

**“Father, As It Please You”:
The Problems of Patriarchy in *Much Ado
About Nothing***

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In his renowned comedy, *Much Ado About Nothing*, Shakespeare sheds a critical light on the many failings of the authoritarian patriarchal structure of Renaissance society. By exploring the theme of honor and the unreliability of appearances, the play examines the significant discrepancies between societal treatment of men and women in early modern England. In doing so, the play exposes the ways in which the patriarchal system that endows men with greater privileges merely because they are male ultimately fails to ensure justice for those excluded from the masculine hierarchy.

Much Ado repeatedly calls attention to the deficiencies of England’s patriarchal system through its depiction of the problems created by the inconsistent standards of honor set in place for early modern men and women. For the male characters of the play, the concept of honor is closely linked to each man’s ability to construct and maintain for himself an appearance of social dignity and respectability among his peers, whether it be due to social status, military

achievement, virtuous behavior, or some other factor. Consequently, a man must always be “consciously keeping up appearances, patrolling social perimeters, and fabricating civility” if he is seeking to build and preserve his good name (Greenblatt 1397). An inherent difficulty with a system so dependent upon outward appearances, however, is that appearances are not always the best indicators of reality. Beatrice points this out when, upon being told by a messenger that Benedict is “stuffed with all honorable virtues,” she skeptically retorts: “But for the stuffing—well, we are all mortal,” implying that despite his honorable reputation, Benedict is still susceptible to human frailty (1.1.45-6, 47-8). While Beatrice’s comment is intended as a personal jab at Benedict, it also suggests an understanding that the outward appearance of honor may not always be reliable since beneath each seemingly virtuous exterior lies a flawed human who is just as capable of virtue or vice as any other person. In this way, Beatrice’s statement suggests that a person’s honor—regardless of sex—should be judged by their actions rather than by hearsay or mere reputation.

The potential for contradiction between the appearance and reality of honor Beatrice hints at is perhaps best exemplified in the play by the character of Don John, who, though a self-professed “plain-dealing villain,” is nevertheless respected by other male characters as an honorable gentleman for much of the play (1.3.26). In the first scene, for instance, when Don Pedro and Don John have just arrived in Messina, they are greeted by the governor, Leonato, who says to Don John: “Let me bid you welcome, my lord, being reconciled to the Prince your brother. I owe you all duty” (1.1.127-8). Although Don John has just been subdued after leading an unsuccessful rebellion against his brother Pedro, Leonato nevertheless readily accepts him as a gentleman worthy of respect merely on the grounds of his princely status and outward reconciliation with Pedro rather than upon any substantial demonstration of trustworthiness. Thus, even though John has been

known to “toil in frame of villainies” and proceeds to wreak havoc throughout the play, by feigning the appearance of honor and associating himself with other men perceived to be honorable, he is able for much of the play to occupy a relatively respectable place within the male hierarchy of Messina (4.1.187).

Another problematic aspect of male honor within Elizabethan society that is showcased in *Much Ado* is its dependence upon female chastity. Since, within the early modern patriarchal societal structure, the tracing of male lineage was of utmost importance to the preservation of the male hierarchy, male honor became necessarily tied to men’s ability to ensure the paternity of their children by also ensuring the fidelity of their wives and daughters. To be cuckolded by a woman was an enormous blow to a man’s dignity, and in *Much Ado*, the prevalence of cuckoldry jokes “points to a larger cultural picture in which men share a sense of vulnerability because they have only a woman’s word for the paternity of their children” (Cook 187). This vulnerability is suggested in the first scene of the play when Leonato welcomes Don Pedro and his company into Messina. The brief exchange that follows between the two characters and Benedict is revealing of the “intense male anxiety about female infidelity” that permeated Renaissance culture (Greenblatt 1397):

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

LEONATO. Her mother hath many times told me so.

BENEDICT. Were you in doubt, sir, that you asked her?

LEONATO. Signor Benedict, no, for then were you a child.
(1.1.84-8)

In this conversation, Leonato acknowledges that his only source of confirmation that he is Hero’s father is the word of her mother, but he then jokes that he need not doubt the truth of her testimony since Benedict was not old enough when Hero was born to have posed a

sexual threat. While this playful exchange occurs within the context of good-natured banter among male peers, it provides an early example of the male concern regarding female fidelity which becomes a central focus of the rest of the play. At the same time, the passage also highlights the play's depiction of a societal perception of chastity as a specifically feminine virtue. Since Leonato's jesting so casually implies that Benedict is no longer incapable of causing men to become cuckolded by their wives, it also suggests an attitude toward male promiscuity that is starkly different from the attitude toward that of females. Whereas unchaste behavior among women is viewed as an enormous threat by the male characters of the play, the same behavior among men seems to be regarded with dismissal or perhaps even acceptance. By representing this inconsistency in the social standards for men and women so early in the play, Shakespeare sets the stage for the problems which these inconsistencies inevitably produce as the drama unfolds.

