

Cuckoldry as a Dramatic Motive in Much Ado about Nothing

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Abstract: *This paper aims to examine the concept of cuckoldry in Shakespeare's play Much Ado About Nothing. Shakespeare reveals the attitude of 16th-century society toward women by making use of this dramatic motive for the actions of male characters in his play. In Shakespeare's time, women's honor was based on their virginity and virtuous behavior. When a woman had a pre-martial sexual relationship with a man, she lost both her honor and her place in the society. This play presents this attitude and men's mistrust of women in 16th-century society, particularly in the love affairs between Claudio and Hero, Benedic and Beatrice. The anxiety and mistrust the male characters felt in relation to women make it a problem play because they cause tragic events.*

Keywords: *Cuckoldry, woman, problem play, Much Ado About Nothing*

Kuru Gürültü 'de Dramatik Dürtü Olarak Boynuzlanma Kavramı

Öz: *Bu çalışmanın amacı Shakespeare'in Kuru Gürültü adlı oyununda boynuzlanma kavramını incelemektir. Shakespeare, oyununda bu dramatik dürtüyü kullanarak 16. yüzyıl toplumunun kadına karşı tutumunu gözler önüne sermektedir. Shakespeare'in zamanında kadının onuru bekâretine ve erdemli davranışa dayanmaktadır. Kadın evlenmeden önce ilişkiye girdiğinde, hem onurunu hem de toplumdaki yerini kaybeder. Oyun bu tutumu ve 16. yüzyıl toplumunda erkeğin kadına karşı güvensizliğini, özellikle Claudio, Hero ve Benedick- Beatrice arasındaki aşk ilişkilerini kullanarak sunmuştur. Erkeklerin hissettiği endişe ve güvensizlik trajik olaylara sebep olduğu için oyunu problem bir oyun yapar.*

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Boynuzlanma, kadın, problem oyun, Kuru Gürültü*

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Introduction

In the Elizabethan period, the patriarchal structure of society heavily relies on religious doctrine which determines the places of men and women. The Bible teaches that the female body is created from man's body saying: 'the rib, which the Lord God had taken from the man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man' (The Holy Bible, 1611:2.22–23). Then man says: 'This now is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman... because she was taken out of Man' (1611:2.22–23). These verses are read by Elizabethans literally: Females are created from man's body, so man created first in God's image is superior to woman. This reading makes woman inferior to man because of her sex. Kelso also stated that woman was created from man, therefore resulting in her inferiority and submissiveness (1956:4). Woman's inferiority is supported by the story of The Fall of Man. Woman is responsible for the original sin as she offers the forbidden apple to Adam. This comment of the Bible puts the responsibility on woman not only for the first sin also for all the sins in the world. These views of the society place woman below man. So, the voices of the society are dominantly males because of their sex and reason. Males are associated with reason, thus gaining superiority over women who are generally considered emotional. In such a community where men hold the highest status, the role of women is to obey and live up to the norms set by the society. In the society, women are given no voice, no rights to stand against the system as they are silenced and made obedient to males.

Obedience and silence are the key qualities for women to have. In this period, silent women are praised as virtuous, since men in general 'equated a loose tongue with a loose body' (Zomparelli, 2007:13). Silencing females is an effective way of making them submissive. More importantly, women are supposed to remain chaste and virginal. Women should be guarded by their father until they marry and they should be loyal to their husband forever after marriage. If women have sex before marriage, they are humiliated and even killed because their honor is based on their virginity in this period. Their betrayal affects not only their place at the eyes of the society but their husband and fathers' position equally. Their shame is shared by their family, for as Vives states 'wife is the physical, social, and religious extension of her husband' (qtd. in Klein, 1992:99).

