



4-25-2007

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Recommended Citation

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https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/eng_honproj/1

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English Independent Study

Research Honors (Credit Granted 4 April 2007)

25 April 2007

Much Ado About Nothing's Criticism of the Renaissance Patriarchy

“Well, niece, I trust you will be ruled by your father.” (2.1.47-48)

“The hero that here lies.” (Shakespeare, *Much Ado* 5.3.5)

In a 1956 production of *Measure for Measure*, actress Margaret Johnston played Isabella as anything but the silent woman, obedient to the patriarchal system. One reviewer in the *Stratford Herald* criticized her performance, claiming, “‘Isabella must be [...] possessed of a shining, wordless tenderness if we are to love her (as we must, or the play suffers), and this does not, I think, emerge’” (Gay 127). From Biblical times through the twentieth century, beliefs of inherent male dominance and female inferiority prevailed. The voices of society were predominantly male, and they constructed the ideal roles of women, stressing the importance of female silence, chastity, and obedience to the patriarchy. As the male reviewer of *Measure for Measure* demonstrates, the assumption was that a woman must adopt a silent, submissive role to be accepted in a patriarchal society. Yet, feminist critic Penny Gay refutes this outdated interpretation, asserting that “the fact that Isabella is not written as a ‘shining, wordless’ part [...] is something that most critics were not yet [...] aware of [in 1956], blinkered as they were by assumptions about what constituted an image of female heroism” (127). Only in recent history has society’s general perception of the ideal woman changed significantly. During the Renaissance, Shakespeare took liberties to enact on stage the problems with traditional views of

men and women not only in *Measure for Measure*, but in other plays as well.

Conventional beliefs during the Renaissance still supported unchallenged patriarchal rule. Male domestic treatise writers as well as male educators during the Renaissance prescribed silence as a necessary virtue for the ideal woman (Hull, *Women* 23). The most common rationale for women's silence was religious, and men used Biblical examples – such as the story of creation, the story of the Fall, and the Proverbial descriptions of the good wife – to support their beliefs in women's silence (Kelso 3). Men also prescribed obedience, chastity, and domesticity for women as a strategic method of preserving men's limitless, unchallenged power (Hull, *Women* 23). Men kept women marginalized and silent to prevent any disturbances or threats to the patriarchy.

Despite the overwhelming beliefs in male superiority, resistance to the inequality of the patriarchal system, although not the norm, did exist in this period. Problems in the social system were addressed when women did employ their tongues or their pens. The theater functioned as an even larger forum for debate in the sixteenth century, and some critics view this venue to have been a medium to enact social problems for the general public. The plays of Shakespeare, for example, address problems with the status quo that might have aroused discussion between common people attending the production. *Much Ado About Nothing* enacts the disastrous effects of placing strict limitations on women and endowing men with unquestionable authority simply because of their sex.

The play presents women's compliance with patriarchal ideals as one possible response to the injustice of the system. In *Much Ado*, Leonato arranges a marriage with Claudio for his daughter, Hero, the representation of men's ideal woman who fulfills all of the men's prescriptive requests. In the patriarchal system, Hero exists solely as a blank space for men to fill with their own meaning, and they do so by reading her physical features as they would read a text and by

assigning meaning based on their interpretations (Cook 192). The men's readings of her physiognomy determine her purity or her infidelity – whether her blushes are “a thousand innocent shames” (Shakespeare 4.1.160) or whether “[h]er blush is guiltiness, not modesty” (4.1.41). Hero demonstrates the ease with which the patriarchy could destroy a woman's character as a result of an injurious misreading. Throughout the slander to her character, Hero faithfully enacts one type of female response to patriarchal authority by maintaining a silent tongue and fulfilling all other aspects of the ideal woman.

