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Deception in *Much Ado About Nothing*

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*Much Ado About Nothing* is about right deception that leads to marriage and the end of deceit and wrong deception that breeds conflict and distrust. Proper deception, that of Benedick and Beatrice by Don Pedro and his friends, succeeds because Benedick and Beatrice are self-deceptive in their pretense that each is the last person the other would marry. Wrong deception, that of Claudio by Don John and Borachio, succeeds because Claudio is deceptively suspicious and faithless. Through Claudio, Shakespeare displays the power malice acquires when it appears respectable. Danger to social harmony comes not from Benedick and Beatrice nor from Don John, so obviously dishonest that he can fool only a fool; the dangerous one is Claudio, who conceals his suspicion behind a mask of virtue and fidelity. Deception depends on deception, and the double deceptions, reinforced by doubly significant images of eating, noting, fishing, and hunting, unify the play.

Two major difficulties in *Much Ado About Nothing*, the question of unity and the character of Claudio, periodically reappear to be resolved or unresolved by the critics. On the first problem, critical opinion has been divided. While some critics feel that there is an inartistic disharmony in the combination of Hero and Claudio with Benedick and Beatrice,¹ that the play's serious and comic plots are involved with each other rather than integrated,² that there is an "inconsistency of purpose,"³ or that the play as we have it represents a less than perfect revision of an earlier play,⁴ other critics see instead considerable skill in the combination of elements in *Much Ado*.⁵ Some critics grant the play a kind of unity by ignoring Beatrice and Benedick or Claudio, but

others have dealt with all characters in discovering a single theme. While all critics do not agree that the major theme is deception (some think instead that the play is primarily about such things as the uncertain course of true love or the significance of nothing), most do agree that deception or improper noting is an important factor in the progress of the action of the play.

The critics neglect to note, however, that deception in Much Ado is of two sorts. One deception leads to social peace, to marriage, to the end of deceit. The other deception breeds conflict and distrust and leads even Beatrice to desire the heart of Claudio in the market place. Wrong deception occurs when one trusts appearances and not one's intuition or "soul," when one depends on eavesdropping and circumstantial evidence instead of careful study, when one has too little trust in human nature. Right deception supports that trust. I want, in this paper, to describe the double deception in Much Ado About Nothing, to show that the play's major images, eating, hunting or angling, and noting, reflect the double theme by being themselves double in significance, and to place Claudio, one of the play's major problems, in this context of theme and image.

One major, proper deception in Much Ado, that of Benedick and Beatrice by Don Pedro and his friends, is pleasantly designed to end another deception, the pretense of Benedick and Beatrice that each is the last person the other would marry, in order to draw together two people who will nourish each other and society itself. Both Beatrice and Benedick seem strongly against romance and marriage. She "had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me" (I.i.132-133) and will have no husband until "God make men

"Paul A. Jorgensen, "Much Ado About Nothing," Shakespeare Quarterly, V (Summer, 1954), 287-295. In Much Ado says Jorgensen, we have "a dramatic, rather than expository, elaboration" of the significance of nothing: "Out of a trifle, a misunderstanding, a fantasy, a mistaken over-hearing, a 'naughtiness,' might come the materials for a drama..." (p. 295)
"All Shakespeare quotations are from The Complete Works of Shakespeare, ed. George Lyman Kittredge (Boston, 1936).
of some other metal than earth” (II.i.62-63). Her attitude deserves modification. Shakespeare's comic heroines (Rosalind, Rosaline, Viola) are often aware of the artificiality of romantic convention, but each heroine is nevertheless ready, as Beatrice soon is also, to listen to a man who swears honestly that he loves her. But Beatrice's deception is mainly self deception, for with her first words she reveals her concern for Benedick; she is already in love; her deception is not really deceptive except to one who notes superficially. Having helped arrange the marriage of Claudio to Hero, Beatrice reveals just how much she too would like to be caught in her nest: “Thus goes everyone to the world but I, and I am sun-burnt, I may sit in a corner and cry ‘Heigh-ho for a husband!’” (II.i.330-333) Beatrice, like Petruchio's Kate, is willing enough to be caught, but self-protective enough to avoid the shame of rejection.

