
Shakespeare's Feminized Friar

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Other than actual clergymen who, by necessity, populate his history plays, William Shakespeare makes little use of this character type. Friar Laurence is, perhaps, his most famous fictional cleric. The Abbess appears as a maternal *deus ex machina* to resolve the confusions of *A Comedy of Errors* and reconstitute her family. Disguised as a friar and, thus, paradoxically relatively invisible yet powerful, the duke of Vienna retreats to the margins of society to observe his overzealous deputy in *Measure for Measure* and returns to effect an uneasy resolution at play's end. Only in *Much Ado About Nothing*, however, does Shakespeare deliberately infuse his friar with spirituality, manifested in his empathy for Hero's plight. Moreover, the friar's understanding emerges from a feminized perspective of her circumstances; that is, he correctly interprets Hero's non-verbal behavior and responds with Christian charity instead of *speaking* her moral condemnation.

The friar is in the world but not of it. He occupies, instead, a privileged position somewhere between God and man. Consequently, other than his liturgical responsibilities, he becomes somewhat transparent in the affairs of men. He is quiet, patient, modest, obedient, nurturing and compassionate. In other words, he becomes a woman. Yet his plan to transform the arrogance of men into remorse is subversive. Whereas Hero has, ostensibly, "died upon [Claudio's] words" (4.1.222), Friar Francis quietly effects her resurrection by arranging that she "die to live" (4.1.253). In other words, he becomes Christ-like. The traits he exhibits reflect the androgyny of Jesus – the innate power of man tempered by the meek humility of woman – and his word choices echo the promise of rebirth and renewal that underscored Jesus's ministry. By emulating those qualities of Jesus that society traditionally ascribes to women, he subverts the power of a male-dominated culture and privileges a feminine perspective of that culture.

At her wedding in Act 4, scene 1, Hero is dishonored by Claudio's accusations of her unchaste behavior. Other than Beatrice and Benedick, everyone believes the charges. "Would the

two princes lie?” Leonato asks rhetorically (4.1.151). Though based in spurious innuendo, the charges have the force of truth because they have been made by men. Indeed, Leonato and Don Pedro privilege their shame over Hero’s. If she has, in fact, been unchaste, they “stand dishonoured” (4.1.63). Even later, when Leonato and Antonio blame Claudio and Don Pedro for Hero’s “death,” they draw swords to defend their own honor. “Thou dost wrong me, thou dissembler, thou” (5.1.52). No one draws a sword for Hero. Instead, she faints under the weight of their accusations, and even Leonato thinks she has rightfully died of shame. When she revives, he is furious rather than relieved.

Everyone talks around the prostrate Hero, except for the Friar. He has been watching her and reads her reactions to the charges as variously shame, anger and defiance. “Trust not my *reading*. . . [i]f this sweet lady lie not guiltless here” (4.1.164, 167). He deciphers her non-verbal expressions as clearly as if she had *spoken* her defense, which her accusers had earlier dismissed contemptuously. In a play whose theme examines the relationship between gender and the use of language, and reveals its essential fallacy through elaborate verbal sparring, it is significant that the resolution of a central plot line depends on a nonverbal appeal to the imagination. The friar fashions a plan to redeem Hero’s honor by creating the illusion of her death so that Claudio will repent his slander. The power of male language to cause Hero to “die upon his words” is attenuated by the transformative power of a silent miracle “play,” that is, a non-verbal medium.

Writing mostly in prose, Shakespeare utilizes elaborate rhetorical flourishes and word games to weave his various themes of love, marriage, and gender politics in *Much Ado About Nothing*. The men have returned from war, and though their concerns turn to love, their metaphors do not. Violence continues to underscore many of the exchanges. The cruel and slanderous charges leveled against Hero by Don John and Claudio are obvious examples of language as a weapon; but Leonato says of Beatrice and Benedick that “[t]here’s a kind of merry war” between them. They never meet but there’s a skirmish of wit between them” (1.1.50-51). As witty and intelligent as this sparring may be, their language is clearly defensive, as if love is war or at least as dangerous. Beatrice’s self-protection is formidable. Leonato cautions that “thou wilt never get thee a husband if thou be so shrewd of tongue.” And Antonio

