

Claudio – ‘a man of honour betrayed’?



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In Shakespeare's 'Much Ado About Nothing' honour is very important to all the gentil characters. To know Claudio's character and his cruel treatment of Hero, it is important to understand the honour code. Specific to aristocracy, honour meant reputation, status and respect. A man's honour was earned through conduct in battle and the virtue of a wife and daughter.

Contemporary audiences would not approve of Claudio's manner towards Hero, whereas Renaissance audiences would understand Claudio's behaviour towards Hero.

This is because honour was regarded very highly in their social class, which would suggest why audiences would see Claudio as 'a man of honour betrayed'. Throughout the play, even when the truth of Hero's chastity comes out, Claudio is a respected character who is not disliked by other characters, such as Benedick and Don Pedro. Audiences in the renaissance periods believed honour was everything. Claudio's 'dishonouring' would not only act as a threat to his reputation, but also undermine the social structure, as honour was an important tool of social cohesion. The Renaissance era believed that honour was synonymous with order.

It is important to emphasize this concept to understand that Claudio is 'a man of honour betrayed'. Nevertheless Shakespeare recognizes the importance of honour throughout the play. However, he also sees that the code is flawed, meaning men can defend their honour using weapons in the battlefield and in duel, yet a man can shame a woman, as Claudio does Hero, and she cannot defend herself. If Claudio had allowed Hero to dishonour him he would have lost his well-earned reputation, so he 'shames' her. Claudio talks of Hero as if she were an object, and insults her at every opportunity.

For instance, whilst he is talking to Leonato he says: " There, Leonato, take her back again. Give not this rotten orange to your friend, She's but the sign and semblance of her honour. " There are many contradictions within the honour code, men are meant to cherish and 'honour' women, but are only too ready to dishonour them, accusing them of being " spoiled goods", as in the case of Claudio and Hero. At the beginning of the play when the messenger enters he describes Claudio as having : " the figure of a lamb, the feats of a lion... "

Claudio is considered a man of honour, he is praised in battle and is portrayed as a great soldier; he is said to be noble Claudio". The lamb/lion metaphor is very appropriate for Claudio as he could be seen as naïve and easily influenced by Don John, this is because of his extreme youth. Even without evidence Claudio was ready to believe Don John over Hero. When Don John delivers the news of Hero's disloyalty, Claudio and Don Pedro are quick to believe a fellow male soldier, without thinking that Don John could be lying. This could be seen as a contradiction as it was believed that " bastards" were not to be trusted. Don John referred to himself as a bad character saying; " I am a plain-dealing villain", audiences may think that Claudio is not 'a man of honour betrayed', as he is the one who is betraying Hero by believing the words of Don John. There are also many characters in the play that sympathize with him and believe that he is right to shame Hero. The honour code meant that if a friend got disrespected and dishonoured then it could affect other friends, in the same way that Don Pedro felt dishonoured. " I stand dishonoured, that have gone about to link

my dear friend to a common stale. " Don Pedro supports his friend and believes that he is dishonoured, as it was him who wooed Hero for him.

Due to the allegations about Hero, other characters in the play believe that they too are dishonoured. One of whom is Leonato, Hero's father. Leonato believes that Hero has destroyed the family's reputation and throws terrible insults at her as well as refusing to believe that she could be his daughter by saying; " No part of it is mine; This shame derives itself from unknown loins? ". Before knowing the facts Leonato instantly believes that his daughter has ruined the family. It could be argued that Claudio invites sympathy as Don John tricks him into believing that Hero has dishonoured him. There are many different interpretations to whether Claudio actually believes that he was betrayed. For example if Claudio genuinely believes himself betrayed then perhaps his actions can be justified, like in Kenneth Branagh's *Much Ado About Nothing* production, he makes Claudio's rage and hurt believable by making the witnessed infidelity convincing.

To understand the presentation of Claudio's character it is necessary to consider him as a man of honour betrayed', which means the scene where Hero, allegedly, is dishonouring Claudio should be believable. In Shakespeare's time, a woman's honour was based upon her virginity and chaste behaviour. For a woman to lose her honour by having sexual relations before marriage meant that she would lose all respect, a catastrophe from which she could never recover. Furthermore, this loss of honour would destroy the woman's whole family. Hence, when Leonato believes Claudio's shaming of Hero at the wedding ceremony, he tries to obliterate her entirely: " Hence from her, let her die". Moreover, he speaks of her loss of honour as

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an unforgettable stain from which he cannot distance himself, no matter how hard he tries: " O she is fallen / Into a pit of ink, that the wide sea / Hath rops too few to wash her clean again".