However, not all women – both characters and historical women alike – readily modeled their behavior after the prescriptive texts of the patriarchy. The play also presents a woman who refuses to uphold the ideals of a system that endows men with power and authority simply because of their sex. In contrast to her cousin Hero, Beatrice is given a more privileged tongue, and she demonstrates rebelliously outspoken and dominant behavior. She refuses marriage on the grounds that she does not want to be “overmastered by a piece of valiant dust” (Shakespeare 2.1.55-57). She challenges the authority with which men are endowed simply because of their sex. As a woman, she asserts her independence and refuses to be silenced, instead engaging in a witty war of words with Benedick. For example, when describing her relationship with Benedick, she states, “In our last conflict, four of his five wits went halting off, and now is the whole man governed with one...for it is all the wealth that he hath left to be known a reasonable creature” (1.1.61-3, 65-7). Her ability to manipulate sharp wit and puns allows her to use her words as weapons as she joins in the male arena. Beatrice's tongue provides a social critique of male domination. In my view, *Much Ado* presents two women's completely different responses to patriarchal rule.

The conflict of the play fully illustrates the detrimental flaws in the ruling system. A trick by the devious Don John “to cross this marriage” convinces Leonato, Don Pedro, and

Claudio that Hero is unfaithful (Shakespeare 2.2.7-8). Completely fooled by the deception, the men engage in slander against Hero's reputation, which in reality is completely virtuous (4.1). Despite the fact that Hero fulfills the image of the ideal woman, she is still subject to slanderous ruin by the patriarchy. Beatrice speaks and is much more openly critical of the father's rule, criticizing how men "bear her in hand until they come to take hands, and then, with public accusation, uncovered slander, unmitigated rancor" (4.1.302-04), and she attacks their lack of masculine courage, explaining that "manhood is melted into curtsies, valor into compliment, and men are only turned into tongue, and trim ones too" (4.1.317-19). Men fail to demonstrate bravery through action, instead employing their tongues with weak or untruthful speech. Since masculine speech must publicly rectify Hero's reputation, Beatrice cannot successfully defend Hero because of her sex, explaining, "I cannot be a man with wishing, therefore I will die a woman with grieving" (4.1.321-22). Beatrice recognizes the limitations on women that even her strong tongue cannot overcome.

Instead of remaining the ideal woman, Hero is rewritten unjustly and irrationally by the men. The men's rash conclusions address larger social issues of Renaissance society: men's irrational fear of cuckoldry causes them to victimize even the most ideal products of their system (Cook 187). In the society represented in the play, authorities exercise neither reason nor justice; yet, they maintain their authoritative position because power is acquired by virtue of sex and birth.

While men of lower class status are able to overcome the limitations of their birth and to have influential voices in society, the play never gives women such an opportunity, thus leaving the ending unresolved. The upper-class, intellectual men, such as Leonato, Don Pedro, and Claudio, fail to bring about justice and to rectify the situation of Hero's slandered reputation. Instead, it is the bumbling constable, Dogberry, and his sidekick, Verges, who expose the

treachery of Don John and enlighten the characters with the truth (Shakespeare 5.1). Dogberry's frequent misuse of language characterizes him as an uneducated, lower class fool. During an exchange with Leonato, he uses the word "tedious" as if it meant "rich" (3.5.20). Furthermore, instead of begging Leonato's pardon, Dogberry states, "[O]ur watch tonight, excepting Your Worship's presence, ha' ta'en a couple of as arrant knaves as any in Messina" (3.5.29-31), implying that Leonato is more of a knave than the criminals. Ironically, however, Dogberry is able to solve the problem that the upper-class men cannot. While authority figures possess authority because of their birthright and sex, the play does provide the opportunity for lower class individuals to rise as influential figures at climactic points in the play.

