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“There is a Stubbornness about me that Never can Bear to be Frightened at the Will of Others”: Constructions of Beatrice and Elizabeth as the Witty Woman

Tess A. Henthorne
The College of Wooster

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A successful witty female heroine must delicately mediate between a number of societal extremes. She needs to challenge her society and be rebellious and relentless in her constant banter, saying the things nearly every reader wishes she could think to say at just the right time. She must accomplish this while remaining virginal, without overstepping her boundaries and without being ostracized. Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, written more than 200 years apart, both introduce this archetype¹ of heroine in protagonists Beatrice and Elizabeth: the witty woman.

If we examine these two women as connected figures of their respective texts, the 'witty woman' archetype draws attention to early modern and regency-era conventions of female behavior—where women are expected to be chaste, modest, and unassertive—and their presence suggests acceptable rebellion in the structure of a patriarchal society. *Much Ado* and *Pride and Prejudice*'s "triumph is to make the audience assent to [their] vision of a community always to be revitalized from within, by the incorporation of rebellious energy, not its expulsion": Beatrice and Elizabeth's power is derived from their societies' acceptance of their defiant attitudes, which consequently allows readers to accept and praise these actions of the 'witty woman' (Gay 143). Simultaneously, critics such as Clara Claiborne Park argue that, for readers, Beatrice, and consequently Elizabeth, form "the ideal: the high-spirited woman who will tame herself" based on the perception that she never acts outside of the confines of her society (Park 106). However, the 'witty woman' is juxtaposed with female counterparts to reveal that she is a balance

¹ This essay is the adaptation of a class assignment that warranted a specific comparison between elements of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. In order to more thoroughly understand the concept of an archetypal 'witty woman,' it is thus necessary to investigate other 'witty women' in literature such as Jane Eyre (from Brontë's *Jane Eyre*), Anne Shirley (from Maud's *Anne of Green Gables*), and Lisbeth Salander (from Larson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*) through this lens.

between the flat, yet perfect woman and one who is dynamic, but socially unacceptable.

Although both Beatrice and Elizabeth are in relationships at the end of the texts, neither is truly tamed with her decision to marry the man she hated in initial scenes. Beatrice and Elizabeth ultimately establish strength with their refusals to be tamed until their masculine counterparts are transformed into suitable marriage partners; through requiring their male counterparts to serve as equal partners, the women's conformation to societal expectations for marriage is an assertion of their power within society.

Before readers can understand the representation of Beatrice and Elizabeth, it is necessary to establish the nature of these characters and, thereby, what characteristics denote the 'witty woman' archetype. I will argue the women are most prominently defined by four attributes: proving themselves equal to a masculine counterpart, using wit, juxtaposing female ideals, and demonstrating they are not tamed. Together, these qualities suggest a shift in the standard active/male, passive/female gender binary—the witty woman must assume more stereotypical masculine qualities in order to fulfill the archetypal role. This essay will now continue to establish these aspects of the witty woman as a way for readers to examine *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Pride and Prejudice* in light of this archetype's inherent characteristics.

It is important to acknowledge that Beatrice and Elizabeth successfully exhibit their archetypal role as the witty woman by having a strong masculine counterpart. Within the texts, each woman is presented with multiple suitors, but specifically paired with a male intellectual equivalent: Beatrice with Benedick and Elizabeth with Darcy. As argued later in this essay, each woman is able to demonstrate the full extent of her wit through verbal sparring, displays of

intellect, and the dynamic personality that arises from discourse with her male peer. This seeming dependence on a man to highlight the women's capacity for wit provides an ironic contrast with the women's continual struggle for independence— Shakespeare and Austen, respectively, emphasize the witty woman in conversation with her masculine counterpart, and thus Beatrice and Elizabeth are reliant on these situations to highlight their archetypal characteristics. However, the continual comparison between the witty women and their masculine counterparts is ultimately effective because both women's "personalit[ies are] thrown into sharper relief by the contrast with an unassuming counterpart" (Pitt 108). Beatrice and Elizabeth are made to seem less abrasive as they are matched by another figure in their displays of wit; what could appear domineering in juxtaposition with more passive female characters becomes clever and powerful in respect to Benedick and Darcy.