Nor is Benedick truly deceptive, except to Beatrice. Although he likewise seems opposed to romance and marriage, sure that he will “live a bachelor,” everyone but Beatrice knows just how small the deceit needs to be in order to unmask Benedick. Even while Benedick chides Claudio because he “wilt needs thrust thy neck into a yoke, wear the print of it and sigh away Sundays” (I.i.203-204), we remember that Beatrice has called Benedick a “thruster” himself. Although Beatrice’s “thrust” has bawdy implications that Benedick's lacks, Beatrice's word is appropriate in Benedick's sense too, for Benedick, as the baiting scene shortly shows, is more eager than Claudio ever will be to thrust his neck into the yoke. For Benedick to vow not to love as Claudio does is a sensible vow, but not to love at all is an anti-social and anti-romantic vow that matches Beatrice's assertion that she would rather not listen to a man say that he loves her.

Don Pedro depends on Benedick's and Beatrice's self-deception in order to end that deception, for if Benedick and Beatrice were not deceptive in their dislike of each other, they would not be drawn together by a scheme like Don Pedro's. One deception, therefore, requires the other. For fullest comic effect, Don Pedro needs to know that his deception is less than deceptive. For that same comic effect, Benedick and Beatrice must each actually consider the other opposed to love and marriage in order that the moment of surprise, when each immediately believes that Don Pedro's bait is the truth,
may be as satisfying as it is. Leonato and Don Pedro play their parts well; they are expert hypocrites; but their hypocrisy is justified because it leads to social harmony. Luciana in The Comedy of Errors recommended just such hypocrisy to Antipholus of Syracuse: "'Tis holy sport to be a little vain / When the sweet breath of flattery conquers strife" (III.ii. 27-28). In Much Ado the holy sport is a carefully controlled deception that likewise conquers strife.

The other major deception, that of Claudio, depends, like Don Pedro's scheme, on a victim not being what he superficially appears to be. Claudio seems a noble fellow, one who "hath borne himself beyond the promise of his age, doing in the figure of a lamb the feats of a lion" (I.i.13-15), who, like Benedick and Beatrice, should better expectation. Instead, in his poor repayment of the trust others have in him, he is worse than expected.

The criticism of Claudio is a curiously mixed bag. At one extreme are those critics, like Thomas Marc Parrot, who condemn Claudio for his treatment of Hero: "It is, perhaps, too hard to call Claudio, as Swinburne does, 'a pitiful fellow,' but only in romantic comedy could such a character be at last rewarded with the hand of the lady he had so publicly slandered."10 A less severe judgment is furnished by Nadine Page, who finds Claudio "interested only in the financial aspect" (p. 742)11 and "reacting true to type in trying circumstances" (p. 744). Charles Prouty agrees: "the plain fact is that Claudio is not a romantic lover and cannot therefore be judged by the artificial standards of literary convention."12 He is instead a very careful and sensible young Elizabethan seeking a profitable marriage. Kerby Neill feels that the judgments against Claudio are "based more on what Claudio does than on the interpretation which the text puts on his actions."13 Francis G. Schoff, going further than most in salvaging Claudio's character, finds Claudio "conclusively and steadily an admirable hero on the evidence of the play

itself, with no other witness needed, then or now.”14

The Claudio in *Much Ado* seems not so consistent as Schoff or Prouty would have him be. In order to make Claudio “an admirable hero,” one must ignore (as Schoff does) what Beatrice has to say about the repudiation of Hero, or one must prove that Beatrice is unjust in her judgment. In order to make Claudio a villain, one must ignore the fact that he is, without irony, called noble and that he is a close friend of Benedick and Don Pedro (or one can, as John Palmer does, make Don Pedro less noble for being ignoble Claudio’s friend).15

The crux of the problem seems to be the nature of the Claudio-Hero relationship. If that relationship is a purely mercenary Elizabethan example of a young man seeking a “good” match, and if such a relationship is justified by the play itself, then Claudio is justly angry when he thinks that he is being forced into a bad bargain, and perhaps then even the public repudiation of Hero will seem “proper, and of an ‘established’ order of things.”16 On the other hand, if that relationship is more than merely mercenary, or if the repudiation is unjust in spite of the fact that it reflects Elizabethan practice, then Claudio’s mistrust and public rejection of Hero can hardly be “proper.” Kerby Neill feels that the problem “is the belief in the slander, not the subsequent repudiation of Hero” (p. 92), but it would seem that both are pretty serious if either one is.

