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Music as an Illustration of Emotional Structure in Shakespeare's

Much Ado About Nothing

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Professor Don Meyer

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Although many of William Shakespeare's plays feature music to some degree, academic discussion rarely focuses on music's features and significance within his plays. In 1955, John H. Long published *Shakespeare's Use of Music*, a series of essays in which he addressed the unfortunate dismissal of this critical element of Shakespeare's productions.¹ Unfortunately, in the 60 years since Long published his work, musicologists have neglected music's function in Shakespeare's plays to illustrate or guide the narrative, be it as appropriate atmospheric music from the time or music that Shakespeare wrote for a particular play, such as "Sigh No More" from *Much Ado About Nothing*. Even Long neglected some crucial elements of Shakespeare's use of music—most notably the importance of "Sigh No More" to guide the Beatrice and Benedick relationship and, more generally, the play's focus on gender politics. However, the significance of music within Shakespeare's productions extends beyond the playwright's initial intentions. Through an analysis of a sampling of composers' arrangements of "Sigh No More," it becomes apparent that various settings of the same song alter the audience's perception of the play's portrayal of infidelity. Furthermore, just as "Sigh No More" drew attention to the interaction between gender politics and infidelity during Shakespeare's time, more recent settings continue to draw attention to this double standard by perpetuating or diverging from the hypocritical message that the song originally conveyed.

Prior to embarking upon his analysis of individual plays, Long begins *Shakespeare's Use of Music* with a brief summary of common musical practices in Renaissance-era theater. After briefly describing the types of songs that were commonly used on stage, Long introduces some

¹ John H. Long, *Shakespeare's Use of Music* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1955).

of the common dramatic uses for music. Long also determines the dramatic uses for instrumental music, although he qualifies his observations with the acknowledgment that little evidence survives to support his interpretations.²

In his analysis of *Much Ado About Nothing*, Long summarizes each scene that explicitly or implicitly contains music, drawing several conclusions about the use of music as a dramatic device. He identifies instances of music as a transitional device between scenes, explores Shakespeare's choice to include a performer as a named character within the company, and dissects the use of music within the two dance scenes that occur.³ Most importantly, however, he determines that there is "an over-all musical structure within the play," which intentionally corresponds with the emotional shifts in the plot.⁴

Long's assessment of music's role in *Much Ado About Nothing* corresponds fairly well with other analyses of the uses of music in Renaissance theater, as well as with other assessments of the value of music in Shakespeare's plays specifically. Nino Pirrotta and Elena Poveledo reveal many similar findings in their book *Music and Theatre from Poliziano to Monteverdi*. They track musical trends from the early to late Renaissance, including the increasingly common belief during period that "music should be 'subservient to the emotions and thoughts' expressed by the words [in a play]."⁵ In *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Christopher R. Wilson provides a more thorough explanation of how Shakespeare specifically used music across his plays, dividing his uses into categories of "stage music, magic music, character music, and atmospheric music."⁶ Stage music is the category that serves a functional purpose, encapsulating

² Ibid. 1-43.

³ Ibid. 120-37.

⁴ Ibid. 137.

⁵ Nino Pirrotta and Elena Poveledo, *Music and Theatre from Poliziano to Monteverdi*, trans. Karen Eales (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) 36.

⁶ Christopher R. Wilson, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, s.v. "Shakespeare, William."

diegetic music that is specifically necessitated by or announced in a scene on stage; in Long’s analysis of *Much Ado About Nothing*, this would apply to the dance scenes from Act 2, scene 1 and Act 5, scene 4, and to Act 2, scene 3, in which a character sings on stage. However, by Long’s assessment, stage music might serve greater importance: Wilson defines “atmospheric music” as being that which is “concerned with such intangibles as mood, tone and emotional feeling,”⁷ which would correspond directly with Long’s conclusion that the music conveys an overarching emotional structure.

