

Gender difference and vulnerable masculinity in the world of Messina in “Much Ado About Nothing”

Syeda Afsana Ferdousi¹

Abstract: *Responding to the centrality of sexual conflict in Much Ado About Nothing, Carol Cook reads the play as a struggle in which humane feminine qualities ultimately supersede ‘inadequate masculine values [1]. The setting of Much Ado About Nothing is in Messina, but Messina is not just a courteous Paradise of masques dance and a banquets. In Messina men and women have a notably different mode of thinking, different system of loyalties, and particularly different social place and function. The two worlds are fighting with each other and ultimately woman’s world dominates in the play.*

Key Words: *Gender, Sexual conflict, woman’s world, vulnerable masculinity, dominate.*

Introduction:

We can know a great deal about the place of gender difference in the life and language of *Much Ado About Nothing*’s Messina by looking at the most persistent theme in the witty discourse of the play’s male character-that of cuckoldry. The cuckold jokes begin when Leonate asked whether Hero is his daughter replies ‘Her mother hath many times told me so’ (1.1.105) and with Benedick’s closing advice to Don Pedro “get thee a wife, get thee a wife”. There is no staff more reverent than one tipped with horn (v.iv.122-24)- an absolute equation with cuckoldry. The tirelessness with which these men return to such jokes suggests an underlying anxiety that is present when the play opens and that has not been dispelled by the resolution of the plot’s various complications. Leonatos casual remark about Hero’s mother is a witty circumlocution of the sort that dominates the sophisticated small talk of Messina. The very conventionality of the comment, though 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. A man may be a cuckold; it is suggested and not aware of his horns.

This anxiety about women’s potential power over men is particularly apparent in Benedicks’ self-consciously misogynistic banter in the first scene, where he airs some of his anti romantic doctrine for the others.

1 Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, University of Information Technology and Sciences (UITS). E-mail: afsana.ferdousi1975@gmail.com

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"... I will not do them the wrong to mistrust any. I will do myself the right to trust none, and the fire is (for which I may go the finer) I will live a bachelor"(I .i.205-210)

Marriage forces a man to "hang his bugle in an invisible bold rick" This somewhat obscure metaphor seems to be a concentrated expression of the masculine fears about feminine power in the play.

The social world of *Much Ado's* Messina seems rather precariously founded on a denial of its most pervasive anxieties, and its potential for violence is triggered when the repressed fear of the feminine and all that woman represents is forced into consciousness by Don John's machinations. Messina, the most sophisticated and urbane society in all Shakespeare's comedies, is also the most confined. Social and sexual roles are firmly established and the inhabitants are acutely conscious of them. 'It is the place where woman becomes a cipher', the target of unconscious fantasies and fears and is dangerously vulnerable to the representations and misrepresentations of men as the main plot of *Much Ado About Nothing*' bears out [2]

To note the rigidity of this world is not to suggest the Messina lacks charm. Its aristocratic characters demonstrate the most elaborate courtesy; formality does not make their manners less genial and they move through their elegant social patterns with an almost choreographic grace yet beneath their easy charm, their wit and conviviality, the characters are evidently anxious, and afraid of betraying spontaneous emotion, afraid of exposing themselves to one another. Messina is much concerned with its carefully preserved surfaces. We hear about "cloth O' gold... down sleeves, side sleeves, and skirts" (III. Iv.19-21); about Benedick's metamorphosis in strange disguises (III. ii. 32-33); about "slops", doublets, rebates, gloves, and hoards; about Dogherry's two gowns; "about the deformed thief fashion"-the rhetorical figure overhead by Messina's night witch, in which minds "the thief, Deformed" takes on a remarkably vivid personality and criminal record. (III -iii-130-31)

Just as the Messinans talk about dress, they talk about talking. They are highly conscious of verbal style. Benedick and Beatrice are known their "Skirmish of wit"[I.i.63] if they are married "but a week". Leonate predicts "they would talk themselves mad"(II.i.353-54)We hear about the speed of Beatrices' tongue, about "gulps and sentences and paper bullets of the many words" who is "not Of brain" about the "ill word" that may "empoison liking" about Don John, who is "not of many words"(I.i.145)

Entering into the social intercourse of Messina entails dressing well and talking well, and in a way these modes of decorous behavior serve similar functions.

