
Honor in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*

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Among the many plays that Shakespeare produced, this particular play in context, *Much Ado About Nothing*, stands out with its effective appeal and content. The literary work goes on to delve deep into many relevant issues that can be comprehended if one chooses to indulge in a close introspection of the literary work and the portraiture of the stalwart literary artist, Shakespeare. One has to take into consideration the fact that the play deals with the thematic content of honor, and this is echoed in both the male and the female characters of the famous play.

Shakespeare's exploration of the theme of honor permeates through the occurrences and events of the play in context, and in retrospect one can very well explore how the playwright engages in his literary pursuit through the play. One has to take into account the fact that honor has truly been one of the most important aspects of life all through the history of the world. Since literature is the reflection of the world and the society, honor plays a very important part in literature as well. The element can be intertwined with the plot or characters of a literary work. The play in context by William Shakespeare goes on to explore this element in the quintessential form. The play is a comedy about love, marriage and emotions, and the factor of honor is shown as the main reason for quite a number of major events in relation to a number of characters of the story.

The play is a perfect depiction of the code of honor and the distinction in such standards for men and women of the society of the time. Shakespeare portrays the different normative parameters for men and women with regard to chastity and honor in the course of the narrative of this play. The conceptual idea of honor goes on to get represented in different ways for the genders- something that is reflective of the patriarchal society of the 17th century England. As such, it would be apt to discuss about honor with regard to its importance for the characters and how the playwright engages in the portrayal of the matter with his feminist approach through the penning of very strong women characters.

One has to take into consideration the fact that in those time, for a male to be taken as honorable, that person needed to have many admirable achievements during the times of the war- something that would give the person a good name among all. Right at the inception of the play, the character of Beatrice goes on to enquire of the messenger if Benedick had got such a famed position during the times of the war that had just passed sometime back. One can recall her character saying, "I pray you, how many hath he killed and eaten in these wars?" (Shakespeare 1.1) The character of Leonato goes on to state that much honor was bestowed on Claudio. This societal parameter of judging the honor of a man can be equated with the patriarchal standards that opine that men are strong and they should be brave and successful.

Once again, in the course of the play, the audience finds a clear indication of the primary importance of having a good name at the time when Hero goes on to communicate with Ursula about Benedick. Here, Hero endeavors a lot to convince Ursula into influencing Beatrice of the

sheer valor and worthiness of Benedick. Hero emphasizes his point when he opines, “Indeed, he hath an excellent good name” (Shakespeare 2.3). Thus, it is not at all difficult to comprehend how reputation and honor was one of the most important attributes of a man in the Elizabethan era. A man was judged by the honor he had, and this would make him eligible for the honorable ladies of the English society of the time.

In stark contrast to the parameters of a man being honorable in the society, the honor of a woman depended on her fidelity and chastity. An avid reader of the play in context should remember that Hero was wrongly accused to have lacked these normative traits. Shakespeare goes on to focus on this point as the character of Claudio goes on to term her as an “approved wanton.” He even goes to the extent of comparing Hero with an animal- a horse- that rages “in savage sensuality” at the marital ceremony. Shakespeare makes the character of Hero remain confined to the societal parameters by which women were judged during that time in English history.

She can be described to be an obedient character. This is also portrayed in the words of Beatrice when she opines, “Yes, faith, it is my cousin’s duty to make curtsy and say, ‘Father, as it please you’” (Shakespeare 2.1). This is further confirmed in the course of the play when her father, Leonato, opines, “Daughter, remember what I told you. If the Prince do solicit you in that kind, you know your answer” (Shakespeare 2.1). It is not hard to recall that the character of Hero is quite polite in nature and she does not slander the name of any person in the course of the play. It should be commented in this context that William Shakespeare goes on to weave the character of Hero as the ideal woman as per the Elizabethan parameters of propriety. However, all the women characters in the play are found to bow down to the patriarchal norms of the society of the time.

One can take the example of Beatrice, the orphan cousin of Hero, who comes across to the audience to be very outspoken and intrepid in her nature. These characteristics of Beatrice are quite evident to the audience or the reader right from the inception of the play from the conversations with Benedick. However, the characteristics are blatantly portrayed when Leonato goes on to opine to her, “Thou wilt never get thee a husband if thou be so shrewd of thy tongue” (Shakespeare 2.1). It has to be taken into account that the character of Beatrice has the courage to confront a male character and even influence that person to go against the accuser in support of her cousin, Hero. At the time when Benedick goes on to proclaim his love for Beatrice, she urges him to avenge the insult that her cousin, Hero, has faced at the hands of Claudio. Beatrice further proclaims that if she were a man, she would avenge her cousin herself. She is successful in persuading Benedick to fight with Claudio.

It has to be reckoned that trail by duel was a part of the tradition of the time and it occurred quite frequently with the purpose of defending one’s honor in the society. People who would back down from a duel were considered to be cowards, and they would lose their honorable position in the Elizabethan society. As such, the character of Benedick goes on to challenge Claudio to a fight. He incites Claudio by saying that he is a villain. He further proclaims that he would defeat Claudio under any circumstance. Apart from saying that he would “make it good” how Claudio dared, Benedick also calls him a coward. These words go on to dishonor him, and Claudio finally gets forced to accept the fight so as to restore and reestablish his honor among one and all.

Thus, the Elizabethan people were extremely serious about their honor in the society. As such, all the males and females were engaged in doing their best to be honorable. Another very significant instance in the course of the play that was triggered by this urge to have honor was when Hero was asked to fake her demise by the Friar so as to regain the lost honor of her life. Friar goes on to opine, “Let her a while be secretly kept in, and publish it that she is dead indeed”

(Shakespeare 4.1). The characters follow the opinion only to establish the surmounting need of having an honorable life in the society.

Now, the concept of honor was gender biased. While the concept of honor that was applicable for the males of the society wanted them to be intrepid and chivalrous, for the ladies it was totally different. The women were expected to remain passive in their nature and remain committed and domestic (Bonazza). Thus, the Elizabethan society went on to focus on the patriarchal standards that encouraged the men to be masculine, while the female folk of the society were meant to remain feminine and subjugated by the males. The play by William Shakespeare can surely be seen as a microcosm of the Elizabethan society of England. One has to understand the fact that the stalwart playwright was a pioneer in echoing the societal factors and practices of his time in his literary work. The play in context fulfills the purpose with utmost perfection.

The audience comes across the character of Hero whom the society would call ideal as per the normative parameters, while there is also a character like Beatrice who questions the patriarchal parameters and shows signs of her individuality in the face of the society. Thus, her sense of honor goes on to question the established norms of the society. Nonetheless, all of the occurrences and characters of the play go on to establish how important the notion of honor was for people of the land at that time. The entire play is encompassed by the thematic content of honor of the characters that are ready to go to any extent to retain their honorable position in the eyes of the people of the society.

It would be correct to conclude that William Shakespeare echoes the theme of honor all through the play. He engages in portraying many facets of honor in the course of the narrative of the literary work in context. As such, the dissimilarities between the males and the females are also explicated. Exploring the attribute of honor to be the central Elizabethan trait in a person, the playwright goes on to provide the avid readers and the audience of the play a thorough insight into the contradictions and psyche of the characters. He even introduces the ignition of the ahead-of-its-time characteristic that is expressed through the words and actions of Beatrice who stands out as a scathing remark on the regressive patriarchal notion of honor in the English society.

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