James Wey’s “‘To Grace Harmony’: Musical Design in *Much Ado About Nothing*” is a conscious response to Long’s analysis of *Much Ado*.⁸ Wey elaborates on Long’s observations about the overarching emotional structure by noting that music specifically occurs in circumstances of “harmony and happiness and love among the principal characters.” For instance, as soon as Don John’s plan succeeds, music disappears and does not return until Hero’s name is cleared. As a result of this structure, Wey concludes that the music firmly supports the interpretation that Hero and Claudio are ultimately the intended protagonists of *Much Ado*.⁹

Although Wey provides a valuable analysis Long’s more generalized remarks about the emotional function of the music, both Wey and Long leave unanalyzed the emotional significance “Sigh No More,” which is one of the key uses of music within the play. Specifically, Long remarks that “[‘Sigh No More’] seems to have little dramatic purpose,”¹⁰ while Wey presents “Sigh No More” as an illustration of Shakespeare’s connection between music and love.¹¹ These authors miss the opportunity to address how this particular song directly alludes to

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ James J. Wey, “‘To Grace Harmony’: Musical Design in *Much Ado About Nothing*,” in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Much Ado About Nothing*, ed. Walter R. Davis (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969).

⁹ Ibid. 80-2.

¹⁰ John H. Long, *Shakespeare’s Use of Music*, 127.

¹¹ James J. Wey, “‘To Grace Harmony’: Musical Design in *Much Ado About Nothing*,” 83.

infidelity, a topic which is one of the most prominent themes of the play from Act 2, scene 2 onwards. As a result of its portrayal of infidelity, “Sigh No More” ultimately becomes one of the most significant pieces of music within the overarching emotional structure that both Long and Wey present.

There is one distinct difference between the portrayal of fidelity in the song and in the greater context of the play: *Much Ado About Nothing* focuses on the perceived infidelity of a woman, whereas “Sigh No More” describes the infidelity of men. When Balthasar first sings “Sigh No More,” the lyrics seem discordant with the emotions of the characters, in part because this cheerful scene follows directly after Don John and Borachio develop their plan to trick Claudio into believing that Hero is unfaithful (2.2.33–49). That said, the tone of Act 2, scene 3 is primarily positive, since Claudio and Hero have decided to be married, and Claudio, Don Pedro, and Leonato have turned their attention to convincing Benedick that Beatrice has confessed her love for him (2.3.64–79). As result, “Sigh No More” addresses the subject of infidelity but presents it specifically as something inevitable and justifiable, even verging on humorous.

Of course, the issue of infidelity is not limited to the context of this humorous scene, as Claudio, later on, proceeds to publicly disgrace Hero because he believes that she has been unfaithful (4.1.31–113). Meanwhile, Beatrice and Benedick’s touching love revelation is somewhat overshadowed by Beatrice’s exasperation with Hero’s situation, as she focuses specifically on the distinction between what she can do for Hero as a woman compared with what Benedick could do for Hero as a man (4.1.315–338). In the wake of these events, “Sigh No More” takes on a more significant meaning because it draws more attention to the double standard that Beatrice only allows herself to hint at in her conversation with Benedick. “Sigh No More” characterizes male infidelity as inevitable, encouraging women to put on a good face

when their husbands have affairs because ‘it has always been this way,’ yet Claudio quite consciously destroys Hero’s life and the other characters perceive his reaction as well within reason.

Shakespeare never explicitly agrees or disagrees with this sexist double standard—though Beatrice’s reaction might suggest that Shakespeare is preparing to dispute the expectations of the day, many scholars regard Hero’s reunion with Claudio at the end of the play as evidence that the play is ultimately grounded within the patriarchal values that “Sigh No More” nonchalantly describes, a sentiment which Muhammad Ayub Jajja expresses explicitly in his essay “Women in Shakespearean Comedies: A Feminist Perspective.”¹² At the very least, Hero and Claudio’s marriage muddles the strength of Beatrice’s criticism of Claudio in Act 4, scene 1. Furthermore, as Harry Berger, Jr. observes in “Against the Sink-a-pace: Sexual and Family Politics in *Much Ado About Nothing*,” Don Pedro praises the song, and “his behavior throughout the play shows that ... in general he agrees with the sentiment. However playfully, he treats courtship as a military campaign.”¹³ As a result of Don Pedro’s part in both of the relationships that develop over the course of the play, this sentiment likewise leaves its mark on the couples.