agrees: “In faith, she’s too curst” (2.1.16-18). For which blessing she is ever grateful to God. Beatrice, like Kate before her, uses language as a man would, intelligently, creatively and aggressively. By thus transgressing society—she is to be seen and not heard, or at least not so vociferously—Beatrice makes herself unnatural, undesirable and, thus, unmarriageable, the ultimate punishment for her presumptuous re-appropriation of language. However, like Kate, she does this deliberately in order to protect herself from an unsatisfactory marriage. “Would it not grieve a woman to be overmastered with a piece of valiant dust?” (2.1.51-52), she responds to her uncle’s hope that she be married one day. Nonetheless, her power is only symbolic. Language is male: its idioms, its practice, its dominance, and the culture it inscribes are male as well. So, when Hero is slandered, Beatrice impotently yet significantly rails, “O that I were a man! . . . O God that I were a man! I would eat [Claudio’s] heart in the market place” (4.1.300; 303-304).

Another recurring image in the play, humorous but edgy nonetheless, is the threat of cuckoldry, an Elizabethan preoccupation that obsessively links female chastity with male inheritance. Benedick, Claudio and Don Pedro are confirmed bachelors, more because they fear being cuckolded than because they have not found the right woman. When Claudio falls in love with Hero, Benedick complains, “Is’t come to this? In faith, hath not the world one man but he will wear his cap with suspicion?” (1.1.160-161). Distorting chivalry somewhat, he maintains, “Because I will not do them the wrong to mistrust any, I will do myself the right to trust none” (1.1.199-200). Even five lines from the end, when the two couples are reconciled in marriage, Benedick mockingly consoles Don Pedro—and perhaps himself—with the idea of marriage: “There is no staff more reverend than one tipped with horn” (5.4.118). More disturbing is Don Pedro’s observation of Hero a mere 85 lines into the play. After apologizing for any inconvenience he may be causing Leonato, he deduces, “I *think* this is your daughter.” To which Leonato reassures, “Her mother hath many times told me so.” To which Benedick asks, “Were you in doubt, sir, that you asked her?” To which Don Pedro assuages any suspicion. “Truly, the lady fathers herself” (1.1.86-87; 90, emphasis added). Hero does not comment during this exchange. Rather, she stands as silent testimony to her mother’s

chastity before her, ironically exercising a subliminal female power to confirm male sexual identity as she protects her father's status and reputation without a word. Indeed, she only speaks in line 30, clarifying Beatrice's sarcastic nickname for Benedick, "Signor Montanto," and leaves the stage 100 lines later. Here, too, she demonstrates another kind of communication – a female code – that only she can interpret for the men around her.

Paralyzed by the fear of sexual betrayal and its concomitant socio-economic dishonor and destruction, men attempt to control women's virginity and chastity through complicated social systems and prescriptions. Marriages are arranged, huge dowries conferred, and the daughter's virginity guaranteed. However, the silent but ever-present threat of female sexuality fuels the anxiety of generations and permeates the system since men can never guarantee their paternity. Rather than capitulate to their paranoia (which Shakespeare examines most poignantly in *The Winter's Tale*), however, they regain control of their sexual circumstances by framing female existence with psycho/socio/sexual controls codified by language. Unmarried women are either nuns or prostitutes, extremes of sexual submission or sexual autonomy. Even the Friar recognizes that if his plan for Hero fails, "you may conceal her,/As best befits her wounded reputation,/In some reclusive and religious life,/Out of all eyes, tongues, minds, and injuries" (4.1.239-242). Paradoxically, her ruined reputation makes her an unacceptable wife for Claudio but a perfect bride for Christ.