Early in the play, Benedick withdraws from the banter of Don Pedro and Claudio saying "Nay ,mock not. The body of your discourse is sometimes guarded with fragments, and the guards are but slightly basted on neither"(I .i.285-87). The character use their wit to cover their emotional nakedness and avoid exposure. Discourse in Messina is aggressive and witty; real wounds are dealt in the "merry war" between Benedick and Beatrice, in which Beatrice "speaks poiniards, and every word stabs" (II.i.247-48). Because of its capacity to inflict wounds, language- especially wit- is wielded both as (a) weapon and as shield.

The construction of femininity within an economy of representation governed by the phallus a construction in which women mirror masculine identity by their own lack. The women in *Much Ado* demonstrate different ways in their entrapment within the contradictions of this system of difference, for ironically it is the docile Hero, rather than her sharp tongued cousin, who is the primary focus for masculine anxieties . Like Benedick, Beatrice adopts the role of "profess'd tyrant" to the opposite sex (I.i.164), satirizing masculine pretensions with agile wit. To Hero, she remarks tartly on patriarchal authority; "yes faith, it is my cousins' duty to make curtsy and say; Father, as if please you. And like Benedick, she makes cynical pronouncement on romantic love and marriage.

"--- the wedding, mannerly-mordent ,as a measure full of state and ancientry , and then comes repentance, and with his bad legs falls into the cinquepace faster and faster , till he sinks into his grave"(II.i.57-67)

Beatrices' ironic comments on men and marriage, and her passionate outburst against Claudio in the first scene of Act IV, have led some critics to regard her as the champion of a "feminine principle" and as a kind of proto feminist [3]. Yet Beatrice's ostentatious flouting of conventional sexual roles is often only a concession to them at another level, and instead of challenging Messina's masculine ethos, she participates in its assumptions values. In the opening scene, she mocks Benedicks' soldier ship:" I pray you, how many hath he killed and eaten in these wars? But how many hath he kill'd? For indeed, I promised to eat all of his killing" (I.i.30-37). On the messenger's remarking that Benedick is a "good soldier too". She quibbles "And a good soldier to a lady. But what is he to a Lord?"(I.i.53-53).

Beatrice tacitly accepts her culture's devaluation of "feminine" characteristics of weakness, dependence, vulnerability- and sees conventionally masculine behavior as the only defense against them. She usurps the 'masculine prerogatives of language' and public wit, speaking poiniards as an escape from feminine silence of inarticulate expression of emotion[4]

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Jean E. Howard sees Beatrice's view of the world as not like that of others in the play. Her response to the revelation about Hero reveals she does not accept the misogynist dictum that all women are whores. She refuses Don John's assimilation of Hero to stereotype of where but she knows that her voice cannot triumph over the patriarchal authority. This is why she is driven to demand that Benedick "kill Claudio"(IV.i.285).

Of course, at this juncture another ideological fissure opens in the play. When Benedick and Beatrice are depicted as standing out against marriage, they figure a challenge to the social order. When led to confess love for one another, they take up their places within the gender order. But pretty clearly for Don Pedro their doing so was not supposed to threaten the patriarchal system. The wife in the Messina society is supposed to be a tamed bird, submissive to her husband's hand, and the bonds between men were not seriously, to be disturbed as we see in Claudio's offer to marry and then promptly to escort Don Pedro on the next stages of his journey. He may be about to become a husband, but that seems not to disturb the primacy of his role as attendant upon the Duke." But, ironically, the bond with a woman does disrupt Benedicks' bond to nun as Jean E. Howard observes.[5]

Hero represents another kind of problem. Here the contradictions consist of a tension between the manifest representation of her character (which according to Carol Cook) is quite uncomplicated and one dimensional and her latest significance, which is evident in the effects she produces in others. Minimally drawn, with few lines, she is less a character than a cipher, or a mirror to the other characters. She is represented as conventionally feminine; meek, self-effacing, vulnerable, obedient, seen and not heard, she is a face without a voice. In the world of Messina, Hero's role is to meet or recollect others' expectations of what women are supposed to be (as Beatrice does not) and paradoxically, therefore, to represent a powerful threat. Hero's nothing invites noting her blankness produces marking, and the ambiguity of this action occurs not only in the play but also in the critical commentary. Marilyn French describes Hero this way, "As a non character, the obedient and silent Hero amplifies the in law (i.e. subordinate) feminine principle at its most acceptable: but like Bianca in *The Taming of the Shrew*, she wears the disguise society demands of her, but harbors other thoughts under her impeccable exterior"[6]

