "Let me alone with him. If I do not gull him into a nayword and make him a common recreation, do not think I have enough wit to lie in my bed" (2.3.12-123). Where

cuckoldry anxiety disrupts the jocular tone in *Much Ado*, social class disrupts the carnival of *Twelfth Night*.

At the center of this play is a “rigid hierarchical social order” (Greenblatt 446). At the top of the hierarchy sit Duke Orsino and the Heiress Olivia, and below them sit the other characters of the play. Olivia and Orsino control most of the play’s characters through employment and power, as demonstrated in 3.4 when Second Officer declares, “Antonio, I arrest thee at the suit of Count Orsino” (3.4.291). This social order is not meant to be broken. Nobility must marry nobility, so that, as Greenblatt remarks, there is no crossing of social class and overturning of social order (Greenblatt 449). The importance of this social hierarchy is demonstrated when Orsino says to Olivia, after she discovers that she has married Sebastian whom she barely knows, “Be not amazed, Right noble is his blood” (5.1.257).

Aside from Orsino’s remark to Olivia, a key example that demonstrates the importance of social order is the treatment of Malvolio, a servant who aspires to elevate his social status through marrying his lady. As a result of Malvolio’s hope, Sir Toby, Maria, and Feste punish him. In 2.3, after Malvolio scolds Sir Toby and Sir Andrew for being drunk and disorderly, Sir Toby responds by saying “Art any more than a steward? Dost thou think because thou art virtuous there will be no more cake and ale?” (2.3.102-104). Sir Toby points out to Malvolio that despite his purity, he is nothing but a lowly steward who has no command over a noble. Sir Toby’s question extends beyond Malvolio and touches on an aspect of human nature. It is human nature to compare oneself to others, as observed in *Much Ado*, and often, competition stems from this comparison. Malvolio only desires to marry Olivia for power. In the daily competition of life, he wants to have power over others. For instance, in 2.5 he proclaims “This is open. I will be proud, I will read politic authors, I will baffle Sir Toby” (2.5.140-143). However, his desire to

elevate his status and gain power makes him susceptible to Maria's plot, where he is deemed possessed and subjected to an exorcism. Olivia tells Maria, "Let some of my people have a special care of him" (3.4.58). By the end of Maria's scheme, Malvolio goes from scorning Feste: "Unless you laugh and minister occasion to him, he is gagged," to begging Feste for help as he says "Good fool, help me to some light and some paper. I tell thee I am as well in my wits as any man in Illyria" (1.5.74-75; 4.2.98-99). As Greenblatt also mentions, Shakespeare does not hide the harsh treatment of Malvolio; there is simply no tolerance for his social climbing. The play concludes in Nature's favor where social order is maintained in addition to the heterosexual norm.

Des McAnuff also appears to emphasize Malvolio in his 2012 film of *Twelfth Night*. In the last scene, despite the happy song that Feste is singing and the celebration that occurs, McAnuff concludes the play on a dark note. Following Malvolio's statement of "I will be revenged upon the whole pack of you!", the lights fade to black concealing all characters but Malvolio (5.1.365). Although the play ends on a festive note with the restoration of social order, singing, and dancing, McAnuff's interpretation of 5.1 stresses the cruelty of Malvolio's punishment. McAnuff utilizes the *mise-en-scène* to differentiate between the festive comedic scenes and darker tragic scenes. During Feste's singing of "Hold thy peace, thou knave", the stage was well illuminated by neon lights, but during Malvolio's exorcism the stage was nearly black (2.3.59). By focusing on Malvolio's punishment, McAnuff highlights the importance of social order.

Shakespeare and McAnuff both emphasize Malvolio's punishment and the importance of the social order in determining the play's events, however, social order is not rigidly maintained within *Twelfth Night*. Maria, unlike Malvolio, elevates her social class through her marriage to

Sir Toby. Her success lies in direct opposition to Malvolio's failure. Despite Shakespeare highlighting Malvolio's cruel punishment via Olivia, the issue of social climbing is not resolved by the play's conclusion. Although Maria does not explicitly state her desire to elevate her social status, through her wit, cunning, and ingenuity, she gradually succeeds in doing so (5.1.366). By 2.5, Sir Toby says to Sir Andrew "I could marry this wench for this device. And ask no other dowry with her but such another jest" (2.5.158-160). In 5.1, Maria's success in marrying Sir is mentioned as a side note from Fabian to Olivia as he says, "Maria writ the letter, at Sir Toby's great importance, In recompense whereof he hath married her" (5.1.351-353).