Beatrice is an orphan, and, though the ward of Leonato, she, nevertheless, speaks with a freedom that Hero does not share: "It is my cousin's duty to make curtsy and say, 'Father, as it please you'" (2.1.44-45). It is unlikely that Beatrice does not know the social codes; rather, because she has no father to speak *for* her, and perhaps arrange a marriage she would otherwise decline, Beatrice must "speak" for herself. Because she is intelligent and articulate, she threatens the institution of marriage that would control and silence such forward women and men's sexuality as well. She defends herself with a rapier wit, and with it, she can castrate any man. Hero, on the other hand, does not demonstrate such linguistic virtuosity, and much of her defense against Claudio is symbolically non-verbal. She represents the cultural model of the dutiful daughter, yet when her honor is impugned, she and the Friar, not her father, defend her.

The cultural imperative that man's speech superseded woman's, that his word silenced hers, was not unique to Shakespeare and the Renaissance. Nor were the tactics that women used to subvert this verbal hegemony. Indeed, centuries before, the myth of Philomela and Procne established a new, unexpected, female idiom to overcome male oppression. After Tereus rapes his sister-in-law, Philomela asserts that she will declare his depravity to the world, a power reserved for men. To silence her, and thus render her threat empty and punish her presumption, he mutilates her by ripping out her tongue. If she cannot speak, as men do, she is powerless. Philomela, however, devises another means to communicate, a method that Tereus, in his personal and cultural gender-centricity, never anticipates nor can even imagine. She weaves the story of her rape, mutilation and imprisonment on a tapestry, and Procne reads it as clearly as if she were reading a text. Unsurprisingly, male mythographers later ignore Tereus's crime and focus, instead, on the horror of the sisters' revenge, killing and cooking Itys, Tereus's son with Procne, and feeding him to his father. The sisters are monsters, unnatural women to usurp such power, and Tereus is a poor father bereft of his son and heir. This reading inaugurates a literary, social and historical tradition in which women are troped as silent, submissive and subjugated as punishment for their audacity. Women, on the other hand, read the myth as a testament to the strength of female bonding and a model of self-empowerment through an alternate, female, non-verbal mode of communication – a female lexicon outside of patriarchy (i.e., the tapestry). Women become texts themselves, reading each other's gestures, facial expressions and eye movements as subliminal statements of intent ignored by men as female idiosyncrasies. Women read and speak between the lines, within the ellipses of their conversations, and through this coded indirection shape an alternate reality disdained by men.

The physical and metaphorical silencing of women is further validated by selectively literal readings of Scripture, wherein women are rarely identified by their own names but rather by the names of their fathers, husbands, and brothers. God spoke the world into existence and then gave Adam the naming power over all creation. And "the man called his wife's name Eve" (Gen. 3:20). This power of men to name, to call into existence or to erase,

essentially authorizes men to recreate women to mirror their needs, not God's. In 1 Timothy 2:11-15, Paul instructs,

Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. *I permit* no woman to teach or have authority over men; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, *with modesty*. (emphasis added) 1 Tim 2:11-15.

In 1 Corinthians 14:34-36, he iterates women's silence and submission to their husbands: "If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church." Knowledge, even spiritual knowledge (i.e., salvation), originates with men and can arbitrarily exclude women. In Ephesians 5:21-25 and Colossian 3:18-19, he counsels men to love their wives, but he directs women to "be *subject* to your husbands" (emphasis added). This is a qualitatively different and unequal relationship. The analogy of husband as "head of the wife as Christ is head of the Church, his body and is himself its Savior" in Ephesians endows men with authority that can easily and intentionally be abused in God's name. Though Paul again counsels wives to be submissive in 1 Peter 3:1-6, he suggests here that their silent obedience may bring their husbands to the Lord: "Your husbands. . . though they do not obey the word, may be won *without a word* by the behavior of their wives" (emphasis added). Putting these women in the company of Sarah, he inadvertently infuses them with a spiritual and social power he heretofore denies them because of their gender. They never have to say a word. His repeated commands that women should be silent are ironically undermined here by his appeal to that very silence to be a means to salvation. He reminds them of their reverence and *chastity* and appeals to their "hidden person of the heart with the imperishable jewel of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious." His metaphors and exhortations are familiar, but what Paul – and other men – does not realize is that this "hidden person of the heart" is the woman who creates herself in her own image, untouchable and unrecognizable by the men who seek to frame her in their own.