The very bulk of the criticism that condemns Claudio’s treatment of Hero, both in his initial suspicion and in the cruel rejection, would seem to indicate that, in spite of Page and Prouty’s description of the Elizabethan attitude toward marriage as a business arrangement, Claudio is doing more than refusing to honor a contract. Walter N. King, even while he agrees with Page and Prouty that the Claudio-Hero relationship is more socially traditional than romantic, detects the flaw in that relationship and fault in the repudiation: “It is here that the social abnormality of aristocratic society in Messina is exposed once and for all for what it is—shallow and perverse application of a standard of behavior that is

both automatic and uncharitable." A code may be in effect during the repudiation, but that code, as Claudio defines it, is unsatisfactory—it breeds mistrust and disharmony: "Those who marry according to the philosophy of caveat emptor, like Claudio, are bound to be predisposed to sexual distrust" (p. 150); and Don John thrives on sexual distrust.

But another problem appears: the code is not the only factor in the Claudio-Hero relationship, for Claudio and Hero follow the conventions of romance as well as those of the arranged marriage. T. W. Craik points out that "the whole point of Benedick's comments is that Claudio loves according to the romantic tradition" (p. 303), even though the arranged marriage makes the Claudio-Hero relationship more complicated than romance alone would be. The fact is that Claudio and Hero have both an arranged marriage and a romantic attachment—the one does not preclude the other. But in each case, as Claudio falls in love with Hero's beautiful face but not with her feelings while Don Pedro arranges a profitable marriage, convention is excessively restrictive and sincere human feeling is deficient. However "proper" or conventional the repudiation may be, it violates another code of love, beauty, and trust that a romantic attachment between Hero and Claudio has established. However conventional that romantic attachment might be, it is, as Benedick points out, too easily silly and too easily selfish unless it includes a concern for more than a pretty face. In Shakespearian comedy, convention that has become restrictive, whether it be the law at the beginning of The Comedy of Errors and A Midsummer Night's Dream, the mercenary marriage in Much Ado About Nothing, or the artificial language of romance in Love's Labour's Lost and As You Like It, needs to become sufficiently flexible to allow for humanity. That flexibility is achieved in The Comedy of Errors when Aegeon is freed, in As You Like It when romance operates under the control of Hymen, in Much Ado when the arranged marriage enriches society, not just one man. Beatrice and Benedick indicate the modification that needs to take place in the Hero-Claudio relationship. Beatrice and Benedick, under the guidance of Don Pedro, likewise have arranged marriage and romantic attachment, but their relationship, unlike Claudio's to Hero, is character-

ized by sincere feeling and trust. They participate in the
conventions, although lamely (Benedick can find no rime
to “lady” but “baby”), but they are more concerned for Hero
and for each other than they are for convention.

Claudio effectively shows what happens when superficial
romance and selfish, suspicious social concern are combined.
His “love” for Hero is much too shallow to preserve him
from doubting both his friend Don Pedro and Hero. When
told that Don Pedro loves Hero, Claudio instantly believes
“’Tis certain so” (II.i.181). When Claudio wishes the Prince
“joy of her,” Benedick hardly believes that Claudio could
“think the Prince would have served you thus” (II.i.202-203).
Benedick calls Claudio a “poor hurt fowl! Now will he creep
into sedges.” The image makes Claudio the victim of Don
John; but also, by pun, the foul quality that must be purged.
With Hero, Claudio’s suspicion is again immediate and so
much in control of Claudio that he decides on Hero’s punish-
ment before he has witnessed her crime: “If I see anything to-
night why I should not marry her to-morrow, in the congrega-
tion where I should wed, there will I shame her” (III.ii.126-
128).