However, although it is tempting to view “Sigh No More” as an affirmation of the patriarchal double standard, it is crucial that we acknowledge what Jajja granted even as he derided the female elements of the play: “[*Much Ado About Nothing*] brings to light the double moral standards prevailing in the Elizabethan society.”¹⁴ And this observation is particularly significant if we also take into account that “Sigh No More” is one of the songs that Shakespeare

¹² Muhammad Ayub Jajja, “Women in Shakespearean Comedies: A Feministic Perspective,” *Journal of Educational Research* 16.1 (2013): 117-118.

¹³ Harry Berger, Jr., “Against the Sink-a-pace: Sexual and Family Politics in *Much Ado About Nothing*,” in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Much Ado About Nothing*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1988), 28.

¹⁴ Muhammad Ayub Jajja, “Women in Shakespearean Comedies: A Feministic Perspective,” 117.

specifically penned himself. He specifically chose to present this binary, with unfaithful but guiltless men on one side and innocent but slandered Hero on the other, and he chose to incorporate the blithe, cheerful “Sigh No More” into an earlier scene of the play in order to ensure that its shadow lingered throughout both the dramatic and emotional structure of the narrative.

“Sigh No More” certainly bears significance throughout the play, but its patriarchal sentiment primarily hangs heavy over Beatrice and Benedick’s relationship. Though the subject of infidelity was certainly crucial for Beatrice and Benedick in Act 4, scene 1, there is also justification for the interpretation that various lines from the earlier acts of the play imply that Benedick was at some point unfaithful to Beatrice prior to the events of the play.¹⁵ Several scholars acknowledge the plausibility of this scenario; Ruth Nevo, for example, gives Benedick’s “roving eye” a fair amount of attention in her article “Better Than Reportingly.”¹⁶ “Sigh No More” takes on particular value in the emotional progression of the play if one embraces this interpretation, because it ceases to be a song that simply emphasizes the relationship between music and love or a song that holds no dramatic significance, as Wey and Long suggested. Instead, “Sigh No More” presents the audience – and, perhaps even more significantly, it presents Benedick – with a *remarkably* precise explanation of Beatrice’s emotional state at the beginning of the play. In a society that has consistently instructed her to regard a man’s infidelity as an inevitability, “Sigh No More” articulates the reaction that would be expected of Beatrice if Benedick was unfaithful: “sigh not so, but let [him] go / And be you blithe and bonny, / Converting all your sounds of woe / Into Hey, nonny nonny” (2.3.68–71). However, her attempts to disregard her love for Benedick and to smile through her pain in the wake of his infidelity

¹⁵ Notable lines include 1.1.37–41 and 1.1.142–143.

¹⁶ Ruth Nevo, “Better Than Reportingly,” in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Much Ado About Nothing*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1988), 10.

prove to be entirely ineffective from her very first line in the play, when her first instinct is to ensure that Benedick will be returning home safely from war (1.1.30–31).

Though primarily illustrated by implicit remarks in the play, if we perceive “Sigh No More” as a specific representation of Beatrice’s emotional journey through the play, it would explain why Beatrice only allows herself to “speak all mirth and no matter” (2.1.323), as well as why she is so quick to crumble in the wake of Hero’s public shaming. We have already seen that she is unable to conceal her concern for Benedick (1.1.30–31), and that she is unable to subdue her anger with him for betraying her (1.1.142–143), but when Claudio publicly disgraces Hero, the sexist double standard of infidelity becomes very real to her. Although Shakespeare does not necessarily support or oppose this standard, in the latter portion of Act 4, scene 1, Beatrice certainly opposes it, and her exasperation is meant to elicit sympathy from both Benedick and the audience. It is largely because of the explicit contrast between “Sigh No More” and the narrative of *Much Ado* that Shakespeare successfully conveys that emotional blow.

Many composers have created their own settings of “Sigh No More,” although the original has been lost. *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare* provides a fairly thorough list of examples of classical choral compositions, though it is far from exhaustive.¹⁷ However, for the sake of analysis, I will examine three settings, expanding my focus from those in *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare* in order to also include compositions created for theater and film productions of *Much Ado About Nothing*. Just as Shakespeare failed to take a direct stance on this hypocrisy, composers seem reluctant to draw more attention to the issue in their own settings of the piece both in and outside the context of *Much Ado About Nothing*. That said, a majority of the common trends – namely composers’ favoring of female singers and simple, consonant melodies and harmonies – ultimately affirm the song’s forgiveness of male infidelity.