The societal standard of honor for men in *Much Ado*, with its ties to masculine virtues, cultivation of male connections, and exertion of power over women's purity, is strongly contrasted by the standard for women, which propounds silence, submission, and chastity. Within the strict patriarchal structure of Renaissance society portrayed in the play, the character of Hero constitutes the ideal female who exemplifies each of these qualities, her main function being "to meet or reflect others' expectations of what women are supposed to be" (Cook 191). Indeed, Hero serves as the embodiment of chastity and "maiden modesty" throughout the play, and in contrast to her cousin Beatrice, Hero is silent and submissive, even – and perhaps especially – when her fate is being decided by the men around her (4.1.177). When her father, Leonato, for example, indicates that she is to accept Don Pedro's offer of marriage should he "solicit [her] in that kind" (2.1.57), and again later when he offers her in marriage to Claudio instead, her silence serves as

a “golden and virtuous” signifier of submission that “clearly marks her out as the modest, dutiful daughter” (Sales 82). Hero consistently complies with whatever is expected of her, even going so far as to agree to help the men of the play trick Beatrice into believing Benedict is in love with her—stating that she “will do any modest office ... to help [her] cousin to a good husband”—and thereby urge Beatrice toward acceptance of her assigned role as a female in a male-dominated society (2.1.331-2).

Whereas the system of honor established by the patriarchal order within which the play takes place offers men opportunities to attain respect and exert some of level of power and influence, however, it offers neither empowerment nor protection to women. Although Hero demonstrates flawless conformance to the feminine ideals of her society, when she is falsely accused by Don John of being sexually “disloyal” to Claudio, she “of all persons, who more than any has bowed to conventions, yet ... on that account is treated only with the greater cruelty” (3.2.87, Smith 36). By conforming to a standard of honor which necessitates her complete subjugation and vulnerability to male authority, she is left with no means of defending herself when her honor is questioned.

This problem is exacerbated further by the fact that, as a woman, she is subject to much harsher punishment for her alleged transgressions than that to which a man, if found guilty, would be subject. When Hero is slandered at the climax of the play, Leonato says of her accusers: “If they speak but truth of her, / These hands shall tear her. If they wrong her honor, / The proudest of them shall well hear of it” (4.1.188-90). The stark contrast between the two punishments Leonato describes in his declaration is telling of the grave disadvantage of women in a system which unabashedly caters to men. Whereas Hero, whose honor is bound to her chastity because she is a woman, is faced with the threat of violence or death for even being suspected of

unchaste behavior, Borachio—the man with whom Hero was accused of compromising her purity—receives no comparably serious punishment, and the men who carelessly make such serious accusations against Hero are threatened with no more than a scolding.

The disadvantaged position of women within male-dominated early modern society is further exhibited in *Much Ado* by the character of Beatrice, who, in contrast to Hero, struggles to resist the constraints put upon her by the patriarchal forces of her community. In defiance of the feminine ideal to which Hero subscribes, Beatrice is neither silent nor wholly submissive. When Leonato discusses his plans to arrange an advantageous marriage for Hero, for instance, Beatrice boldly remarks that while Hero's duty is "to make curtsy and say, 'Father, as it please you,'" she should instead—if she wishes not to accept her father's demands—"make another curtsy and say, 'Father, as it please me'" (2.1.44-5, 46-7). Beatrice herself initially dismisses the notion of marriage, knowing that "a married woman must put her integrity at risk by submitting herself to a man," and since she, unlike Hero, does not bear the heiress's burden of continuing her father's lineage, the pressure put upon her to be "fitted with a husband" is not necessarily insurmountable (Greenblatt 1401, 2.1.48-9). Nevertheless, Beatrice's attempts to challenge the norms of her society which she sees as unjust do not escape disapproval as even Hero criticizes her behavior, stating that "to be so odd and from all fashions, / As Beatrice is, cannot be commendable" (3.1.72-3).