Claudio’s suspicion is exactly the characteristic that en-
ables him to fulfill his role in the play. Through Claudio, Much
Ado displays the power that malice acquires when it is allowed
to operate behind a respectable appearance. The greatest
danger to society comes not from Benedick and Beatrice, who
are very ready to increase the social harmony, nor even from
Don John, who is known to be a villain to all but one who
mistakenly decides that Don John is honest when he has
proved himself dishonest. The dangerous one is Claudio, who
conceals a huge and active suspicion behind a mask of virtue
and fidelity. One can anticipate Don John’s villainy; one does
not expect Claudio’s suspicion. If everyone were like the Friar
and Beatrice—disinclined to accept slanderous accusations
without clear proof—Don John would have no success what-
ever. Again, as with Don Pedro’s deception, the primary
scheme depends on a secondary deceit: Benedick’s and Beat-
rice’s distaste for each other has to be pretense for Don
Pedro’s scheme to work; Claudio’s faithfulness has to be
deceptive for Don John’s plan to succeed, a plan which is,
appropriately, not even Don John’s, but Borachio’s.

The consequence of Claudio’s lack of trust is the repudiation
of Hero. While, as Prouty shows, the repudiation would have been less offensive in Shakespeare's day than it is now, the fact remains that it could hardly have been completely inoffensive. Beatrice, in her impassioned demand for revenge, points out exactly the problem that we detect if we have watched or read the repudiation scene at all. Claudio is cruel, shamefully cruel. However well, according to some concept of "honor," Claudio may be acting in trying circumstances, he is not acting well according to the more general standards of human decency. T. W. Craik argues that Claudio is cleared of blame "by the facts that Don John (as villain) draws all censure on himself and that Don Pedro (hitherto the norm, the reasonable man) is also deceived" (p. 314). I would argue that the emphasis of the play is on Don John's inability to bite until someone else gets close enough to him and that Claudio is to blame for putting himself that close. Don Pedro's agreement with Claudio does not exonerate Claudio; rather, it indicates the spread of suspicion until someone notes evidence carefully, as the Friar does, and opposes that suspicion with trust. Craik says that Friar Francis becomes the "new point of reference" after Don Pedro implicates himself in error. Beatrice is surely part of that new point of reference too. She knows intuitively that Hero is innocent; the Friar adds to that intuition a careful study of the evidence. This combination of intuitive trust and careful observation seems to be the one that the play recommends.

Craik argues that Beatrice's "revengeful invective against Claudio . . . does not justify itself" (p. 314) because Beatrice is wrong in her judgment of Claudio's guilt. I agree that Beatrice is too passionate, too much inclined to help Don John's feast of malice to its conclusion, but Claudio is not, therefore, innocent. Beatrice recognizes exactly the problem: "O that I were a man! What? bear her in hand until they come to take hands, and then with public accusation, uncover'd slander, unmitigated rancour—O God, that I were a man!" (IV.i.305-309) Here as in Lear even a dog deserves better treatment than that. Claudio's fault is both his lack of trust that leads him to doubt Hero so easily and his lack of decency that leads him to accuse her so unfairly at that very moment when he should be most concerned for her. Yet, the

18Prouty, pp. 47, 62.
very magnitude of that accusation of Hero makes it more effective dramatically than a gentler accusation would be, for it better indicates the consequences of wrong deception, the social disruptiveness of a lack of trust. If Hero's shame were less, Claudio's fault would likewise be less; and the power that malice can have when it is allowed respectability would loom less large. The problem is not malice itself; that as Benedick points out and as the end of the play indicates, may be recognized for what it is. The problem is that Claudio, who should measure up to an expectation of nobleness, conceals beneath his noble appearance a lack of trust, a lack of soul.

Even at the moment that the success of the wrong kind of deception seems assured, however, its failure is evident, for the shameful result of Claudio's suspicion immediately awakens the decency of others and makes them observe carefully what Claudio has seen only superficially and inaccurately. While Claudio condemns Hero, the Friar and Beatrice assure themselves, on the basis of human evidence that Claudio ignores that Hero is guiltless. And, at the same time, Dogberry and Verges, apparently the most inept officers of law that one could ever fear to have, have in hand the originators of the deception, Borachio and Conrade. They have noted what Borachio and Conrade said; in this case noting ends the very mischief that noting began.