Then it can be said that women's chastity is determined by men's words. So fragile is women's chastity that they can find themselves disgraced and scorned unexpectedly. In other words, even the most virtuous women can lose their honor, innocence or everything for the reason that their purity is resolved by the words of men in authority. Chastity is a strong determiner in woman's destiny in that her being chaste is so important for her position in the society, as Robert Cleaver acutely puts it: 'Take from a maide or woman her beautie, take from her, kindred, riches, comelinesse, eloquence, sharpnesse of wit, cunning in her craft, and give her Chastitie, and you have given her all things' (Dod and

Cleaver, 1614:352). The women, in such a suppressive atmosphere, feel themselves in a tricky situation, and as a consequence of this, they continually have anxiety regarding their shaky position. This anxiety naturally reflects on men in the same way, for the shame put on women will bring shade to their honor, too. So, it comes as no surprise that men have fear of being cuckolded by their wives, sisters or lovers. This problem of cuckoldry puts the man in a precarious state, as he has nothing but the words of his wife to depend on to hold his honor stable. If man is deceived by his wife or sister, he has to find resolutions to be rid of this disturbing case. As stated above, death or humiliation can be a possible cure to save men themselves from this shameful condition. It is crucial to note that men are always suspicious of woman's chastity in this period. Inevitably, this suspicion is mostly triggered by both the feeling of jealousy and fear of being deceived by woman. Whether they repress this sinister fear or not, it is always there, in their minds.

What men experience in this period is best illustrated in *Much Ado*. *Much Ado*, at first look, seems to deal with universal themes such as love, marriage, friendship, betrayal, and loyalty. However, on closer examination, it mirrors the age in which it is written since it drives home the crucial points on the social attitudes and values. More importantly, it is Shakespeare's best comedy to exemplify the relationships between men and women by means of the concept of 'cuckoldry'. The male characters in the play, preoccupied with the idea of cuckoldry, have serious doubts about the morality of women. The idealized Renaissance woman, Hero, is repudiated in public by Claudio who has a fixation with cuckoldry. His actions are caused by this obsession, thus leading to tragic actions on behalf of Hero. Although it seems to be a comedy, it is, in reality, a dark play with tragic events taking place in the play.

The Obsession of Male Characters with Cuckoldry

From the very beginning of the play, it is obvious that the male characters have a fixation on cuckoldry which is seen in their discourse and cuckold jokes which pervade throughout the play. The cuckold jokes begin when Leanato, the lord of Messina, is asked whether Hero is his daughter and he retorts: 'Her mother hath many times told me so' (Manis, 1999:6). His joke about Hero's mother is overused in Messina as Cook states, 'In itself, it is a trifle, a hackneyed joke that comes automatically to mind and rolls easily off the tongue' (1986:187). From this joke, the reader is to deduce that Leanato has no grave doubts about the virtue of his wife. However, his joke, in a way, can be read as an evidence of his pent-up apprehension of cuckoldry. Just like men in the Elizabethan period, he has to trust the words of his wife, as the words are the only proof that he is not cuckolded. Trusting in the words of females, men become more edgy, since the words may not be the expression of truth at all times. Cook voices his intimate opinion about this status quo as such: 'A man may be a cuckold,....., and not be aware of his horns' (1986:187). This situation, as a matter of fact, gives power to women- the power men believe to cuckold them in secret, thus leading to mistrust of women.

In the course of the play, Benedick gives advice to Don Pedro: 'get thee a wife, get thee a wife! There is no staff more reverent than one tipp'd with horn' (1999:76). With his sentence, he identifies marriage with cuckoldry without doubt. Benedick goes further to comment on marriage in the scene where he reveals his own ideas for the benefit of Claudio and Don Pedro:

That a woman conceiv'd me, I thank her; that she brought me up, I likewise give her most humble thanks; but that I will have a rechate winded in my forehead, or hang my bugle in an invisible baldrick, all women shall pardon me. Because I will not do them the wrong to mistrust any, I will do myself the right to trust none; and the fine is, I will live a bachelor (1999:9–10).

