Virtue and Suspicion

In a comedy about falling in love and pledging oneself to matrimony, the men of *Much Ado about Nothing* spend much of their time and energy fretting about female chastity and faithfulness. The shadow of male jealousy is a recurrent presence in *Much Ado*, mostly in the form of cuckold jokes and horn imagery, even as the play’s holiday spirit allows the romantic intrigues to progress and the comic high-jinks to build.

Cuckolds were popularly portrayed in Elizabethan England as long-suffering men whose wives’ infidelities left them vulnerable to society’s taunts. To add insult to injury, a cuckolded husband was depicted as growing horns on his head—the mark of a whipped and tamed man. Consequently, Don Pedro teases the avowed bachelor Benedick with the menace of horns, promising that “In time the savage bull doth bear the yoke.”

However, the locker-room humor of male bonding that Don Pedro, Benedick and Claudio indulge in has its dark side, hinting at profound fear of being cuckolded and humiliated by women. When Hero is introduced to the company of soldiers in Act I, her legitimacy immediately becomes the subject of a side conversation amongst the men:

Don Pedro: I think this is your daughter.
Leonato: Her mother hath many times told me so.
Benedick: Were you in doubt, sir, that you asked her?

After all, Leonato implies, he has only his wife’s word that Hero is, in fact, his child and not another man’s.

Claudio’s own anxieties about Hero’s virtue make him a perfect target for Don John’s malicious schemes. *Much Ado* is one of Shakespeare’s “jealousy” plays—a group that includes *Othello* and *The Winter’s Tale*—where a man is fooled into believing his beloved is dallying with another. Stories of chaste women falsely accused of unfaithfulness are found in multiple sources, including the story of Susanna and the Elders in the biblical Book of Daniel. Shakespeare himself drew on two popular Renaissance accounts, Ludovico Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* and Matteo Bandello’s *La Prima Parte de le Novelle*.

The dark thread of jealousy

Claudio is only the first of a number of Shakespeare’s men gripped by unjustified masculine fantasies of female betrayal, a group that includes Angelo in *Measure for Measure*, Troilus, Hamlet, Othello, Posthumus in *Cymbeline* and Leontes in *The Winter’s Tale*. Significantly, many of these presumed betrayals hinge on feminine speech. After all, Hero is not accused of having intimate relations with Borachio. Claudio instead demands to know, “What man was he talked with you yesternight / Out at your window betwixt twelve and one?”

In Renaissance England, the silence of the woman betokened bodily purity, where a closed mouth implied a closed body. For Hero to have been talking with a man other than her father or her fiancé at such a suspicious hour, the implication goes, she must have been as loose with her body as she was with her speech.

Ironically, the loquacious Beatrice never has her chasteness called into question, despite her logorrhea. Instead, it is the unerringly obedient and largely silent Hero who becomes the target of slanderous speculation and a very public denunciation. Even her shocked silence is read
by her grieving father as confirmation of her guilt: “Thou seest that all the grace that she hath left / Is that she will not add to her damnation / A sin of perjury. She not denies it.”

How to untangle this knot of insinuation and anxiety? For the wronged Hero, her exoneration comes through a feigned death, a symbolic journey to the underworld that is all too real for the doomed Desdemona in Othello but turns out more happily for Imogen in Cymbeline and Hermione in The Winter’s Tale.

What are we to make of Claudio? Certainly Shakespeare gives us a romantic suitor who is faint of heart and faith. Claudio, in all fairness, is young, anxious for his elders’ approval, unsure of himself and hypersensitive to embarrassment. Before he can claim his second bride, however, Claudio must learn to have faith in her integrity where once he lacked faith in Hero. In learning to set aside his unfounded anxiety about Hero’s assured virtue, Claudio can also be redeemed by the power of love and comedy.

By the end of Much Ado about Nothing, the horns of cuckoldry have become tipped with gold and the “savage bull” has been transformed into lusty Jove carrying away his adored Europa—as long as the men don’t let their imaginations run away with them.—Lydia G. Garcia

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