Possible confusion is usually limited in Shakespeare's comedies. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Theseus ordains that the festivities shall last only so long. In *Love's Labour's Lost*, all of the young men's scheme is foreknown by the ladies; thus they are armed to resist confusion. In *The Comedy of Errors*, chains and ropes rapidly bind those who would wander too far from social restrictions. In *Much Ado*, two of the villains are arrested before the accusation takes place; the villainy will come to light; the asinine Dogberry is required in order to keep it from coming to light too early and spoiling the dramatic intensity of the play.

The control that society finally exercises is shown not only by Dogberry but also by Don Pedro's earlier guidance of Beatrice and Benedick toward marriage. That earlier control serves as a pattern for the later handling of Claudio and Hero, who are likewise led into marriage by a deception that undeceives. Claudio shows what happens when society loses its tight control over the deceptiveness of individual members.
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of society; Beatrice and Benedick and later Hero and Claudio show the harmony that will occur when society, represented here by Don Pedro and Leonato, prince and father, regain that control.

The theme of deception is double in nature; the primary images, eating, fishing or hunting, and noting, that help carry that theme, reflect that doubleness. Beatrice, who would eat the heart of Claudio in the market place if she were a man, also feeds on the meet food of Benedick. One feast would satiate the appetite for revenge perhaps, but the other surely furnishes a nobler and a fuller satisfaction. Don John fishes for Claudio, and through him for Don Pedro, while Don Pedro angles for Benedick and Beatrice, but the two fishermen’s goals and methods are as disparate as are their own characters. The Friar, by closely noting Hero, assures himself that she cannot be false. Claudio, after noting from some distance Margaret playing Hero, decides that Hero cannot be true. Both the methods and results of the two notings are contradictory.

In spite of Benedick’s “excellent stomach” at the beginning of the play (I.i.52), Benedick and Beatrice at first feed the appetite that Don John feels most, the appetite for conflict. Beatrice says that her disdain will not die while “she hath such meet food to feed it as Signoir Benedick” (I.i.122-123). Benedick calls Beatrice “a dish I love not! I cannot endure my Lady Tongue” (II.i.282-283) and vows that he “would not marry her though she were endowed with all that Adam had left him before he transgress’d” (II.i.258-261). Don Pedro points out that Benedick now has a “queasy stomach” which must be overcome for him to “fall in love with Beatrice. If we can do this, Cupid is no longer an archer; his glory shall be ours, for we are the only love gods” (II.i.401-404). They are the only orderly love gods, more interested in social harmony than in romance.

Benedick’s stomach does settle. Properly deceived, he decides that he will be “horribly in love” with Beatrice: “I have railed so long against marriage. But doth not the appetite alter? A man loves the meat in his youth that he cannot endure in his age” (II.iii.245-248). No longer will Benedick’s queasy stomach reject the meat of the marriage table; instead it rejects the pleasures of selfish bachelorhood. As Margaret says, Benedick has “become a man. He swore he would never marry and yet now, in despite of his heart he eats his meat
without grudging" (III.iv.88-90). Both meals and marriage are socially sustaining; the image is an appropriate one for the sort of love that Benedick accepts: "No, the world must be peopled. When I said I would die a bachelor, I did not think I should live till I were married" (II.iii.251-253). Sent to fetch Benedick in to dinner, Beatrice decides that he "has no stomach"; actually, he now has just the right sort of stomach.

Don John, who will "eat when I have stomach, and wait no man's leisure" (I.iii.16-17), is able to feed his villainous appetite while wrong deception prevails. In Claudio, Don John sees "food to my displeasure" (I.iii.68). Don John's private meal is to be at the expense of "the great supper" where too many healthy appetites are indisposed. Even Beatrice finds her appetite troubled by Don John: "I never can see him but I am heart-burn'd an hour after" (II.i.3-5). Don John's villainy and Claudio's suspicion are the acids that cause such indigestion.