This is much like what we categorize as the screwball comedy film, which Leger Grindon describes in *The Hollywood Romantic Comedy: Conventions, History, Controversies*. In his essay, Grindon reinforces the necessity for a masculine counterpart in an explanation that the romantic comedy, as applied to *Much Ado* and *Pride and Prejudice*, is primarily verbal. Within a coupling of the male and female protagonists, "rapid-fire witticism, overlapping delivery, and densely written insults establish wordplay as the chief vehicle for flirtation... These couples initiate their relationship with verbal duels... [and] only later do they realize. . . the bond arising out of these exchanges... [where] the wordplay sparks a current of erotic energy" (Grindon 35). Where a direct display of romantic interest would conflict with each of the individuals' refusals to marry, verbal banter allows for the women to directly oppose men as a manner of displacing

sexual desire. Each woman's masculine counterpart provides her both the agency and means to display her wit and intelligence without entirely defying societal expectations for a traditional, modest heroine; the couple's verbal sparring is provoked by an initial conflict existing between the two characters, and thereby reinforces the woman's wit as this dissention escalates throughout the text. Without the existence of her masculine counterpart, the witty woman would not have the circumstances to display her wit in a socially acceptable manner.

Beatrice's interactions with Benedick in *Much Ado* establish a relationship driven by verbal sparring and demonstrate her ability to equally challenge a masculine peer with disregard to its effects on her potential marriageability; ultimately, this reflects Beatrice's refusal to conform to expected societal conventions of female behavior and, thus, demonstrates her resistance to being tamed by a masculine figure. As Beatrice seeks to establish equality, the verbal sparring becomes a strong defensive mechanism that displaces Beatrice's sexual desire for Benedick onto words that pronounce the opposite. This is highlighted most significantly by their first major interaction of the play:

BENEDICK. It is certain I am loved of all ladies, only you excepted, and I would I could find in my heart that I had not a hard heart, for truly I love none.

BEATRICE. A dear happiness to women! They would else have been troubled with a pernicious suitor. I thank God and my cold blood, I am of your humor for that. I had rather hear a dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me.

BENEDICK. God keep your ladyship still in that mind! So some gentleman or other shall scape a predestinate scratched face.

BEATRICE. Scratching could not make it worse an 'twere such a face as yours were.

BENEDICK. Well, you are a rare parrot teacher.

BEATRICE. A bird of my tongue is better than a beast of yours. (1.1.118-134)

Within this conversation, Beatrice directly critiques Benedick's worth as a suitor. Particularly with her expression, "A dear happiness to women! They would else have been troubled with a pernicious suitor," she indicates that Benedick would be socially harmful to any woman he marries. However, in the context of the greater conversation, Beatrice's statement hints at the underlying sexual tension between her and Benedick: despite rejecting him, the quick pacing of their banter and dialogue still suggests a deeper connection between them. Beatrice's statements are also juxtaposed with the underlying implication that she "occupies a different social position in Leonato's household as an unmarried and orphaned woman" (Intro xxxviii). Her open rejection of any possibility for marriage is, to an extent, social marginalization— she refuses to marry Benedick despite the potential monetary and social benefits he could provide and thereby subjects herself to remaining in this unwed-and-approaching-spinsterhood classification. Accordingly, Beatrice's participation in verbal sparring with a member of the opposite sex establishes her willingness to ignore some of the conventional expectations for female characters in an attempt to achieve equality.

In this passage, Beatrice also highlights the way in which she and Benedick feed off one another in conversation. Her sparring serves as a form of defense that displaces her sexual desire for him: though her words appear harsh, Beatrice shows a fundamental interest in his statements before she reacts and formulates responses that directly stem from Benedick's dialogue.

Specifically, this is expressed in the way Beatrice matches each of Benedick's expressions: when he notes that despite being loved by many women he has loved none, she too emphasizes her own unwillingness to marry. Beatrice proves that she has the power to seamlessly maintain a clever and intelligent conversation without appearing dominating because both she and Benedick "are endowed with the same kind of wit and the same enjoyment of verbal competitiveness. The pleasure of watching them lies in the equality of the match" (Park 104). Though she is critical of his potential as a suitor, Beatrice's responses are engaged and equally interconnected with Benedick's.