¹⁷ *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare*, s.v. “Sigh no more, ladies.”

Ralph Vaughan-Williams composed one of the most representative choral versions of “Sigh No More.” Composed for women’s chorus and full orchestra, Vaughn-Williams’ “Sigh No More, Ladies” immediately stands apart from the original text because it is sung by women. This choice raises a question about the implications of the gender binary that the song presents, because the named male singer is in part how Shakespeare positions “Sigh No More” so squarely in opposition with Beatrice’s sentiments from Act 4, scene 1. When sung by a women’s chorus, the discussion of this double standard becomes even more complex because a full group of women are now asserting that it is simply in men’s nature to be unfaithful. In Vaughan-Williams’ setting, the women ultimately emphasize this sentiment in particular when the sopranos echo “deceivers ever” after the altos sing the line in the melody, as illustrated below.¹⁸



Figure 1: “Sigh No More, Ladies” by Ralph Vaughan-Williams (measures 13-17).¹⁹

Many other elements of “Sigh No More, Ladies” follow this same pattern. Vaughan-Williams also concludes the piece with a reiteration of the line “men were deceivers ever” motive and elongates the “hey nonny nonny” phrase in order to emphasize the cheerful refrain. It could be argued that Vaughan-Williams provided the piece with *some* ambiguity by composing it in a minor key; however, his choices to modulate to the parallel major in the refrain and to

¹⁸ Vaughan-Williams also mimics this motive to the same effect on the line “constant never.”

¹⁹ Ralph Vaughan-Williams, *In Windsor Forest No. I: The Conspiracy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1931).

resolve to a Picardy third at the end of piece both illustrate that “Sigh No More, Ladies” is ultimately meant to be positive. His song also appears outside of the context of *Much Ado About Nothing*, which eliminates Beatrice’s voice as an explicit counterargument against the sentiment in the lyrics. As a result, this setting normalizes male infidelity to a much greater extent than the original “Sigh No More”—arguably even to such a degree that it overrides the initial contention between reasonable and unreasonable infidelity that Shakespeare established.

Joss Whedon composed all of the music for his 2012 film version of *Much Ado About Nothing*, including an arrangement of “Sigh No More.” His production immediately strays from Shakespeare’s original intentions with the piece by incorporating it into the party scene in Act 2, scene 1, where its primary function is in the context of a montage (though it is briefly diegetic).²⁰ As I previously discussed, “Sigh No More” has particular potential to be emotionally significant for Benedick if he and Beatrice had a past relationship. Given that Whedon chose to explicitly portray them in this context, it is somewhat peculiar that he removed the song from Act 2, scene 3, because this change eliminates an opportunity to elicit an emotional reaction from Benedick. Thus, “Sigh No More” inherently must serve a different function in the emotional structure of the play, before we even begin to analyze the musical elements of Whedon’s setting.

The timbre of “Sigh No More” corresponds well with the rest of Whedon’s score, which consists primarily of brief themes performed by solo instruments or small ensembles, but the guitar has the most significance throughout. As a result of its role as both a harmonic and melodic instrument within “Sigh No More,” the guitar ultimately creates a sense of unity between “Sigh No More” and the rest of the music in the film. This unity makes the piece strong in the context of a montage but ineffective as a means to foreshadow to the subject of infidelity. Instead, this arrangement is ultimately an opportunity for Whedon to showcase his sister-in-law,

²⁰ *Much Ado About Nothing*, directed by Joss Whedon (2012; Santa Monica: Lionsgate Pictures, 2013), DVD.

Maurissa Tancharoen, as a singer. It would be reasonable to imagine that some significance from the lyrics would ultimately have to come to the forefront as a result of the focus on the singer. However, Whedon subverts many of the natural rhythms in “Sigh No More,” particularly at the end of phrases between words like “deceivers ever” and “constant never” (see Figure 2 below). As a result of these rhythmic choices, Whedon’s setting ultimately muddles the lyrics.