In contrast to Claudio, who notes superficially and mistrusts Don Pedro and Hero, are all those who are not deceived because they recognize, as Hero tells Don Pedro, that "the lute should be like the case" (II.i.98). With proper noting, the lute plays, and relationships are like harmonic musical notes. As Beatrice tells Hero, "The fault will be in the music, cousin, if you be not wooed in good time" (II.i.72). Music is harmonic if, as Richard II says, time is kept at all. Beatrice, more interested in being witty than in being wise, is wise nevertheless. Claudio, Benedick, and Beatrice must properly note together and attain such accord if social harmony is to be attained.

The "noting" trap set for Benedick is itself harmonic both in goal and in method, for part of the bait is music:

Pedro. Come, shall we hear this music?
Claud. Yea, my good lord. How still the evening is,
As hush'd on purpose to grace harmony!
(II.iii.38-41)

Don Pedro notes "where Benedick hath hid himself" (II.iii.42), and has Balthasar do his noting in order to establish the graceful harmonic mood appropriate for getting a husband for a lady.

Balthasar protests:
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Note this before my notes:
There's not a note of mine that's worth the noting.
Pedro. Why, these are very crotchets that he speaks!
Note notes, forsooth, and nothing! (II.iii.56-59)

But Balthasar's notes are more than nothing; they are harmonic in sound and informative in message. The song warns ladies that "Men were deceivers ever," always capable of fraud; the message is more appropriate for Claudio than for Benedick, although Benedick too has been guilty of attempted deception. As Balthasar sings his song, Benedick, like Hotspur who would rather listen to his hound, reveals his own discord in his unflattering appraisal of musical harmony: "I had as live have heard the night raven" (II.iii.83). But Benedick is to be made to accord whether he will or not, and beneath the deceptive self-protective wit, Benedick will.

Don Pedro says of Benedick, "if ever thou dost fall from this faith, thou wilt prove a notable argument" (I.i.257-258). Later Leonato describes Claudio as a notable argument also: "Which is the villain? Let me see his eyes, / That when I note another man like him, / I may avoid him" (V.i.268-270). Both notable arguments, finally, prove the same points, that one needs to note carefully before making an important judgment, and that one who is properly guided by society and its harmonic restrictions will avoid deceit and disharmony.

The fishing and hunting imagery, often combined with the noting image, likewise is of two sorts: while Don John angles deceptively for Claudio, Don Pedro fishes properly for Beatrice and Benedick. After Benedick is caught on a carefully baited hook, Beatrice hides in the bushes "like a lapwing" in order to "note" her bait:

Ursala. The pleasant'st angling is to see the fish
Cut with her golden ears the silver stream
And greedily devour the treacherous bait.
So angle we for Beatrice, who even now
Is couched in the woodbine coverture. (III.i.26-30)

The treachery is pleasant, and the pleasantness is not after all very treacherous; for Benedick and Beatrice are caught by the mere truth. Beatrice greedily eating all that she can find is feeding the very appetite that ought to be fed, the desire to marry Benedick. After the trap catches Beatrice, Hero points out that "Some Cupid kills with arrows, some with
traps.” The traps are perhaps less conventionally romantic than Cupid’s arrows, but they are more carefully controlled than haphazard romance would be.

Feasting, noting, and angling become proper when society directs them. Don Pedro angles for Benedick with bait worth noting and gets him to the feast. Claudio, “a poor hurt fowl,” finally escapes Don John’s trap and corrupt appetite and takes Leonato’s bait. Through Don Pedro, who decides that Beatrice “were an excellent wife for Benedick,” and Leonato, who selects Claudio’s wife, society exercises its control. Angling and noting in Benedick’s and Beatrice’s case, and finally in Claudio’s as well, gather sufficient game for a feast of trust and fellowship.

The play is finally much ado about nothing because a sufficient bedrock of trust exists to support social harmony. Appearances do not deceive, at least not importantly, if one trusts one’s friends. Just as every man should know that Dogberry is an ass because he has proved himself so, so every man should know Hero for a chaste woman and Don John for a villain.