Further, Beatrice introduces aggressive language that strengthens her overall rejection of Benedick and thereby protects her virginity. In reinforcing her indifference to a relationship with Benedick, she asserts, "I had rather hear a dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me." Her use of animal imagery is not elegant, but it powerfully demonstrates that she can transgress through language, specifically with the words *bark* and *swear*. These words indicate the man's *swear* to be considerably harsh, as if it were an attack rather than a declaration of love, and reject the expected societal female desire to marry. Beatrice's dialogue seems to over exaggerate her disdain for love; as a result it incites a verbal sparring with Benedick where both the witty woman and her male counterpart compete, continually trying to best one another. Ultimately, Beatrice is left with the final word in the conversation as the animal imagery culminates with her declaration that "a bird of my tongue is better than a beast of yours." In extending the animal metaphor, Beatrice draws a clear distinction between *bird* and *beast*: she suggests her verbal wit to be more fluid and effortless than Benedick's heavy and clumsy speech. Thus, Beatrice

momentarily dismisses the option for a romantic relationship, protecting her virginity, as she remains unwed. Her initial conflict with Benedick develops throughout the text, serving as a vehicle to displace sexual tension until the couple's eventual union.

Similar to Beatrice with Benedick, Elizabeth demonstrates a propensity for verbal sparring in conversation with Mr. Darcy. When Elizabeth travels to Netherfield, Darcy's declaration about his opinion initiates a series of exchanges between the two:

"My good opinion once lost is lost for ever."

"That is a failing indeed... Implacable resentment *is* a shade in a character. But you have chosen your fault well.—I really cannot *laugh* at it. You are safe from me."

"There is, I believe, in every disposition a tendency to some particular evil, a natural defect, which not even the best education can overcome."

"And *your* defect is a propensity to hate every body."

"And yours," he replied with a smile, "is willfully to misunderstand them." (57-58)

In a departure from Beatrice and Benedick's immediate verbal sparring, Elizabeth and Darcy do not directly converse until after they have attended several of the same social events; they meet at Meryton, but prior to her journey to Netherfield, all of their interactions consist of comments made about each other to other individuals. Once Elizabeth and Darcy speak to one another, they, like Beatrice and Benedick, rely on verbal sparring. In this initial interaction, Elizabeth presents conflict because she illustrates indifference to starting a romantic relationship with Darcy. Her statement therefore serves as a subtle assertion of her power: in her claim that "[Darcy] is safe from [her]" Elizabeth demonstrates that despite Darcy's evident wealth and

superficial potential as a suitor, she is unwilling to compromise her own self-worth and marry solely to secure a stable societal position. Thus as the archetypal witty woman, Elizabeth forcefully yet properly establishes that she will disregard some societal expectations for women to emphasize that she requires an equal masculine counterpart.

Additionally, the pair's sparring is considerably more decorous than Beatrice and Benedick's speech: the language is more nuanced as Elizabeth refrains from the use of specific aggressive words and instead makes more general statements about Darcy's character. Her phrases are formal— "shade in a character" and "implacable resentment" indicate her initial dislike for Darcy, but lack the same explicit aggression displayed by Beatrice's use of words like "scratching." Yet, Elizabeth still challenges Darcy's shortcomings in noting he has a "propensity to hate every body": her statement criticizes Darcy's ability to exhibit favorable emotions towards other individuals, and, as a result, his ability to be involved in a romantic relationship. Her critique reinforces the necessity of the archetypal witty woman's masculine counterpart establishing himself as a suitable marriage partner before being accepted by the witty woman. Elizabeth's word choice illustrates the ability for more nuanced language to effectively highlight the witty woman's capacity for verbal sparring and ultimately her overarching need for a masculine counterpart within the text.

In addition to sparring with a masculine counterpart, the balanced nature of Beatrice and Elizabeth's witty woman archetype is highlighted by the inclusion of both a positive and a negative female foil. For both women, this contrast with other female ideals presents them as a mediator between two extremes: the traditional, passive heroine and the woman who seemingly

has fallen from grace. As "Shakespeare [and therefore Austen]'s bright young girls are meant to please, not to make us uncomfortable," the witty woman's juxtaposition with other female characters allows her to introduce a sense of acceptable rebellion—deviating from the traditional societal standards without entirely neglecting their influence (Park 105). Hence, the inclusion of numerous feminine ideals constitutes the witty woman as an archetype defined by its interrelations with other characters.