Women's behavior is so proscribed in both Testaments, by commandments and culture, that any deviation is perpetuated and canonized through antifeminist tirades in secular literature. Eve is the cause of all men's woes, seductresses like Delilah and Bathsheba make otherwise great men fall, and the blame game goes on. Whether or not men recognize the inherent irony that women have this much power, they, nonetheless, enforce their domination of women as if it were a sacred trust. Women, on the other hand, read Scripture and tradition differently, and thereby derive a symbolic power that cannot be underestimated.

In her Epistle, *To the Virtuous Reader*, from *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, Shakespeare's contemporary, Aemilia Lanyer, writes a defense of women that includes Eve:

[T]his have I done, to make known to the world, that all women deserve not to be blamed" and that the men who castigate them "do like vipers deface the wombs wherein they were bred" . . . and have tempted even the patience of God himself, who gave power to wise and virtuous women, to bring down their pride and arrogancy. (Lanyon 1284)

There follows a catalogue of strong, resolute, chaste women that includes Mary, mother of Jesus. What distinguishes this catalogue from others is that Jesus is defined in terms of Mary, and not the other way around: "it pleased our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, without the assistance of man. . . to be begotten of a woman, born of a woman, nourished of a woman, obedient to a woman" (Lanyer 1284). Lanyer continues to describe Jesus's ministry in terms of women: "he healed women, pardoned women, comforted women. . .took care to dispose of a woman." Her most profound assertion of feminine power derived from Jesus's relationship with women is the scripturally true but oft ignored fact that "after his resurrection, [he] appeared first to a woman, [and] sent a woman to declare his most glorious resurrection to *the rest of his Disciples*" (Lanyon 1284, emphasis added). Mary Magdalene is one of the twelve disciples, not just a woman performing a task commanded by a man.

In the Middle English lyric, "I Sing of a Maiden," the anonymous, perhaps female, poet invests Mary with personal power upon the Annunciation: "King of alle kinges/To [as] her sone

she cheers” (“I Sing” lines 3-4). According to Luke 1:28-35, when Gabriel informs Mary that she is favored by God to conceive Jesus, she does not immediately assent. First she asks, “How shall this be, since I have no husband?” Besides allowing Luke the miraculous explanation of this biological conundrum, Mary’s question reveals an unexpected poise and self-awareness not generally associated with the Annunciation. Tradition states that Mary dutifully responded, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38), revealing herself to be the obedient maiden God had chosen as the mother of His son. The medieval poet, on the other hand, makes her an active partner in this divine decision.

In the seventeenth century, Spanish/Portuguese nun, Sor Violante del Cielo, further empowers Mary at this incredible moment in her life when she writes that even Jesus waits for her response before he incarnates Himself:

The Word who, independent, yet awaits
Humbly to hear His mother acquiesce,
Obedient, even e’er He take on flesh,
Will not come down without that glorious
Yes! . . . he does not come until you give him place.

Equally dramatic and unorthodox, Julian of Norwich meditates on a series of sixteen mystical visions in which she reconfigures God the Son as the Mother in *A Book of Showings*. God the Father is obviously male, yet his awesome power distances Him from men. But by defining Jesus in maternal metaphors, this domestication of the Trinity provides women a powerful, personal, gendered identification with Him. We are brought back into our natural place by a “motherhood of mercy”; we were created by a “motherhood of love, a mother’s love which never leaves us”; he is kind, tender, wise and protective; a child naturally “trusts in its mother’s love in well-being and in woe: “[f]or when it is distressed and frightened, it runs quickly to its mother” (Gilbert and Gubar 16-18). Though men clearly enjoy the same access to forgiveness, grace and salvation that women do, Julian’s gendered language establishes a kind of intuitive relationship between women and Jesus that marginalizes men.