It can be said, with reference to this quotation, that the devotion to or love for a woman stands for 'having a rechate winded' in one's forehead, which publicizes one's mortification to the world. To Benedick, marriage is an institution that impels men to 'hang their bugle in an invisible baldrick.' His relation of marriage with these metaphors is undoubtedly an indication of the fear of males about feminine power to make them a cuckold. Just because of his uneasiness about being betrayed, he is wholly opposed to marriage, and goes on to make jokes about it. During a conversation with Don Pedro and Claudio, Don Pedro reminds Benedick that marriage is inevitable, voicing a general truth of Elizabethan Period: 'In time the savage bull doth bear the yoke' (1999:10). Benedick mockingly responds to it by completely rejecting marriage:

The savage bull may; but if ever the sensible Benedick bear it, pluck off the bull's horns and set them in my forehead; and let me be vilely painted, and in such great letters as they write, 'Here is good horse to hire,' let them signify under my sign 'Here you may see Benedick the married man (1999:10).

The horns of the savage bull symbolize power, savagery and, by extension, vitality. If the sensible Benedick obeys to the yoke, pluck off the bull horns and place them in his forehead. With this action, the horns, symbol of power, savagery and vitality, are reduced to the symbol of weakness, emasculation- but mostly of a cuckolded man. To Benedick, marriage carries a potential danger for men since women are untrustworthy. The married man wearing the horns of the bull is a figure humiliated by other men. Benedick, conscious of this danger, stands against marriage in a comic way. The underlying reason for his rejection of marriage reverberates with the fear of men about cuckoldry.

All these cuckold jokes manifest the obsessive fear men have of being deceived. In the play, Benedick, Leonato, and Don Pedro are not the only men whose minds are occupied with cuckoldry. Claudio also shares the same obsession. Once Claudio falls

in love with Hero, the only child of Leonato, and gives voice to his desire to marry her, Benedick takes it with a lament for the decline of bachelors: 'hath not the world one man but he will wear his cap with suspicion?' (1999:8). Through Benedick's utterance, it directly becomes clear that Claudio does wear his cap with suspicion. Before taking step to woo Hero, Claudio assesses her, and comments about her and is also vigilant of his friend's responses. He asks Benedick: 'Did thou note the daughter of Signior Leonato? Is she not a modest young lady?', Benedick replies: 'I pray thee tell me truly how thou lik'st her?' (1999:8). Even though Claudio has heard good things about Hero, he still hesitates. The moment Don Pedro says 'the lady is very well worthy' (1999:9), he retorts 'You speak this to fetch me in' (1999:9). Claudio apparently wishes to marry a virtuous woman and he has scruples about women's chastity. His anxiety becomes more evident when Don Pedro woos Hero to win her on behalf of Claudio. Feeling that he is deceived, Claudio states:

Tis certain so.
The Prince woos for himself
Friendship is constant in all other things
Save in the office and affairs of love;
Therefore all hearts in love use their own tongues.
Let every eye negotiate for itself,
And trust no agent; for beauty is a witch
Against whose charms faith melteth into blood.
This is an accident of hourly proof,
Which I mistrusted not. Farewell therefore Hero! (1999:19)

From this short and effective soliloquy, it is obvious that he is entirely seized by the feeling of betrayal. What is more striking is he skilfully redirects his accusation from Don Pedro to the beauty of Hero. In doing so, he reveals the potentiality of females to betray by seeing them as a sexual threat. For Claudio, the power of female beauty is likely as strong as that of witches. With his soliloquy, Claudio, in a sense, gives vent to the fear of being deceived by women, that is, to the fear of cuckoldry. His fear of being cheated is explained by Benedick when he remarks on the reason of Claudio's weird behaviour toward Don Pedro: 'The flat transgression of a school-boy, who, being overjoy'd with finding bird's nest, shows it his companion, and he steals it' (1999:20). Stealing bird's nest is directly associated with the deceiving of men by women secretly or overtly. Benedick indeed clarifies the hidden angst of Claudio about cuckoldry by making use of the concept of 'bird's nest'. When Claudio is informed that Don Pedro broke with Hero and her father and Hero is his, he returns to his former romantic position again. His changing mode- from weirdness to romanticism- become a clear sign of his hidden worry about Hero's purity.

