

Claudio's Song

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"Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more.
Men were deceivers ever,
One foot in sea and one on shore,
To one thing constant never.
Then sigh not so, but let them go,
And be you blithe and bonny,
Converting all your sounds of woe
Into Hey nonny, nonny..."

- - Balthasar's song, from *Much Ado About Nothing*, Act 2, scene 3, lines 60-68.

One of the central themes in William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* is anxiety. More specifically, the deep-seated anxiety of the men that they will be "emasculated," rendered powerless and exposed to ridicule upon entrusting their hearts - and reputations - to women. Although Balthasar's song pegs men as "deceivers" and "frauds," the subtext of the play would seem to suggest that as far as Shakespeare's audience was concerned, the opposite is true.

There are two main romantic pairings in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Claudio and Hero, and Beatrice and Benedick. Claudio is a young lord just returned from war who becomes enamored with the virginal Hero, daughter of Leonato, the governor of Messina. Benedick, his friend and compatriot in battle, is rather more cynical regarding romance; in fact, outwardly at least, he's a confirmed misogynist, engaged in an ongoing war of words with the equally dyspeptic Beatrice. It's plain to see as the play unfolds, however, that it is Claudio who bears the most mistrust for women in general, and the vagaries of love in particular.

For instance, Claudio is incredulous when the prince Don Pedro, his other close companion in arms, affirms that Hero is "well worthy" as a maid and therefore fit for marriage. "Well worthy," (or "modest," to use Claudio's word) translates as "unsullied and untried." To Claudio, this is any woman's finest virtue, proof-positive that she will belong to him and him alone. The only problem, and the one that will cause the most consternation for the inexperienced suitor and those around him, is that female chastity, or the lack of it, cannot really be measured with the naked eye. Hence, Claudio's response - "You speak this to fetch me in, my lord" (1.1, line 213) - is indicative of his uncertainty. This crucial sense of doubt will plague him throughout the ensuing acts, and nearly be the ruin of the young lady he claims to love.

Claudio is both immature and insecure, never a profitable mix in a Shakespeare play. He wants people to tell him what to do, as if he weren't quite sure himself, and far too often accepts the words of others without question - the sure mark of someone in need of self-confidence. The first time we meet him, he's seeking Benedick's assurance that Hero is worth pursuing (1.1). When he attempts to extract an affirmative answer - "I pray thee, tell me truly how thou lik'st her" - Benedick retorts, "would thou buy her, that you inquire after her?" Claudio's response to this jab is most telling. Rather than shoot back an indignant reply to the suggestion that he regards Hero as an object to possess, a pretty bauble, his rejoinder instead is, "Can the world buy such a jewel?" (line 174) This answer is the first hint that Claudio isn't so much in love with Hero (in fact he barely knows her) as he is with the *idea* of Hero. To Claudio, she's not a human being with thoughts and feelings, she's the perfect accessory. More, because Hero is young, beautiful and essentially a stranger, she is a blank slate upon which to project his insecurities. And project he does.

In Act 2, Scene 1, Leonato holds a masked dance, and it is there that Don Pedro has promised to woo Hero in Claudio's name. Awaiting her answer, Claudio is met by the prince's villainous half-brother, the bastard Don John, and two of his followers, Conrade and Borachio.

Seeking to derail the prospect of romance between them, Don John tells Claudio "my brother... is enamored of Hero. I pray you, dissuade him from her; she is no equal for his birth." (lines 157, 158) He and Borachio then go on to assert that Don Pedro intends to marry Hero that night. Claudio's only query of these unknown men who besmirch his beloved's reputation and assail Don Pedro's honor is "How know you he loves her?" (line 160), and the reply - "I heard him swear his affection" - appears to satisfy his curiosity. This is the sum total of his cross-examination, and the fact that it goes no further illustrates Claudio's almost unbelievable gullibility and willingness to engrave events with the nomenclature of his own fears. After Don John and his minions leave, Claudio says,

'Tis certain so. The Prince woos for himself.
Friendship is constant in all other things
Save in the office and affairs of love;
Therefore all hearts in love use their own tongues.
Let every eye negotiate for itself
And trust no agent; for beauty is a witch
Against whose charms faith melteth into blood.
This is an accident of hourly proof,
Which I mistrust not. Farewell therefore Hero!

(2.1, 166-176)

He doesn't immediately seek out Don Pedro or Hero to ascertain the veracity of Don John's claims, but simply takes them as truth. Though Claudio soon learns that Don Pedro did, as promised, secure Hero's hand in marriage for him, he fails to grasp the nefarious designs of Don John or to call him to task for them. Instead, the same doubts he agonized over only moments before are summarily forgotten ("Lady, as you are mine, I am yours. I give away myself for you and dote upon the exchange," 2.1, 293, 294). Forgotten, that is, until much darker accusations are laid against Hero, and then they reemerge, with a vengeance.

