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'Much Ado About Nothing' Some Critics Have Seen Claudio as a "Problem" Essay Sample

Claudio's gullibility and harmful obsession with his own reputation makes him a real difficulty for some readers. Andrew Lang called him, for example, 'a hateful young cub.' This is because Claudio is so insecure about himself that he has to conform to society's rules and expectations. During the Elizabethan era, a stereotypical male had to fight for his country, be honourable and have a good reputation all of which we see Claudio fighting to achieve throughout the play. Claudio has expectations placed upon him even before he is introduced into the play and this leads to the audience and the other characters having an image of what he will be like. This leaves Claudio no choice but to 'do in the figure of a lamb the feats of a lion' whether it is a true image or not. Claudio is a character that some people can sympathise with while others will think of him as being rather irritating.

An Elizabethan audience may well have shown more sympathy to Claudio when he is deceived into thinking that Hero has had sexual intercourse with another man. During Elizabethan times, it was very important that a woman was a virgin when she got married. Marriage was seen very differently then than it is today. Most marriages were based upon wealth and the social status of the individuals and not on love like today. The fact is indeed important to Claudio, 'Hath Leonato any son, my lord?' this is significant as if Leonato did have a son then Hero would not be the heir to Leonato's wealth and, therefore, the marriage would not benefit Claudio financially. The modern day audience would have overlooked this if Don Pedro did not

ask, 'Dost thou affect her?' this puts a real emphasis upon the fact that marriages were more for financial gain than love. At this point in the play, a modern audience would see Claudio as a selfish and greedy man. However, I do not agree that this is true as during this period, it was seen as acceptable behaviour and Claudio is only following society and is not doing anything an Elizabethan audience would see as being selfish.

The fact that Borachio and Don John deceive Claudio shows that there is some insecurity on Claudio's behalf about Hero. Borachio and Margaret are told to kiss at Hero's window and Don John tells Claudio about what he has just seen. Even though Don John was his enemy only days before, Claudio listens to what he is being told. This shows how naïve Claudio can be and how inexperienced he is. However, social status and reputation is so important to all of the characters, including Claudio, that he sees what he wants to see, which is not necessarily always the truth.

There is also a fear of dishonour, which in turn arises from the male fear of uncontrolled female sexuality. Some critics say that this raises the question about whether Claudio truly trusts Hero. I do not think that this is an issue about trust but more about the importance of reputation. Claudio does not want to be shamed by society and feels that he is doing the right thing by showing up Hero. I feel that as Claudio is a young man and, therefore, has much to learn about life, he is having to follow social expectations and not his true thoughts and feelings, and therefore reacts to the situation as he does. An Elizabethan audience would see Claudio's actions as being acceptable as wives had to obey their husbands. However, a modern

audience may find his behaviour to be immoral as today both sexes have equal rights in relationships.

In the beginning of the play, the messenger describes Claudio as being 'noble', which raises his reputation and expectation of him immediately. Due to this comment, an Elizabethan audience may expect Claudio to be honourable and have a good reputation. A modern audience may find that this does not really build up any expectations. This leaves Claudio no choice, but to 'live up' to this image throughout the play. The fact that Claudio allows Don Pedro to woo Hero for him, however, makes Claudio look very inexperienced. A ball is held whereby the males wear a mask and Don John once again uses the opportunity to deceive Claudio. In this case, Don John deals with him in a very clever and cunning way. Don John knowingly calls Claudio, 'Benedick' which flatters Claudio, and makes Claudio think that Don John will speak about him without concealment. This is exactly the effect Don John wanted to have upon Claudio, and so now, it is much easier for Don John to deceive him. Claudio is told that Don Pedro is wooing Hero for himself. This upsets Claudio very much and shows how insecure Claudio feels about life, as shown by the fact that even though Claudio opens up to Don Pedro and reveals to him first about his feelings for Hero, he is able to think that Don Pedro would be doing this for himself.

Claudio's ensuing soliloquy reflects how Claudio truly feels about life, love, and friendship. Claudio feels, 'Friendship is constant in all other things save in the office and affairs of love.' Claudio is saying that he blames himself for not having realised that friendship is weaker than love, 'This is an accident

of hourly proof which I mistrusted'. Yet, more profoundly it reveals his fear of female sexuality. The suddenness and violence of his rejection of Hero is due to the panic about the threat of his honour. During the soliloquy, Claudio does not mention the fact that Don Pedro, who is considered a friend, has betrayed Claudio's trust. Claudio is made to believe that Don Pedro has betrayed his trust and is very hurt by this, ' And trust no agent.' Yet, he puts much more of the blame on women's nature. He feels as though women come between friendship and male bonds, ' For beauty is a witch against whose charms faith melteth into blood.' This makes Claudio even more insecure about life as he thinks that he has ' lost' a friend to love. Claudio's last words in the soliloquy, ' Farewell, therefore Hero' emphasise his pain.