Although Maria does succeed in elevating her social status, her marriage is not highlighted in the play; the only mention of her marriage is Fabian's comment to Olivia in explanation of what happened to Malvolio. Maria keeping her desires and her success quiet is most likely the reason that she is able to elevate her social status while Malvolio is not. Malvolio repeatedly demonstrates his desires to be in a higher position. He criticizes Sir Toby's drunken behavior as if he were Sir Toby's superior, he declares he will report Sir Toby's and Maria's actions to Olivia, and he explicitly states his desires to improve his social status when he declares "To be Count Malvolio!" (2.3.78-83; 2.3.111; 2.5.29). Malvolio makes enemies through his actions, yet Maria acquires friends through hers. Maria has her wit and a deep understanding of human nature both of which she utilizes to trick Malvolio and to strengthen her relationship with Sir Toby.

In McAnuff's film, Cara Ricketts brings out Maria's cunning and wit. McAnuff's interpretation of 1.3 involves Maria placing Sir Andrew's hand upon her breast. This movement draws out Maria's boldness. Not only does Maria joke along with the men of the play, she mocks Sir Andrew, who is surprised and baffled by her actions. Sir Andrew does not understand

Maria's joke, which places her on a higher intellectual level than him. Ultimately, this allows for Maria and Sir Toby to share a joke at Sir Andrew's expense. Ricketts' portrayal of Maria draws out qualities of Maria that are not as evident in Shakespeare's text.

As the definition of Shakespearean comedy is not clear, deviations from common comedic patterns exist within individual comedies. *Twelfth Night* does not end in a completely joyous manner. Although the play ends with marriages, Maria is allowed to disrupt the social order through her marriage to Sir Toby. The discrepancy between the plot lines of Maria and Malvolio show that different endings are possible despite the constructions of social order and social class. As for *Much Ado*, the play ends in a dismal manner as well. The witty and verbal Beatrice succumbs to societal pressures and marries Benedick. After Benedick says, "Peace, I will stop your mouth", Beatrice does not speak any further (5.4.297).

After the analysis of various characters and scenes, the overarching patriarchal, heterosexual, and same-class inclinations within the societies of *Twelfth Night* and *Much Ado about Nothing* become visible. The influences of these social constructions are present within Shakespeare's text as well as various film adaptations, including Branagh's film and particularly McAnuff's. Set in Tuscany, Branagh's film almost skims over the idea of societal influence. However, McAnuff's film emphasizes social class through both Malvolio and Maria. In *Much Ado*, cuckoldry anxiety, patriarchy, misogyny, and homosociality are present in the marriage of Beatrice and Benedict, and in the relationship between Hero and her father Leonato. In *Twelfth Night*, the importance of social class is present in the punishment of Malvolio, and in the relationship between Maria and Sir Toby. The concept of same-sex relationships is present between Orsino and Viola, and in Olivia and Sebastian's marriage. Despite the seemingly happy endings, Shakespeare includes unresolved issues. Ultimately, social conflict exists at the center

of these two comedies. Just as genres intermingle, academic disciplines intertwine; scholars can examine Shakespeare's work through various sociological perspectives.

Works Cited

- Crowl, Samuel. "The Marriage of Shakespeare and Hollywood: Kenneth Branagh's *Much Ado about Nothing*." *Spectacular Shakespeare: Critical Theory and Popular Cinema* (2002): 110-124. Print.
- Greenblatt, Stephen, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, and Katherine Eisaman Maus, eds. *The Norton Anthology*. 2nd ed. New York: W.W Norton, 2008. 322-376. Print.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. "Much Ado about Nothing." Greenblatt, et al. 313-319.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. "Twelfth Night." Greenblatt, et al. 453-506.
- Immerwhar, Adam. "Shakespearean Comedy." *A Midsummer Night's Dream Audience Resource Guide*. McCarter Theater, 2009. Web. 5 Nov. 2015.
- Levin, Richard A. *Love and Society in Shakespearean Comedies: a Study of Dramatic Form and Content*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1985.
- Much Ado about Nothing*. Dir. Kenneth Branagh. Perf. Kenneth Branagh, Emma Thompson. The Samuel Goldwyn Company, 1993. DVD.
- Shakespeare, William. "Much Ado about Nothing." Greenblatt, et al. 322-376. Shakespeare, William. "Twelfth Night." Greenblatt, et al. 453-506. *Twelfth Night*. Dir. Des McAnuff. Perf. Ben Carlson, Brian Dennehy. 2012. DVD.