The great fear that preoccupies the male characters of *Much Ado About Nothing* is the fear of cuckoldry, to be known by all as the husband of an adulterous wife. The text is littered with

references to it, showing up often in the verbal banter that takes place between Benedick, Don Pedro, and Claudio. In Act 1, Scene 1, for example, Benedick, the most vocal of the lot, opines,

"That a woman conceived me, I thank her; that she brought me up, I likewise give her most humble thanks. But that I will have a recheat winded in my forehead or hang my bugle in an invisible baldrick, all women shall pardon me. Because I will not do them the wrong to mistrust any, I will do myself the right to trust none; and the fine is, for the which I may go the finer, I will live a bachelor. " (228-235)

The operative word here is *trust*. Behind Benedick's breezy dissertation lies the anxiety of "castration" at the hands of the female. If a woman sleeps around on her husband, the implication is that he is either too stupid or too weak to control her, and thus rightly adjudged a fool by his peers. More to the point, if a husband cannot exercise control over his wife, then he is powerless before her, and this is what the men of Messina (and of Shakespeare's day) fear most of all. Further, a man who permits himself to be cuckolded is at the mercy of his spouse - just as a little boy is, in important respects, "at the mercy" of his mother. Do the actions and reactions of Claudio bespeak an unconscious belief that it is women, and not men, who hold the real power, and is this perception so threatening that means must be devised to defend against it, whether conscious or unconscious? Benedick deals with his insecurity within the relatively safe confines of witty discourse, but Claudio is not so wise.

The night before he is to wed Hero, Claudio (along with Don Pedro) is again taken aside by the scoundrel Don John, this time offering to show her engaged in amorous conversation with another man as proof of infidelity. The "other man" is actually Don John's pal Borachio, who woos Margaret, Hero's attendant, as if she were Hero herself. Claudio takes the bait once more, and as quickly as his confidence in Hero's honor was lost and then restored the first time, that's as long as it takes to evaporate the second time it's tested. At the wedding ceremony the next day, Claudio refuses to marry Hero, giving her hand back to a stunned Leonato. He then proceeds to vilify her in

front of the entire wedding party, heaping scorn upon scorn and rejecting every appeal toward reason:

"Behold how like a maid she blushes here!
O, what authority and show of truth
Can cunning sin cover itself withal!
Comes not that blood as modest evidence
 To witness simple virtue? Would you not swear,
All you that see her, that she were a maid,
By these exterior shows? But she is none:
She knows the heat of a luxurious bed.
Her blush is guiltiness, not modesty."

(4.1, 31-41)

Claudio's diatribe is so merciless that Hero swoons, and with that, he takes his leave. In his absence, the friar, or priest, suggests to Leonato a plan to redeem her good name; counterfeit that Hero is dead, so that remorse may work itself on the conscience of Claudio, and perhaps in the interim, the real truth can be uncovered.

In reasonably short order, it is, when the principal's learn that "Don John is the author of all," and Hero and Claudio are married at last. In between, however, he believes her dead, and it is further illustration of his immaturity, indeed, bizarre indifference, that Claudio actually makes light of Leonato's (feigned) grief (5.1, 116, 117). It isn't until he learns he's been duped again by Don John that he shows any outward signs of contrition. At that point, and still under the illusion that Hero is dead, Claudio apologizes profusely to Leonato (5.1) yet simultaneously bids for absolution with the line, " Yet sinned I not but in mistaking" (268). What is significant about this justification is that it reveals how little Claudio actually knows of Hero's character; if he really knew the young lady he was betrothed to marry, or had an inkling of her true nature, he would not have been so easily deceived. More than this, Claudio's actions in the wake of his "mistaking" are those of an individual profoundly lacking in faith. Rarely does he pause to consider that the slanderous allegations leveled

against Hero might be false, and never - never - does he exhibit the slightest bit of trust or belief in her.

To give credit where credit is due, Claudio does agree to hang an epitaph on what he thinks is Hero's tomb, thereby taking his share of the blame (5.4, 1-8). Eventually, as noted, he and Hero marry (but not before Claudio consents to wed Leonato's "niece," yet another example of how quickly the self-centered young man can shift gears), and "all's well that ends well," superficially, anyway. Has Claudio learned anything from the affair? Is he chastened by the experience, perhaps a little wiser? Has he undergone any kind of metamorphosis at all? The answer, it seems, is no. His actions following the revelation that "Hero yet lives," are given over to brandishing a love note written by Benedick to Beatrice, in an effort to embarrass the two into marriage (which succeeds), and, ironically, making a joke about marital infidelity (5.4., 110-114). The jest only underscores how static his personal development has been. This guy has learned nothing, not a thing.

Which brings me back to Balthasar's song. While my initial point was that the lyrics actually reflect *male* fears about *female* deception rather than the other way around, I would expand that notion in light of my analysis of Claudio. If one substitutes the words "insecure" and "shallow" for "deceiver" and "fraud," the song explicates his character nicely. It also entreats, "...then sigh not so, but let them go, and be you blithe and bonny" - words, I trust, Hero would heed. Claudio is a young man in need of a swift kick in the ass; maybe leaving him would be the best thing for the both of them...

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