Figure 2: “Sigh No More” by Joss Whedon (approximately measures 9-16)²¹

The laid-back instrumentation and lack of emphasis on the lyrics work well to emphasize the visually mesmerizing quality of the masquerade scene. However, these features are also the primary reasons that “Sigh No More” is not likely to raise questions about whether the lyrical sentiment is wrong or potentially hypocritical. The relationship between “Sigh No More” and the emotional structure of the play does not disappear entirely, but Whedon certainly disregards many of the nuances to “Sigh No More” in order to draw the audience into the party montage. This change ultimately diverges *remarkably* from the song’s original function because he eliminates any opportunity for Benedick to engage with the lyrics and makes it far more difficult to the audience to engage with them, as well.

The performance of “Sigh No More” in the 2011 West End production of *Much Ado About Nothing* initially seems to follow Shakespeare’s intentions more closely, at least insofar as

²¹ Ibid.

it is sung by Balthasar in the same scene and context as the original. Composed by Michael Bruce, the song has few features worth noting—as the approximate transcription below illustrates, the piece follows a standard harmonic structure, and the melody is simplistic and primarily step-wise, making this setting reminiscent of a standard folk song. The most compelling element of the chord structure is the recurring iii chord, but this harmony only appears as a passing second inversion chord, which minimizes the effect of the chord to some degree. Because the piece itself is so simplistic, it is both literally and figuratively upstaged by Benedick’s physical comedy as he eavesdrops.²² As a result, the song most likely exists for many viewers as a mellow complement to Benedick’s hungover dramatics, highlighting the playful tone of the scene rather than foreshadowing the negative elements of the narrative.



Figure 3: “Sigh No More” by Michael Bruce (approximately measures 9-16)²³

That said, their performance choices provide the song with a more nuanced meaning because of the characters’ interactions with the lyrics. The lovesick Claudio embraces the song and channels his passion for Hero into it, both with his rapturous sigh as Balthasar strums the opening chords and with his enthusiasm as he sings along with the first refrain.²⁴ However, unlike the other two settings that I’ve described, Claudio’s positive reaction does not contradict the initial intentions of the piece, especially when we also consider Benedick’s disparaging

²² *Much Ado About Nothing*, directed by Josie Rourke (London: Digital Theatre, 2011), *Digital Theatre* video.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

reaction to the song. As Claudio accompanies Balthasar on the refrain, Benedick scoffs before ironically mouthing along to the line, “hey nonny nonny.”²⁵ Although the simplistic setting of “Sigh No More” establishes the song’s place in the background, it is because the audience focuses on Benedick’s judgmental reaction that this production sets the stage for a more specifically sympathetic interaction with Beatrice in Act 4, scene 1 and a more equal relationship between them in general. Like Vaughan-Williams’ setting, this arrangement consequently takes a stronger stance on the issue of reasonable and unreasonable infidelity. However, by not allowing Claudio and Balthasar to more fully express a favorable sentiment, this setting from the 2011 production ultimately sets itself apart because it more heavily favors the perception that there is no justification for infidelity.

John H. Long and James J. Wey provide compelling analyses of the significance of music in the emotional framework of *Much Ado About Nothing*, but both authors ultimately neglect the true significance of “Sigh No More” to steer the overarching plot and to define Beatrice’s emotional characterization. Though Wey perceived the musical structure as contributing to the perception that Hero and Claudio are the protagonists of the play, “Sigh No More” actually positions Beatrice and Benedick in a place of stronger significance than either Wey or Long were willing to acknowledge. This interpretation also draws particular attention to the dissonance between the perception of men and women’s infidelity. Though some settings eliminate much of the preexisting significance of the song, many versions have accommodated or altered its message to varying degrees through both musical and performance choices. Regardless of the stance on infidelity that individual settings convey, they unite to support the argument that “Sigh No More” is far more valuable to the emotional structure of *Much Ado About Nothing* than Long and Wey were willing to acknowledge. Instead, the arrangement and placement of “Sigh No

²⁵ Ibid.

More” have a profound impact on a given production’s portrayal of the play’s central question of infidelity and gender politics.

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