Even the actual language of Scripture endows Jesus with feminine characteristics of God the Mother. He blesses the *meek*,

“for they shall inherit the earth” (Matt 5:5). He lovingly offers comfort and relief to “all who labor and are heavy-laden”, “[c]ome to me, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt 11:28-30). His most gracious and loving act, His self-sacrifice for his children, begins with His entrance into Jerusalem “humble, and mounted on. . . the foal of an ass” (Matt 21:5). The Passion of Jesus – His trial, crucifixion and resurrection – is marked by silent humility and obedience. He submits to God’s will in the Garden of Gethsemane, does not defend Himself directly and unequivocally before Pilate or even Herod, forgives a thief and promises him salvation, attends to His mother and gives himself up to His father. He is protective, loving, comforting, humble, merciful, devoted and dutiful. He is passively active, effecting profound human transformation even as He appears to be subdued and compliant.

Women share these traits with Jesus, and Friar Francis shares them with both. As the father, Leonato dominates the beginning of the wedding ceremony with his instruction to the Friar to “be brief – only to the plain form of marriage, and you shall recount their particular duties afterwards” (4.1.1-3). When Claudio answers “No” to “You come hither, my lord, to marry this lady,” Leonato clarifies the Friar’s language: “To be married to her. Friar, you come to marry her” (4.1.4-8). He validates Hero’s worth, worthiness, and worthwhileness as a wife for Claudio when he affirms that he does not know any reason why the marriage should not take place. To which, in a sadly ironic echo of Jesus, Claudio charges, “O, what men dare do...not knowing what they do” (4.1.19-20), and he takes over the ceremony, supplanting both father and friar with his accusations. The language remains decidedly male in its negotiations as Leonato gives Hero as a “gift” and Claudio returns her as a “rotten orange.”

Based on an alternate reality that Don John and Borachio have devised for him, Claudio believes that Hero has been unfaithful. The scene that Claudio and Don Pedro witness is framed in such stark words of sexual infidelity and contamination that impugn their integrity, honor, and reputation, that the “*seeming* truth of Hero’s disloyalty, that jealousy shall be call’d assurance, and all the preparations overthrown” (2.2.48-50, emphasis added). Don John’s words challenge the sexual authority

of Claudio and Don Pedro, a challenge that undermines their entire cultural identity. Though his “proof” is based on a dumb-show, the men have heard the charges and what they see and hear resonates through their culturally determined perspectives. Despite the fact that Don John is a disreputable fellow only recently reconciled to his brother, and they all know that his animus stems from his own socially inferior position based on the circumstances of his illegitimate birth, they nevertheless believe him because the suggestion of a woman exercising autonomy over her sexuality is inimical to their power, and any man’s words supersede such impudence.

When Leonato finally greets Don John sixty-five lines after his entrance in Act I, he replies, “I am not of many words” and, truly, other than his plotting and planning, he has few lines with the distinguished characters in the play (1.1.157). In scene iii, he states to Conrade that his “sadness is without limit” and that he “cannot hide what [he] is” but that he is “a plain feeling villain” (1.3.4; 13; 32). He deliberately misleads Claudio into believing that Don Pedro loves Hero for himself even as he woos her for Claudio, and then plots to thwart the marriage when it comes to pass. When he finally speaks to Claudio and Don Pedro, Don John prefaces his remarks with courtesies which he has previously disdained, so that when he suggests that the marriage may not happen “when he knows what I know” (3.2.91), the other men are listening. Such an ambiguous remark piques their curiosity, but he continues to temporize vaguely, controlling them with his word choices, until 14 lines after he suggests a problem, he states, “[T]he lady is disloyal” (3.2.104). At first, Claudio does not recognize that he means Hero. And the clarification is sweeping, encompassing every identity that Hero could possibly occupy: “Leonato’s Hero, your Hero, every man’s Hero” (3.2.107-8). Even the word “disloyal” becomes insufficient to the task of defining her. The possibilities for redefining Hero are endless because the male lexicon that controls women is endless. The ambiguity that Don John posits here reflects the amorphous threat that female sexuality is to the men: “The word is too good to paint out her wickedness. I could say she were worse; think you of a worse title, and I will fit her to it” (3.2.109-11). Pick a different word, and I will frame her behavior to it. Claudio and Don Pedro are now complicit in the verbal degradation and destruction of Hero. “Let there be

light. And there was light.” The awesome power of men to name, shape and contain with their words is profoundly manifested here.