Beatrice's positive counterpart, Hero, is constructed to be more docile and modest, resembling idealized feminine standards of her society, and consequently illustrates Beatrice's flaws. Most significantly, when Claudio denounces Hero at their wedding, Hero does not say anything notable to dispute the suggestion that she was unfaithful. After the conversation between Don Pedro, Don John, Leonato, and Claudio is almost over, she makes the claim, "I talked with no man at that hour, my lord" (4.1.85). Her statement is virtually ignored and the men conclude that she is no longer a virgin. While this causes Hero to be temporarily shamed, her response to the situation is considered to be socially acceptable: she does not argue with the men, does not stand up for herself, and subsequently faints. Hero's behaviors reaffirm her passive role in society, a standard expected of women, and additionally allow for her to have a neat and honorable reunion with Claudio when it is revealed she remained faithful. Hero is eventually rewarded for her lack of action when she is reunited with Claudio, but her fate is only the result of other characters' intervention.²

² It is significant to note that both Hero and Jane are dependent on Beatrice and Elizabeth in order to successfully reach their happy endings: it is the witty woman that takes action in reuniting the 'positive' counterpart with her intended lover, ultimately leading to marriage in both circumstances.

Similarly, Elizabeth's more traditional counterpart, Jane, refrains from taking action during her time apart from Bingley. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane is described to "never see a fault in any body. All the world are good and agreeable in [her] eyes. [Elizabeth] never heard [her] speak ill of a human being in [her] life" (19). When Bingley suddenly leaves Netherfield, Jane maintains her positive perspective and keeps faith that there is still a possibility for their courtship. Instead of attempting to speak with Bingley, or even make contact through another individual such as Mr. Darcy, Jane takes no action. Like Hero, Jane is shown to assume a passive role when faced with conflict; although her miscommunication with Bingley is ultimately resolved and she is reunited with her suitor, it is not a result of Jane taking action against being wrongly accused of romantic indifference towards Bingley.

This contrast between the passive, traditional, and socially accepted female archetype and the witty woman, Beatrice and Elizabeth, shows the latter to be a more active character. Further, Beatrice and Elizabeth construct themselves to be the type of "woman who can so adroitly and irresistibly take over such a scene [that she] will have no trouble in persuading others to believe of her whatever she wishes" (Pitt 109). Their choices throughout the texts, such as Beatrice's defense of Hero after her shaming and Elizabeth's questioning of Darcy about his involvement with Jane and Bingley's split, demonstrate the women's willingness to take action when it is not directly required of them. Moreover, these actions are successful—in both situations, the witty woman actively reunites the passive, traditional female counterpart with her intended lover. Therefore, Beatrice and Elizabeth are arguably more appealing than their counterparts because the witty woman is a catalyst for subsequent actions in the text and proves that she can act

independently. Both women demonstrate they are assertive and engaged, but, as illustrated by their juxtaposition with a more negative counterpart, they do so while remaining within the confines created by their society.

Beatrice's negative counterpart, Margaret, is constructed to be an extreme example of a woman who unwittingly ostracizes herself due to her potential sexual promiscuity and consequently demonstrates Beatrice's success in maintaining societal approval throughout *Much Ado*. Margaret naively agrees to meet Borachio at her chamber window, allowing Claudio to "hear [Borachio] call [her] Hero, hear Margaret term [him] Claudio" (2.2.39-40). While it is possible she did not possess a full understanding of the situation, her action still creates problems: Hero is shamed at what was to be her wedding because of her supposed unfaithfulness, and Margaret's reputation is tarnished for assisting Borachio in his scheme. This ultimately compromises Margaret's power, and her immoral actions restrict her social position. In juxtaposition with Margaret, Beatrice is decorous and demonstrates an ability to uphold a virginal image despite her more transgressive actions.

Elizabeth's negative counterpart, Lydia, is similarly constructed as a woman who disregards the female standards of her society and consequently illustrates Elizabeth's success in not overextending her power.³ Lydia's behaviors put her at risk for a public shaming: she runs away with Wickham prior to getting married. This action is detrimental to her status within society—it is understood by most individuals, and directly expressed by Mr. Collins, that "the

³ The text of *Pride and Prejudice* establishes a number of other foils to Elizabeth, including Charlotte and Caroline Bingley. Both of these women, in addition to others, help to display different aspects of Elizabeth's character as the witty woman; however, for the purposes of my argument, this essay will only focus on the contrast established between Lydia and Elizabeth Bennet.

death of [Lydia] would have been a blessing in comparison of this” (Austen 252). Lydia’s decision tarnishes her reputation and, more importantly, it jeopardizes her sisters’ chances for marriage; if Lydia were not officially married, it would be social taboo to marry one of the other Bennet daughters. Lydia consequently provides an example of what Elizabeth could have become if she entirely disregarded societal requirements for feminine behavior.

