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“To One Thing Constant Never”: The Male Characters of *Much Ado About Nothing*

In Act 2, Scene 3 of Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*, Balthasar charms his fellow characters with a song about the nature of men: “One foot in sea and one on shore, / To one thing constant never” (64-65). Though the listeners believe the musical interlude is simply for their entertainment, an important truth about male characters hides beneath the musical merriment. Balthasar’s song draws attention to a pattern of male inconsistency, displayed over and over during the course of the play. Two men in particular who hear Balthasar’s song, Claudio and Benedick, may well be Balthasar’s very lyrical inspiration: In nearly every scene, they change in mind or behavior. This is especially true when the two men’s interactions concern the women in the play, and, eventually, their inconstancy makes gender itself unstable.

Claudio, the most obviously irresolute character in the play, reveals his nature in Act 2, Scene 1. In this scene, readers learn with what little provocation Claudio’s opinion of his friends can change. He instantly believes any lie about betrayal, ready to swear off a friendship at a moment’s notice. Claudio had earlier agreed to let a disguised Don Pedro do the work of wooing Hero for him. Now, in Act 2, Scene 1, Don Pedro follows through with their agreed-upon plan. Don Pedro’s brother, Don John, reports to Claudio that Don Pedro has won the heart of Hero and that the two have sworn to marry (Shakespeare 2.1.136-170). Though this is exactly what Claudio and Don Pedro agreed upon in Act 1, Scene 1, Claudio instantly despairs. He believes Don Pedro “woos for himself” (Shakespeare 2.1.174), declares his friend inconstant (175-76), and regrets trusting him (179). Of course, Claudio forgets his unhappy sentiments and jealous disavowals when Don Pedro hands him Hero (Shakespeare 2.1.306). Here, Claudio first displays natural inclinations toward erratic behavior that will be seen again throughout the play: He is all

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too willing to interpret actions as betrayals; he believes whatever he is told without question; he is ready at all times to end relationships.

In the same scene, Claudio displays his inconstant nature in other ways as well—ways that concern women. Claudio's attitude toward Hero proves to be even more wavering than it was in Act 1, Scene 1 when his opinion of her needed validation (Shakespeare 162-63, 165) and he could not summon the courage to win Hero himself. In Act 2, Scene 1, when Claudio believes Don Pedro is wooing Hero for himself, Claudio expresses his sorrow not by declaring that he will fight for Hero's affection but instead by declaring, "Farewell, therefore, Hero!" (Shakespeare 2.1.182). Claudio lets go of what he desires in an instant, showing a complete lack of resolve. But this quick retraction of devotion is not entirely surprising because other evidence from this scene demonstrates that Claudio cannot decide what he thinks of Hero. Carol Cook notes that Hero was previously "modest" and "sweet" in Claudio's eyes (Shakespeare 1.1.165, 187, Cook 86). Suddenly, in Act 2, Scene 1, Hero possesses witch-like qualities and melts people's faithfulness into hot-blooded sensuality (Shakespeare 2.1.179-80, Cook 86). In Claudio's mind, then, Hero's womanly wiles are to blame for Don Pedro's unfaithfulness.

Claudio quickly changes his mind about Hero's honor again in Act 3, Scene 2. Don John accuses Hero of conducting an affair, and Claudio responds by voicing immediate and vehement suspicion of Hero. Claudio has no need for external confirmation before imagining aloud how he will punish his betrothed for her infidelities (Shakespeare 3.2.123-25). Though Claudio does decide to get concrete evidence of the affair for himself, he is far too suspicious to properly judge the veracity of this apparent proof. Claudio observes a woman, too far away to be identified and too shaded by the dark to be recognized, responding favorably to a drunkard's calls. In Claudio's

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mind, this clearly constitutes proof of Hero's betrayal. As is the case with Don Pedro in Act 2, Scene 1, Claudio has no problem making relationship-altering decisions based on hearsay and shoddy evidence. But unlike the circumstances surrounding Claudio's mistrust of Don Pedro, this time a woman's entire future could be ruined by his faithless and irresolute character.

With these specific incidents in mind, it becomes clear that the entirety of *Much Ado About Nothing* chronicles Claudio's immense struggle to make up his mind about Hero. In Act 1, Scene 1, he says Hero is modest and wants to marry her immediately, though he had known her before and apparently had no feelings for her (Shakespeare 1.1.297-298). He defends his hasty decision by explaining that, before, his "soldier's eye" was unable to look upon women with affection (Shakespeare 1.1.298). Now that he is a civilian, he can enjoy the luxury of falling in love. Yet, it is hard to take Claudio at his word as he continues to make impulsive decisions and have dramatic changes of heart throughout the rest of the play. In Act 2, Scene 1, Claudio believes the modest Hero turns into a sensual witch and then back into modest creature she was before. Then, as a result of questionable evidence, he sees her turned back into a harlot in Act 4, Scene 1, and shows no emotion upon hearing of his former fiancée's alleged death. Claudio, in fact, feels quite merry, asking to hear a few jokes (5.1.122-23). When Hero recovers her good name, Claudio is overjoyed to see her again. Five changes of heart about a female character, in five acts, serve as decent evidence of Claudio's irresolute character and suspicion toward women. He seems markedly mistrustful of these beings he believes are simultaneously "most foul" and "most fair" (Shakespeare 4.1.103).