Beatrice herself seems to demonstrate an understanding of the futility of her efforts to oppose the limitations placed on women in her society, and her comment to Don Pedro that she "was born to speak all mirth and no matter" (2.1.291-2) serves as a wry statement on her fate as a woman not to be taken seriously by the men around her, even when she voices poignant criticism of problematic "masculine values" and the "ineffective, narcissistic courtiers" by whom she is surrounded (Sales

116). In the end, both Beatrice and Hero “have parts to act for their male audiences: the one to amuse and abuse with her wit, the other to gratify with her presence” (83). Through its depiction of this grim reality, the play demonstrates how women in Renaissance society — whether they adhere to the feminine ideals constructed by men or resist them — are rendered voiceless by an unjust system of unquestioned male authority.

Ironically, although the male characters of the play zealously defend and pride themselves on their honor, they repeatedly conduct themselves with far less honor than the women over whom they deem themselves superior. Leonato, for instance, demonstrates a troubling propensity to be easily swayed without properly investigating the truth of a claim. When, early in the play, he is told a rumor by his brother Anthony that Don Pedro wishes to woo Hero, Leonato immediately acts upon the erroneous report without verifying the information, stating that he “will acquaint [his] daughter withal, that she may be the better prepared for an answer, if peradventure this be true” (1.2.18-20).

Similarly, when Hero is later slandered by Don John, Don Pedro, and Claudio with accusations of promiscuous behavior, Leonato believes the accusations without any evidence, reasoning: “Would the two princes lie, and Claudio lie, / Who loved her so that, speaking of her foulness, / Washed it with tears? Hence from her. Let her die” (4.1.150-2).

Assuming that the honorable reputations and apparent sincerity of Hero’s accusers are enough to validate their charges against her own flawless reputation, Leonato carelessly denounces his daughter — ready even to forfeit her life — for the sake of his honor, being “unable to believe that his male guests, particularly such distinguished ones, could tell a lie” (Sales 64).

Furthermore, even when Leonato expresses grief over his daughter’s denunciation, his focus remains fixed primarily upon himself as he “makes ... much ado about how the accusation threatens his own self-important view of himself” (Sales 97). When Leonato

bemoans that the source of his disgrace is his own daughter, he refers to Hero in markedly possessive terms, calling her “mine, and mine I loved, and mine I praised, / And mine that I was proud on, mine so much / That I myself was to myself not mine...” (4.1.134-6). Leonato’s repetition of *mine*, *I*, and *myself* throughout this speech reflects not only an early modern view of women as property to be possessed, but also Leonato’s self-absorbed preoccupation with how Hero’s degradation reflects back upon his own honor, which—from all indications—he values more than his daughter’s life.

The narcissistic concern with appearances Leonato demonstrates here recalls an exchange, at the opening of the play, between Leonato and a messenger who has come to announce the forthcoming arrival of Don Pedro and his soldiers in Messina following a victorious battle. When Leonato inquires about the number of men lost in the conflict, the messenger responds that the losses were “But few of any sort, and none of name” (1.1.6). The messenger’s dismissal here of the deaths of low-ranking soldiers as inconsequential, as well as Leonato’s subsequent participation in this dismissal when he praises Don Pedro’s ability to “[bring] home full numbers,” serves as an early—and troubling—indicator within the play that the male characters’ preoccupation with appearances tends to supersede any concern for those lower than themselves within the hierarchy (1.1.7-8).

Like Leonato, both Claudio and Pedro—though they are said to have “the very bent of honor”—conduct themselves less than honorably on a number of occasions throughout the play (4.1.184). When Don John approaches them with lies of Hero’s infidelity, both men, “[p]resuming ... that woman is frail, ... spontaneously assume Hero is guilty” and, feeling “an urgent need to avenge the slight to their own self-image,” ruthlessly go out of their way to publicly shame her—and, by association, her father—in “the most public way possible” at the proposed time of her wedding to Claudio (Findlay). Likewise, when

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Hero claims her innocence, insisting that she knows no more “of any man alive / Than that which maiden modesty doth warrant,” Claudio ironically disregards his own charge to “Let every eye negotiate for itself / And trust no agent” by choosing to believe Don John over the virtuous Hero despite John’s history as a traitor and deceiver who, having blatantly lied to Claudio earlier in the play by telling him that Pedro intended to woo Hero for himself, “ought to have forfeited any claims to be a reliable witness” (4.1.176-7, 2.1.159-60, Sales 64).