Leonato is prepared to align himself with Claudio rather than his own daughter. The illusory betrayal of Claudio's 'honour' becomes Leonato's dishonouring as she has 'smeared the family name'. Honour was a frequent theme in some of Shakespeare's plays and was also common in that period, for example in Shakespeare's play Julius Caesar, Brutus says " Believe me for mine honour, and have respect to mine honour that you may believe". Mowbray states in Richard 11 " Mine honour is my life; both grow in one/ Take honour from me, and my life is done".

This shows the importance of honour in that period. Claudio speaks of Hero as an 'object' by referring to her as a " jewel". Claudio's tendencies to see Hero as an object was because he had no intimacy with her and perceived her as a commodity. His language portrays the differences between his and Benedick's love. The way Claudio speaks of his love shows the audiences that Claudio is not very romantic, which could affect how audiences would think of him. Audiences might dislike Claudio because he is not the conventional romantic character like 'Romeo'. Whilst talking about Hero, Claudio sometimes uses blank verse.

His speech seems more constructed and artificial than others, which has the effect of making him sound less genuine. He doesn't talk about Hero with passion, whereas Benedick uses poetry and sonnets to show and represent his love towards Beatrice. There is irony in the play when it comes to the

denunciation of Hero, where Claudio speaks with passion to Hero for the first time, out of hatred. This shows audiences that Claudio did not love Hero truly otherwise he would not have been so quick to judge her. In act 4 scene 1 he likens her to an animal; "... or those pampered animals that rage in savage sensuality".

However, it could be said that after Claudio finds out the truth he knows that he has wronged Hero. He tries to renew Hero's reputation by marrying Leonato's niece even if she is an "Ethiope", which means that he was truly apologetic. Some critics argue that Claudio has a business like approach, it can be argued that he only wants the estate, before Claudio married Hero he was fully informed about the property: "Hath Leonato any son, my lord?" In aristocratic society, people were dependant upon marriages of conveniences based on status and property, which could mean that Claudio is not a man of honour betrayed, as he only married for convenience. Before Claudio went to war all he thought about was fighting but as soon as he has finished it is time for marriage. When he had finally come from war, audiences can tell that he is ready for marriage as one of the first sentences he says are "I would scarce trust myself, though I had sworn the contrary, if Hero would be my wife." Critics can also argue that 'war' can be seen as a central metaphor, the men return from war and instantly convey the values engaged on the battlefield into the domestic arena. 'Love' is presented by Shakespeare as a form of warfare with the sexes battling it out.

However, it is not a fair fight because women, unlike men, can not physically defend their honour. Hero's honour is betrayed, but there is little she can do about it. Claudio uses the metaphor "beauty is a witch", even before his

relationship with Hero, Claudio started showing that he was already suspicious of her -seeing her as an Eve, a betrayer of men. This emphasizes what he felt about women and reflected a popular renaissance view - that women were untrustworthy. It may be argued that Claudio lived in a society that was very misogynistic; during that period much of the fiction included misogynistic views.

In the renaissance period people used to live by the bible, this is where the idea of male superiority came from. The story of Adam and Eve blames Eve for tempting Adam to eat the fruit. Thus, it was the woman who was morally weak. In Genesis, Chapter Two vs. 21-25 it says; " and the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman.. " Women were 'made from men' reinforcing the illusion of inferiority. In renaissance times it was believed that women were deceivers and were there to tempt, just like Eve. It could be argued that Claudio was not to blame for his reaction to Hero, as he was merely reacting as men would at that time as it represented Elizabethan values. Benedick has similar values, believing that if he gets married he would be cuckolded; " I will live a bachelor".

There are endless Elizabethan jokes about cuckoldry, which reveal a general fear of infidelity that was perceived as dishonour. It was believed that the honour code was important and that soldiers such as Claudio were supposed to behave with chivalry. Audiences might have found it hard to sympathize with Claudio even in the Renaissance period because he was not behaving in a truly chivalrous manner. His behaviour could be seen as unacceptable and immoral as he treats Hero in a shameful way. However, Claudio's behaviour can be seen as acceptable once audiences understand the honour. Claudio's

honour was so important to him, but when Hero allegedly cheated on him, he believed that it was only right to shame her. Claudio could have been seen as a victim of gossip within the play as he was lied to and manipulated by Don John to fulfill his plan. However despite this, Claudio changed his mind about Hero and instantly believed that she had done wrong.

In conclusion, it could be argued that Claudio was not at fault. He was just mirroring the values of renaissance society. It is important to understand how social status and honour worked in the renaissance period to understand Claudio's cruelty. He was a 'man of honour betrayed' and to understand what he did to Hero, audiences would have to consider that he thought that he had been betrayed. Nevertheless, it would be hard for any audience to sympathize with Claudio, as he did not behave with chivalry. However, Claudio realized his mistake and was willing to marry Hero's cousin.