The fact that Claudio cannot make up his mind is glaring—practically every page of *Much Ado About Nothing* reveals a new fluctuation. The other young male character in the play,

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Benedick, may appear steadfast enough, especially in comparison to Claudio. The only clear example of Benedick's wavering nature appears in Act 5, when he retracts his vow never to marry. If the argument for male inconstancy is left at that, however, it would be simple to refute; the female Beatrice, too, decides to marry despite her claim that she never would. Finding the difference between male and female constancy requires a closer reading.

A careful examination of Acts 1 and 2 reveals that the male Benedick and the female Beatrice could not have more different motivations for their actions in the play. Joost Daalder, literary critic, highlights evidence from the play that can lead to only one conclusion: Beatrice and Benedick had a past relationship that Benedick, a womanizing character, cruelly ended. Daalder first uses the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) to trace the meaning of the confusing name, "Signor Montano," by which Beatrice calls Benedick. Searching for "Montano" in the online version of the OED produces several related words and suggested definitions, one of which indicates Beatrice may be mockingly calling Benedick someone who often trades one lover for another (Daalder 522-23). But even more convincing evidence of this pre-history is nestled in an easily-overlooked passage in Act 2: "Indeed, my lord, he [Benedick] lent me it [his heart] a while...once before he won it of me with false dice" (Shakespeare 2.1.278, 280-81). This passage makes it apparent that Benedick and Beatrice had a romantic history before the play began; in pretending to love Beatrice, Benedick won her heart through false affection before he went on to date other women (Daalder 525). Therefore, the male and female characters could not be more different in their motivations for their similar actions in the play (Daalder 522). Beatrice's hostility toward Benedick is genuine; she is still hurt. Hence, Beatrice "grew cautious only as a direct result of his conduct" (Daalder 522), not because of, as Daalder says, a deep-

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seated fear of the opposite gender, or, as I say, an inconstant nature. Benedick loved and left Beatrice before the play began, and now, in Act 2, Scene 3, he loves her once more.

Once Benedick decides he loves Beatrice again, he dedicates himself to the woman with all his heart—for a moment, at least. In Act 4, Scene 1, he is anxious to prove his devotion to Beatrice: “Come, bid me do anything for thee,” he says (Shakespeare 288). But when Beatrice demands Benedick kill Claudio, Benedick immediately refuses. He then spends most of the scene trying to escape the responsibilities that accompany his hasty promise. In the end, Benedick changes his mind and agrees. He even goes as far as to, albeit with pale face, challenge Claudio to a duel. Then, Benedick changes his mind again and runs off without fighting (Shakespeare 5.1.193). An obvious pattern of inconsistency reveals itself through these interactions.

In a way, it is not only Benedick’s character that is ever-changing. Even his manliness is in flux. In the previously discussed passage in which Benedick challenges Claudio, Shakespeare describes him as pale or sick-looking (Shakespeare 5.1.130-31). Because Benedick is betraying a friend, this cowardly-seeming sign might well be excused. However, he also goes from wearing a beard to being clean-shaven (Shakespeare 3.2.45-47). Presumably he has heard that Beatrice would never marry a man with a beard (Shakespeare 2.1.29-31). But Beatrice also claimed she would dress a beardless man in woman’s clothes and said such a man would actually be “less than a man” (Shakespeare 2.1.37). Benedick’s embrace of his role as man also changes with his fluctuating resolve to fight or not to fight Claudio. Wanting someone to kill Claudio for her, Beatrice cries, “that I had any friend who would be a man for my sake!” (Shakespeare 4.1.317-18). Every time Benedick resolves or fails to fight Claudio, his adaptation of the role of man

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changes. Perhaps these observations lend themselves to a broader interpretation. The wavering nature of men in the play becomes the wavering nature of maleness, in general, in *Much Ado About Nothing*. The male gender itself, as a role, is unstable.

Male-gendered characters, and even gender itself, is ever-changing in Shakespeare's plays. *Much Ado About Nothing* is no exception. As both Claudio and Benedick exemplify, the irresolute and rash nature of the play's male characters can be seen in nearly every scene—especially those that involve women. Perhaps these characters are at least partially aware of this fact themselves: After all, it is Benedick who exclaims, “for man is a giddy thing, and this is my conclusion” (Shakespeare 5.4.108-109).

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