As soon as Claudio rejects Hero as his wife, she undergoes physical changes that he interprets for the wedding guests as guilt, sin and immodesty. Much like Don John could easily interpret the exchange between Margaret and Borachio to implicate Hero because he has already awakened the submerged fears and suspicions of Don Pedro and Claudio, Claudio’s charges speak directly to the cultural anxieties this marriage is supposed to assuage. Indeed, Leonato’s one defense of Hero alludes to the Renaissance practice that betrothal itself was sufficient for consummation, thus exonerating her. He never directly defends his daughter against the charges based on her innate honor and chastity, nor does he challenge her three accusers when they summarily dismiss her answer. “I talk’d with no man at that hour” (4.1.86). Even though their exaggerated charges are corroborated by a “liberal villain” (4.1.92), Leonato privileges that they would never lie and, by implication, that they could never be wrong. Indeed, Don John builds on this dramatic moment in which they are transfixed by the word picture that has been drawn for them by resorting to his previous strategy. Through ambiguity and innuendo, he amplifies Hero’s sins by placing them in a context beyond language.

“Fie, fie, they are not to be named...
Nor to be spoke of;
There is not chastity enough in language
Without offense to utter them” (4.1.94-98).

Hero’s behavior is so transgressive that even language, another male social construct, cannot constrain it. Clearly, her identity as maiden, daughter, wife, cousin, and friend is being disputed by these charges; but Claudio effects a complete erasure of Hero when he asks her to “answer truly to your name.” She replies, “Is it not Hero?” Punning on her name, he substitutes, “Hero [whore] itself can blot out Hero’s virtue” (4.1.79-82). She swoons and her accusers think that she has died. Apparently, their power over women’s lives is literal.

After her accusers leave and Leonato laments his existence and Hero’s revival, the Friar speaks. Having been interrupted as celebrant and, thus, marginalized in the proceedings, he has “only

been silent so long,/And given way unto this course of fortune,/By noting of the lady now” (4.1.156-8). Leonato is still indifferent to his daughter and bemoans his own fate and material loss now that he has been dishonored by the charges. If he could, he would disinherit her since she is without marriageable value to him. Beatrice and Benedick try to console him and themselves, but only the Friar remarks that Hero has every right to live. “Dost thou look up?” Leonato demands. “Yea wherefore should she not?” avers the friar (4.1.117-18). He penetrates the shouts and wails and recriminations with a gentle, “Hear me a little” and proceeds to revise Claudio’s interpretation of Hero’s response to his charges. Whereas Claudio misconstrues her blushes as testimony of her guilt because he is reading from the patriarchal script that Don John has written for him, the Friar reads from age, reverence, calling and divinity instead. But he also interprets from a feminized perspective that he shares with Hero and even Jesus. Recognizing that he “must reappropriate language [in order] to constitute and validate a female paradigm for human experience” heretofore privileged only as male (Michalos 7), he sees in her reaction a defense that the patriarchy, including her own father, would disallow.

“A thousand blushing apparitions. . .
 a thousand innocent shames/
 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” (4.1.159-164).

Since language has been, for the most part, controlled by men, women are forced to conceptualize themselves, their values and experiences within an alien construct that does not speak for them and often, indeed excludes them. Speaking (and writing) from such gender-marked, ideologically constrained and linguistically handicapped positions, women are challenged with “nothing less than to ‘reinvent’ language. . .to establish a discourse the status of which could no longer be defined by the phallacy of masculine meaning” (Felman qtd. in Showalter 254). Otherwise, women’s experience and its articulation remain unrecognized because they are unrepresentable in a male idiom. She denied Claudio’s charge—“I talk’d with no man at that hour” (4.1.86)—but,

paradoxically, Leonato hears that as an admission of guilt: “She will not add to her damnation/the sin of perjury; she not denies it” (4.1.172-3). Nevertheless, intuitively aligned with the friar and empowered by his compassionate support, Hero turns the burden of proof onto her father and her accusers and confidently takes responsibility for her punishment onto herself.