Jean E. Howard provides a moral of the case of Don John. She thinks that Don John is successful in his mission because the men of Messina believe him rather than their women she sees the villainy of Don John in this way " a character's logical focus on Don John as origin of evil can obscure the extent to which the assumptions about women upon which his trick depends are shared by other men

in the play". Many men including Hero's own father surprisingly conclude that she has merely been impersonating virtue. In short, Don John lies about Hero, but his lie works because it easily passes in Messina as a thoughtful reading of women [7].

Another crucial aspect which Jean E. Howard observes is that the identity of Don John is not only the villain but he is also the bastard brother of the play's highest ranking figure. Moreover, the very fact that Don John is bastard, his origin implicates women in crime. As Harry Berger writes "... Don John is testimony both to his fathers' prowess and to his mother's sin- a by product of the frailty named women" (1982,311)

Don Pedro, the legitimate brother is the plays' chief dissembler. It is he who employs deception in his plan to woo Hero for Claudio and he who then goes on to arrange the play lets by which Benedick and Beatrice are made to fall in love. Don Pedro may promote a union between social equals and thereby strengthens the existing social order but he does not sanction a marriage across social class.

Interestingly the friar, another powerful figure in Messina, cannot directly contest the stories enclosed by Don Pedro. He must work by indirection; knowing all the while that his fictions may not altar the fixed views of Claudio and Don Pedro and that Hero may live out her life in a convent. In this context Dogberry and Verges, the powerless fools, rescue the world of Messina from the evil which nobody sees breaking into their lives. Dogberry and Verges cannot see but they catch hold of the right persons in a wrong context. So, called witty higher rankers of the society fails in this case, as Borachio says to Don Pedro, "... I have deceived even your very eyes. What your wisdoms could not discover these shallow fools have brought to light" (V. i. 217) Jean E. Howard says that the powerless Dogberry and Verges to rescue the world seems all the more a kind of wish fulfillment or a magical thinking ; an attempt to reconcile the recognition of power's power to determine truth with a view of a world where truth stands outside it's discursive existence in a social field.

Catherine Belsey suggests that Shakespearean comedy can be read as disrupting sexual difference. Calling into question that set of relations between terms which proposes as inevitable an antithesis between masculine and feminine men and women [8].

Conclusion:

In my writing I dealt with the sexual difference in *Much Ado About Nothing* and tried to show how vulnerable the Messina society is. In presenting Hero as a king of cipher, *Much Ado* reflects its patriarchal heritage; yet it is Hero's very

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blankness that allows the revealing explosion to occur the play's explicit representation of masculine fantasy and delusion trades on , and partakes, of, the process of explores . In the final scene, Don John is being defeated, the male characters recur to their verbal aggression and particularly to their cuckold Jokes (V. iv. 43-51). That the jokes retain their original force indicates that Messina's masculine ethos survives unchanged. The play began with the defeat of Don John, and with defeat of ends, leaving us to wonder, if we care to.

References

- [1] Carol Cook, (1986), "The Sign and Semblance of the Honor": *Reading Gender Difference in Much Ado About Nothing*, PMLA Vol-101. 102, March, 1986, pp. 185-200.
- [2] Ibid, pp. 187-190.
- [3] Ibid, pp.187-190
- [4] John Dover, (1991), *Shakespeare's Happy Comedies*, New York, Columbia University Press.
- [5] Jean E. Howard, (1987), *Renaissance and theatricality and the politics of gender and rank in Much Ado about Nothing*, New York and London: Methuen, 1987, pp. 163-187.
- [6] Op, cit, 201, Carol Cook, refers to Barbara Everell and Marilyn French, who note that Beatrice' does not break decorum" describes her as "a Rosalind who has taken a step further into freedom--- a force for anarchy- democracy- in Messina" (131)
- [7] Op, cit, pp. 187
- [8] Catherine Belsey, (1985), "Disrupting sexual difference: meaning and gender in comedies" from John Drakakis edited, *Methuen*, pp.166-168.