Beatrice and the Friar, in contrast to Claudio, know men and women for what they are. Beatrice trusts Hero: “O, on my soul, my cousin is belied!” (IV.i.147) After his initial shock, Leonato agrees with Beatrice: “My soul doth tell me Hero is belied” (V.i.43); the soul is better evidence than the word of a villain. Benedick perceives where one source of confusion may lie: “The practice of it lives in John the bastard, / Whose spirits toil in frame of villainies” (IV.i.189-190). The Friar, after careful “noting of the lady,” decides that she is “guiltless here / Under some biting error” (IV.i. 170-171). But Don John’s feast is soon to end, for with the Friar’s plan, proper deception replaces improper deception.

Only now, after the shame of Hero, do Benedick and Beatrice confess their love. Benedick says, “I do love nothing in the world so well as you. Is not that strange?” (IV.i.269-270) But concern for Hero takes precedence over romance. Although Beatrice assigns her knight a knightly duty, she does so exactly because she loves Hero.

After Benedick’s declaration of love, the language strikes the ear rather harshly, but the language and its harshness are appropriate:
Bene. By my sword, Beatrice, thou lovest me.
Beat. Do not swear, and eat it.
Bene. I will swear by it that you love me, and
I will make him eat it that says I love not you.
Beat. Will you not eat your word?

(IV.i.276-280)

Of the two kinds of eating in the play, the biting conflict and suspicion that consumes social peace and the pleasant feast of harmony and love that settles a queasy stomach, the eating that Beatrice would like to do on Claudio is not the one that will nurture social harmony. The duty that Beatrice assigns Benedick, to kill Claudio, is likewise an antisocial task, however much Claudio may seem to deserve killing at this point. Happily, Benedick does not have to fulfill that duty in order to win Beatrice.

Beatrice’s concern for Hero defines her essentially generous nature that has been hidden behind a witty counterfeit. Benedick’s refusal to kill Claudio defines the same quality in his character:

Bene. Come, bid me do anything for thee.
Beat. Kill Claudio.
Bene. Ha! Not for the wide world!

(IV.i.289-291)

Although Benedick does finally agree to fulfill Beatrice’s request, he does so because he trusts her intuition:

Bene. Think you in your soul the Count Claudio hath wronged Hero?
Beat. Yea, as sure as I have a thought or a soul.
Bene. Enough, I am engag’d.

(IV.i.331-335)

Now, very late, Don Pedro and Claudio discover what their intuition should have told them. Don Pedro remembers that Don John “is compos’d and fram’d of treachery” (V.i.257). Claudio sees Hero’s innocence, admits his fault, but denies its magnitude: “Yet sinn’d I not / But in mistaking” (V.i.283-284). But that mistaking, as Beatrice has told us, was a large fault, a violation of trust and social harmony. We cannot expect Claudio to achieve tragic recognition, but we have been furnished sufficient evidence to see Claudio’s fault. Leonato forgives Claudio easily after all, for Claudio’s only penance is to marry Leonato’s mystery niece, “Almost the copy of my child that’s dead” (V.i.298). Claudio’s penance may seem light, but comedy does not require the more severe logic of tragedy,
particularly not when the comedy is concerned to show the failure of suspicion and success of trust. We are happy, as is Antonio, that “all things sort so well” (V.iv.7). While they sort so well, the firm hand of society pushes a properly deceived Claudio and an innocent Hero into marriage; with social restrictions in control, malice is ineffectual.

As in Shakespeare's other comedies, that control is disguised by sentiment even while the conventional language of sentiment is handled less than seriously. Benedick and Beatrice, witty to the end, are finally permitted to join wits:

_Bene._ Come, I will have thee; but, by this light, I take thee for pity.

_Beat._ I would not deny you; but, by this good day, I yield upon great persuasion, and partly to save your life, for I was told you were in a consumption.

(V.iv.92-97)

Benedick and Claudio are friends again. The play ends with dancing, music, peace. With society in control, with suspicion replaced by trust and with destructive biting by a marriage feast, Don John is no problem. He has been brought back to Messina, but as Benedick says, we need not think on him “till to-morrow.”

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