However, if he truly loves Hero then should he not be fighting for her instead of dismissing the fact that she loves her? This again shows his insecurity and inexperience. Claudio is so engrossed in trying to do the right thing and remain unashamed by society that he forgets his true feelings about Hero and his speech reveals that he is feeling what society would want him to feel. Claudio says, ' beauty is a witch,' which implies that he feels as though beauty is a bad thing and only skin deep. Yet, without having ever met Hero before he instantly appears to fall in love with her and if it was not her beauty he fell in love with what was it? I think that these words are spoken out of hurt and anger and not what he truly feels. If it is how he feels then he has been contradicting himself throughout it. This can be looked at in two very different ways as some could say that he is being shallow and is only thinking about his honour and reputation. We could see him as more of a

victim of poor male role models, prime examples being Don Pedro and Benedick, and that this is an image that he cannot portray successfully. It could also be said that Claudio does have true feelings for Hero, ' I looked upon her with a soldier's eye.'

Claudio shames Hero during the wedding ceremony, which some would say is harsh and brutal. However, I do not agree with this because Claudio thinks that he does have proof of her infidelity, and no reason to think anything different. In this respect, his actions are understandable. In Langham's 1961 production, Claudio slapped Hero. This is theatrical and too harsh. Even though Claudio feels that he has been hurt and betrayed, to physically hurt Hero instantly gains her the audience's sympathy. On the other hand, in Branagh's film he spat at her struggling to restrain his tears.

This is a mixture of disgust and pity and would gain Claudio little sympathy from the audience, as it emphasises his hurt and betrayal. However, having said this, it also shows up Claudio as he should have done something about it earlier and dealt with it more discreetly, but this could be explained by his inexperience and immaturity. When Claudio reveals to the public Hero's alleged infidelity his speech sounds as though it has been premeditated, as it sounds as though the words have been carefully chosen, ' O what men dare do! What men may do! What men daily do, not knowing what they do!' Claudio uses some harsh phrases, ' rotten orange' and ' impious purity,' which do Claudio no favour as it means that the audience's sympathy will turn towards Hero. However, the dramatic irony of this impediment is that the audience know the truth, so some would be sympathising with Hero from

the beginning, but Claudio may lose sympathy from the audience. Claudio's behaviour is typical of an Elizabethan husband as women were seen as being inferior to men. On the other hand, a modern audience may feel that Claudio's behaviour is exaggerated.

Shakespeare carefully chooses what each character will know about this alleged affair. The audience know the whole truth, Don John knows that this is all a set up as it was carried out by him, Claudio thinks that he knows the truth but does not and the other characters namely Leonato, Beatrice and Benedick know nothing. Claudio's reaction could be excused by saying that he is young and inexperienced, however, Leonato who is older and with more experience reacts very harshly too. This allows the audience to focus on the theme of honour and its importance throughout the play. Don Pedro and Leonato's words help to spread the blame evenly. In Barton's production, Claudio smiles at Benedick, assuming solidarity with an officer friend.

This excites the audience's disgust. Claudio is looking for approval from Benedick and so the audience's sympathy lies with Hero. The way in which Leonato reacts to this would shock a modern day audience as he says, 'Death is the fairest cover for her shame.' Even her own father does not believe that she did not sleep with another man. Today most parents would support their child whether or not they think his or her conduct is right or wrong. During Elizabethan times, it would not have had quite this effect on the audience as it was seen as acceptable to disown your son or daughter if they did anything to bring shame upon the family. The issue about honour and reputation comes up again as Leonato's reaction is based on this and

not upon parental affection as we would expect today. In this scene, many of the plays major themes are seen including the importance of honour and the effect deceptions can have upon people and how they determine the next part of the play.

Finally, in Act 5 scene 5, Claudio thinks that Hero is dead. In this scene, Claudio is mourning her loss at her tomb. This scene can be viewed from two very different perspectives. One being that Claudio is exaggerating and that he is only superficially in grief. Claudio writes a song for Hero and says, 'Yearly will I do this rite,' which seems theatrical. On the other hand, the scene could be played where Claudio is truly mournful and regrets everything he has done to ruin Hero's reputation. Edward Woodward presented a more sympathetic view of Claudio than in other productions. He portrayed Claudio as showing 'genuine grief'. Claudio is shown to be naïve again when Leonato asks Claudio to marry his brother's daughter in order to pay back Leonato for the way he treated Hero. This is very naïve on Claudio's part because he should be questioning why Leonato wants him to do this instead of instantly agreeing to do it. Then again, this shows Claudio's remorse, as he is willing to respect Leonato's wishes.

I do not think that Claudio's actions are any worse than that of Leonato or Don Pedro. Leonato, who is expected to be a more mature and wiser man, disowns his daughter instantly without even having heard the truth. I feel that Claudio's actions are quite understandable throughout the play and that if supposedly a wiser man, such as Leonato, believes Hero has had an affair then why should Claudio be blamed, as it is obvious that he is an

inexperienced and repressed individual. After the end of the play, Claudio has an opportunity to change as he is young and has learnt from his past mistakes. On the other hand, Don Pedro and Leonato are older and therefore, it is much more difficult for them to change.