The Tragic Event As a result of This Obsession

All the cuckold jokes and men's anxiety of cuckoldry in the play foreshadow in the tragic event that leads to disgrace of Hero. That is to say, the central conflict of *Much Ado* stems from men's fear regarding women's chastity. While Leonato and his brother Antonio arrange a marriage ceremony for Claudio and Hero, Don John, defeated by his brother Don Pedro, accuses Hero of being 'disloyal' (1999:38) solely to take revenge on his brother and others. Don John offers to the eyes of Claudio a visual proof that gives way to the repressed fear of Claudio. In fact, the visual proof does not address to the eyes of Claudio's mind. In his imagination, 'sweet', 'modest' Hero turns into 'the figure of witchlike, betraying, sexual' Hero (Cook, 1986:193). Hence Claudio takes the bait: 'If I see anything tonight why I should not marry her, to-morrow in the congregation, where I should wed, there will I shame her' (1999:39). Completely tricked by Don John's false blame, Claudio rashly and severely shames Hero in the presence of his father and public, calling out:

There, Leonato, take her back again:
Give not his rotten orange to your friend;
She's but the sign and semblance of her honor.
Behold! How like a maid she blushes here.
O! What authority and show of truth
Can cunning sin cover itself withal.
Comes not that blood as modest evidence
To witness simple virtue?
Would you not swear,
All you that see her, that she were a maid,
By these exterior shows?
But she is none:
She knows the heat of a luxurious bed;
Her blush is guiltiness, not modesty (1999:50).

As Claudio states, Hero is 'the sign and semblance of her honor'. In the play, her position becomes conspicuous in the scene where she keeps silence, falls in a faint and becomes 'a sign to be read and interpreted by others' (Cook, 1986:194). Calling Hero Leonato's 'rotten orange', Claudio reads and interprets the blushes on Hero's face as the sign of her infamy and guilt regardless of the possibility that the accusation can be false.

Despite the fact that the text portrays Hero as the epitome of the good Renaissance woman with her silence, obedience, chastity, purity, wealth, she is interpreted as unchaste by Claudio. Through Claudio's misinterpretations of Hero, the pure Hero appears on the stage as a disgracer to both Claudio himself and her father. Though she has long-

standing virtue, only through the words of Claudio is it destroyed. Dreher offers a striking explanation of this case: 'One illusion can destroy her(Hero), so fragile is a woman's honor, so tenuous her position in a man's world. Unless she is beyond suspicion, she becomes a tainted outcast' (1986:86). The primary reason of Claudio's degrading Hero is no doubt his fear of being deceived by woman. Even though Hero is seen as a traditional woman, she has the female power- witchlike beauty- to make any man a cuckold. Cook gives a pointed comment on this issue: 'men's irrational fear of cuckoldry causes them to victimize even the most ideal products of their system' (1986:187). Having interpreted Hero as unfaithful, he wants to get rid of her to save his honor from the disgrace that she could bring to him. Claudio rejects marrying Hero: 'Not to be married, Not to knit my soul to an approved wanton' (1999:50). Should he marry Hero, he is surely aware that his good name will be in the danger since the shame of Hero will tarnish his reputation as Zomparelli shrewdly observes: ' a marriage to a virtuous woman will enhance his reputation while a marriage to a loose woman will make him a cuckold' (2007:22).

Leonato, fallen into uncertainty by Claudio's bitter words, wishes his daughter to answer her accusers, yet Hero is unable to prove otherwise, whereupon Leonato begins to adopt Claudio's style of reading Hero. Just like Claudio, he harshly reproves his daughter for the shame she brought upon him: 'O Fate, take not away thy heavy hand!/Death is the fairest cover for her shame/That may be wished for' (1999:52). Leonato goes on to say: 'Do not live, Hero, do not open thine eyes' (1999:52). Rather than losing his face in the society, Leonato wishes to see Hero dead upon hearing the accusations made against her chastity. He feels humiliated in the face of his daughter's infidelity now that her embarrassment, in a sense, is his. Bevington puts the same view briskly: 'Hero's father collapses in shame when he hears his daughter publicly accused of promiscuity, for Leonato's own reputation is on the line: as a father in patriarchal society, his responsibility is to guarantee the chastity of his daughter' (2004:222).