They know that do accuse me . . . If I know more of
any man alive/Than that which maiden modesty do
warrant . . . Refuse me, hate me, torture me to death
(4.1.177-183).

Only when the Friar speculates about their motives [“There is some strange misprision in the princes” (4.1.184)] does Benedick wonder about her accusers. From his feminized perspective, the Friar shifts attention to Hero’s innocence, and now the men become the object of suspicion rather than sympathy. Thus, he unobtrusively rejects the construction of women embedded in culture and inscribed in his audience’s psyches and finds a “unique and powerful voice capable of canceling out those other voices. . .which spoke about [Hero] to [Hero] but never for [Hero]” (Fetterley xxiv). Even though Leonato’s ambivalence becomes more congenial to this notion, he still couches it in solipsistic, male language about how he will prove that he is strong and not to be undone. Again, the Friar dilutes the passions with calm, simple advice: “Pause awhile, / And let my counsel sway you in this case” (4.1.200-1). He recommends that they continue the charade of Hero’s death so that Claudio can redeem her reputation and his love for her through quiet reflection of his destructive words. In the process, he will redeem himself:

On this travail look for greater birth. . . Th’ idea of her
life shall sweetly creep . . . Into the eye and presence
of his soul. . .then shall he mourn. . .And wish he had
not so accused her”(4.1.213; 224; 229; 230; 231).

The Friar’s language speaks of death, rebirth, repentance, contrition, forgiveness, redemption and resurrection – the spiritual journey of the Christian and the sacred promise of Jesus. His compassion will save them both.

The Friar's plan is simple: Hero's death will speak for her. No one else need *say* a word. Claudio will reflect upon his words and their consequences, and he will repent. Nevertheless, her kinsmen defend her posthumously as men are wont to do – with threats and challenges to duels. Still, Benedick undertakes this task because Beatrice extorts it from him, not because it is inherently the right thing to do. And Leonato, knowing full well that Hero is alive, laments his loss with which no other man can empathize and makes his revenge as much about himself as it is about Hero. Though Benedick poses a more realistic threat to Claudio – but never seeks satisfaction of Don Pedro – Leonato and Antonio challenge the younger men with buffoonish bravado. They are summarily dismissed, not because of their age but because Don Pedro asserts, “on his honor,” that Hero “was charg'd with nothing/But what was true, and very full of proof” (5.1.104-5). When Leonato protests, he stops the old man cold: “I will not hear you” (5.1.107). And though Leonato insists that he will be heard, he says so only as he exits. The authority of male speech to silence even other men, to render them socially invisible, is represented here in a darkly humorous scene.

The play ends with the characters reconciled in marriage, and the conversation returns, noticeably, to the ever-present fear of cuckoldry. As humorous as the allusions may be, the men sublimate the threat into elaborate protestations that no amount of flouting, beating, or cudgeling will keep them from marriage. Indeed, the final words of the play are quintessentially male in their sweep and import. “I'll devise thee brave punishments for him” (5.4.128). Granted, Don John should not go unpunished, but these are hardly words of benediction at a wedding. Rather than setting a tone of regeneration, these lines reassert male authority that has been temporarily disrupted and portend the violence that percolates just beneath the surface of even Shakespeare's comedies. Yet the supreme irony of a play that explores language on so many levels is that its resolution lies in the tortured malapropisms of Dogberry and his crew, perhaps another attempt by Shakespeare to complicate and compromise male linguistic hegemony with alternate idioms. Though semantics may, to a certain extent, exculpate Claudio and Don Pedro (i.e., they charged Hero based on what they were led to believe by Don John), Leonato's satisfaction rests in another kind of language. He

demands a monument that will clear Hero of any slander, memorializing her chastity in perpetuity. She was destroyed by men's speech; she will be redeemed by the written word, which will continue to praise her long after Claudio is "dumb." This epitaph, like Philomela's tapestry, is a female form, a new poetic – eternal, immutable, constant. Just like the model of Jesus.

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