The questionable behavior of the male characters in these instances stands in stark contrast to the courageous behavior which Beatrice exhibits. As Roger Sales points out, while the men in *Much Ado About Nothing* “make much ado about loyalty, it is [Beatrice’s] unswerving loyalty to Hero which makes the deepest impression, as well as providing the most lasting criticism of courtliness” (117). Indeed, while most of the supposedly honorable men of the play irrationally condemn Hero without investigating the possibility of her innocence, it is Beatrice who stands up in Hero’s defense and vouches for her character. Nevertheless, even when Beatrice’s testimony that “until last night / [She] ha[d] this twelvemonth been [Hero’s] bedfellow” (4.1.146-7) contradicts Don John’s description of Hero as “every man’s Hero” (3.2.89) who had had, as Don Pedro states, “vile encounters ... / A thousand times in secret” (4.1.92-3), she is ignored while “Don John is believed because he is a man” (Sales 64).

In Beatrice’s subsequent outburst against this injustice, she calls out Claudio’s dishonorable treatment of Hero and highlights the larger problems of undeserved male authority within her society:

Oh, that I were a man for his sake! Or that I had any friend would be a man for my sake! But manhood is melted into curtsies, valor into compliment, and men are only turned into tongue, and trim ones, too. He is now as valiant as Hercules that only tells a lie and swears it. I cannot be a

man with wishing. Therefore I will die a woman with grieving (4.1.310-16).

The frustration Beatrice expresses in this speech rings with “the anger of impotence” as she acknowledges the fact that the constraints placed upon her for her womanhood leave her powerless to protect her cousin (Clamp 39). Moreover, her critical assessment of the men in her society and their vain preoccupation with appearances highlights the injustice bred by a societal structure which tramples upon women while upholding the power of undeserving men and “pseudo-courtiers” (Collington 299). By juxtaposing Beatrice’s valorous defense of Hero’s honor with the foolish and narcissistic behavior of the men around her, the play depicts “a struggle in which humane feminine qualities ultimately supersede inadequate masculine values,” thus emphasizing the weakness and deficiency of a system which endows authority and privilege on the basis of sex rather than merit (Cook 186).

In a similar way, the powerful men of the play are made to appear even more ridiculous by the character of Dogberry, the bumbling constable who serves as an instrument of Shakespeare’s satire on the excesses of male vanity and courtliness. Like the majority of men in the play, Dogberry demonstrates a distinct sense of prideful self-importance. When Borachio, one of Don John’s henchmen, insults Dogberry, the constable indignantly responds by cataloging the accoutrements of his own supposed gentility, declaring:

I am a wise fellow, and which is more, an officer, and which is more, a householder, and which is more, as pretty a piece of flesh as any is in Messina, and one that knows the law, go to, and a rich fellow enough, go to, and a fellow that hath had losses, and one that hath two gowns and everything handsome about him (4.2.71-6).

Through this comically vain and lengthy tirade, Dogberry “participates in and parodies the masculine concern with controlling signification,

particularly that which relates to himself," and, in doing so, demonstrates the absurdity of the male obsession with self-image that the play seems to critique (Cook 200).

Furthermore, when Dogberry and his incompetent crew of watchmen ultimately manage to uncover the truth of Don John's treachery and Hero's innocence, thus enabling Hero to restore her honor, the irony of their successful execution of justice is emphasized by its juxtaposition to the failure of self-assured and purportedly honorable men such as Pedro, Claudio, and Leonato, whose "wisdoms," as Borachio points out, "could not discover [what] these shallow fools have brought to light" and whose irrational and subjective judgments nearly destroyed the life of an innocent woman (5.1.219-20). Thus, the fact that an obvious simpleton such as Dogberry proves to be more efficient in administering justice than the most powerful and honored men of Messina heightens the absurdity of the other male characters' ostentatious yet hollow displays of honor and social superiority, and through the character of Dogberry, Shakespeare contributes yet another layer to the play's rich criticism of excessive male pride and superficiality.

In the end, *Much Ado about Nothing* reveals a good deal about the shortcomings of early modern England's authoritarian patriarchal structure. Through its combination of comedy and subtle satire, the play exposes ways in which a system that favors men and subjugates women merely on account of their sex not only fails to deliver justice but also victimizes those not endowed with aristocratic male privilege. Consequently, although the play concludes with a conventional restoration of social order, it nevertheless challenges this order by bringing attention to the problems created by unquestioned authority, and in doing so, it subtly urges viewers to become aware of such injustices within their own society.

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