Both Leonato and Claudio act on their impulse without thinking that the accusation may not be true. Both of them are more concerned about their respectability rather than the welfare of women. The main reason for both treating Hero in this way is the fear of wearing horns, namely, the fear of being a cuckold. The signs of disloyalty that both men read in Hero are triggered by both her father's and her future husband's obsession with the possibility of unfaithfulness and cuckoldry (Zomparelli, 2007:23). So deep is their preoccupation that they ignore the protests of Beatrice, Hero's cousin, who is drawn as a woman who speaks her mind freely and acts independently. She refuses marriage inasmuch as she does not want to be 'overmastered by a piece of valiant dust' (1999:16). She has a great ability to use sharp wit and puns, which is clear from the merry war between her and Benedick, her lover. However, to the reader's surprise, she is not able to help Hero prove her innocence. Beatrice is clearly aware of the limitations put on her by the society in which males are dominant. Both Claudio and Leonato do not give importance to what she exclaims.

The Friar is probably the only man who can truthfully read the blushes on Hero's face:

In angel whiteness beat away those blushes,
And in her eye there hath appeared a fire
To burn the errors that these princes hold
Against her maiden truth (1999:53).

With the Friar's advice, Hero pretends to die of anguish immediately after she is defamed. By the end of the play, unlike Beatrice, Hero, pretending to die, regains her purity by the words of men, not of upper-class men but of the lower-class, Dogberry and his sidekick, Verges. By their eavesdropping, they find out that Hero is besmirched by Don John and Boracchio who concoct a plan to trick men into believing that Hero is faithless. Upon hearing Hero is pure, Claudio imagines Hero as the former 'modest', 'sweet' Hero and is ready to do everything to compensate for what he has done. He accepts to marry Hero's cousin without seeing her and makes public Hero's morality, mourns for her at the tomb. On the wedding day, Hero reveals her true identity and they join a dance. The play has a happy ending; Hero clears her name, thereby Claudio takes her hand in marriage once more and strikingly enough, Benedick, who Beatrice is madly in love with, overcomes his preconception about cuckoldry and thus decides to marry Beatrice.

Much Ado As A Dark Play

In *Much Ado*, Shakespeare has employed the concept of cuckoldry as the driving force behind the actions of the male characters whose repressed fear of being deceived by women comes to the surface and causes the tragic event. Crucial to the plot of the play, the tragic event rests on the loss of virginity. Donlon emphasized its significance as such : 'Take away her (Hero's) virginity, you take away the entire premise of the play' (2010:3). In a feminist reading of the text, the tragic event taking place in the play functions to disclose both the relationship between men and women and the social attitude toward women in sixteenth-century England. Hero, the ideal Renaissance woman, is accused falsely and suffers at the hands of men in authority in vain. In this way, Hero metaphorically becomes the voice of Renaissance women, by extension, of women all over the world. Besides its important role to forward the play, the tragic event makes the play a 'dark' play. Not until this tragic event occurs is the comic mood of *Much Ado* distorted. This situation creates a problem for critics on the grounds that it cannot be classified as a tragedy or comedy as Cook accentuates: 'Critics dissatisfied with *Much Ado* have complained that its near tragic catastrophe violates the comic mood of the rest of the play' (1986:193). Although it offers the reader comic scenes at the beginning, especially with cuckold jokes, with the appearance of tragic acts, it breaks loose from its comic tone and turns into something

like a tragedy. Due to the terrible event, by the end of the play, the reader cannot find himself in comedy as in the first scenes. This underlying problem causes it to be called a dark play.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Much Ado* is a dark play because of the horrible events that happen to Hero. As a play, it sheds light on the position of women in the society by revealing their sufferings under the authority of men. Shakespeare underlines the troubles of Hero, of Renaissance women, and more generally, of women universally. Shakespeare, however, leaves this issue unresolved, particularly as seen in his telling song:

Sigh no more ditties, sing no moe
Of dumps so dull and heavy;
The fraud of men was ever so,
Since summer first was leavy.
Then sigh not so,
But let them go,
And be you blithe and bonny,
Converting all your sounds of woe
Into hey nonny, nonny (1990:28).

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