The juxtaposition between the witty woman archetype and the woman who falls from grace, whether it be direct or unwitting, reinforces that Beatrice and Elizabeth are situated in a position just above characters who extend their power outside the limits of their society. Where Lydia, and to some extent Margaret, serve to “test the limits of our tolerance for feminine assertiveness,” Beatrice and Elizabeth in comparison seem to know their places and never push any boundaries too far (Park 105). Elizabeth’s negative counterpart, Lydia, runs away with a man she has not married; in comparison, Elizabeth honestly, but cordially rejects Mr. Collins’s proposal (and Mr. Darcy’s first proposal). Elizabeth reinforces that she is unwilling to marry for the sake of wealth or social status—she only accepts Darcy once she believes they can serve as equals. Accordingly, she never appears overly transgressive in her truthful evaluation of marriage partners. Beatrice’s negative counterpart, Margaret, is implicated in the greater scheme of shaming Hero, whereas Beatrice plainly vocalizes a desire not to marry. Thus, Beatrice is bold in her rejection of suitors, yet still maintains a virginal image and thus is not ostracized by her community. The witty woman archetype rebels against her society, but never goes as far as to make the audience question whether or not her actions are truly justified.

In light of Park's initial claim that the witty woman 'tames herself,' it is finally most important to specify why Beatrice and Elizabeth are not tamed. These women fundamentally demonstrate that they, like their masculine counterparts, make compromises to establish equality—specifically where equality is not men 'winning' over women or women 'winning' over men, but when men and women come into a social situation evenly matched. This equality is highlighted by the differing outcomes of Darcy's multiple proposals. After initially declaring his love for Elizabeth, Darcy questions, "Could you expect me to rejoice in the inferiority of your connections? To congratulate myself on the hope of relations, whose condition in life is so decidedly beneath my own?" (Austen 168). Despite also asking for her hand in marriage, Darcy's initial pride and high value of social class prompt him to insult Elizabeth's family and, consequently, she refuses his proposal. Elizabeth's reaction and consequent declaration that "[he] could not have made [her] the offer of [his] hand in any possible way that would have tempted [her] to accept it" displays that she is unwilling to marry—and thus settle—for rude and insulting behavior (168).

Darcy's second proposal at the end of the novel illustrates a change in both characters. When he explains to Elizabeth that he realized he loved her, he declares, "I cannot fix on the hour, or the spot, or the look, or the words, which laid the foundation. It is too long ago. I was in the middle before I knew that I *had* begun" (322). Darcy's dialogue—specifically his focus on his relationship with Elizabeth, rather than his earlier focus on the low social status of her family—demonstrates his growth over the course of the novel: in desiring to start a relationship with Elizabeth, he is required to sacrifice some of his pride. In turn, Elizabeth is required to

acknowledge her initial prejudices toward Darcy, noting, “my behaviour to *you* was at least always bordering on the uncivil” (322). Instead of attempting to exhibit dominance over one another, both Darcy and Elizabeth make concessions— Elizabeth’s power is consequently derived not from having resisted Darcy’s initial proposals, but rather in proving she is not willing to settle for less than a certain standard. Likewise, Beatrice emphasizes that when she marries Benedick it is only because they are equal peers. After initially criticizing Benedick, stating he would be a pernicious suitor, Beatrice reciprocates his eventual declaration of love. In justifying their union she tells him, “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” (5.4.94-96). Though her statement displays sarcasm in stating she will marry Benedick to ‘save his life,’ Beatrice enforces that by marrying him she is not conceding power.

Beatrice and Elizabeth’s inability to be tamed highlight the central achievement of the witty woman: by forcing both themselves and their masculine counterparts to compromise and thereby become suitable for marriage, these women are establishing their power within society. Beatrice and Elizabeth utilize their capacity for wit and verbal sparring to show their true abilities to contend with masculine and authoritative figures in the texts. The dynamic and spirited qualities that epitomize the witty woman are also accentuated in her juxtaposition with counterparts: the witty woman and her masculine counterpart serve as catalysts for one another, displaying equality in their words and actions; and her female counterparts serve as societal reflections, emphasizing that this equality is a true balance between being inactive and being socially unacceptable. While the variations between the two women demonstrate shades of

difference within the witty woman archetype, both successfully present an acceptable rebellion to their societies—these women push, but never break, the social confines established within their respective texts. Beatrice and Elizabeth prove themselves to achieve equality within their societies and thereby produce a new archetype of female heroine.

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