Although it is possible for the criterion of birth to be flexible as a determinant of authoritative power for men, the play presents the criterion of sex as being much more static. Throughout the first three acts of the play, Beatrice proves her ability to enter into the male arena by employing her words as weapons. For example, she frequently uses puns and wit to engage in linguistic battle with Benedick and to assert her own independence. So the audience naturally expects that Beatrice will use her skillful language to rise as the ultimate defender of justice in the play. Yet, quite the opposite is true: Beatrice admits her inability as a woman to defend her cousin, instead demanding that Benedick speak for her because his role as a man provides him with authority that she can never possess (Shakespeare 4.1). Moreover, Beatrice's silence during the last scene of the play allows the tension between sex and authority to ferment without any sense of resolution (5.1). I argue that the play leaves this issue unresolved to spark social debate about the limitations of women's roles: no matter what her response to patriarchal rule, a woman will always be silenced and overruled.

The play enacts the problems with a patriarchal structure that gives women no voice in their own lives and no autonomy. Women exist as texts to be read by men; thus, a woman's

meaning and value is interpreted and assigned by the patriarchy. In this reading then, the word “nothing” in the title of the play can also be interpreted to refer to female genitalia, which is literally in the shape of a zero. Women are physically a space for men to fill, both physically through sexual acts and abstractly through verbal interpretation. Through the character of Hero – the ideal Renaissance woman, silent and submissive to male authority – the play enacts the ways in which men read women as texts and assign meaning. By complying with every aspect of the male-dominated structure, Hero’s virtuous, chaste, female identity, the ultimate trophy of any man, reinforces the hierarchy. However, even Hero – the ultimate embodiment of the chaste, obedient woman as her name suggests – is unjustly accused of unfaithfulness by the males in authority. The men objectify Hero, leading to the inevitable misreading of her character. Because Hero must be silent, she has no tongue with which to refute the false slander against her reputation. The play questions patriarchal authority by epitomizing Hero as the ideal image of the silent, powerless woman disgraced by the men who read and interpret her as a text.

Just as Hero’s tongue remains silent, the pens of women writers also remained fairly silent during the Renaissance. As feminist critic Helene Cixous explains the necessity of women writing their stories, she includes a passionate call to action: “And why don’t you write? Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours... Write, let no one hold you back, let nothing stop you: not man... I write woman: woman must write woman. And man, man” (277). Cixous views writing and language as sexed, so silencing women also silences – and suppresses – the needs and the opinions of their sex. I agree that men might write about women with a completely different perspective and might not accurately describe women’s experiences or feelings since they do not have first-hand knowledge.

Since most of the treatise books for women were written by men, these books did not accurately reflect women’s experiences or thinking (Klein, ed. x). Suzanne W. Hull explains the

problematic nature of this system in *Women According To Men*: “Men’s writing was *prescriptive* and *proscriptive*, but not always *descriptive*. It pictured women according to men’s ideals and interpretations. The books prescribe a life different from what women might have described had they been publishing” (23). While modern historians do not have much direct access to women’s descriptive writings of their roles in society, they do have men’s writings about the ways in which an ideal woman should behave. We can learn a significant amount about a culture by studying its values and belief systems, and the men’s “prescriptive and proscriptive” writings reveal that information (Hull, *Women* 23). During the Renaissance, men created the image of the ideal woman in their prescriptive texts to promote women’s obedience, silence, and moral behavior – all qualities that men highly valued in women. If women followed these rules, the patriarchy could rule unchallenged. While these prescriptive writings by men do, unfortunately, make it difficult to know the ways in which women actually behaved or their feelings toward the complete male domination over them, I am seeking to understand the patriarchy’s construction of the ideal woman so that I can then analyze the effects of this ideal in terms of the women in *Much Ado*.

The sixteenth century patriarchy of England relied primarily on religious doctrine to construct their definition of women’s roles. Woman was created from man, therefore resulting in her presumed inferiority and submissiveness (Kelso 3). It is written in Genesis that “the ribbe which the Lord God had taken from the man, made he a woman, and broght her to the man. Then the man said, ‘This now is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh. She shalbe called woman, because she was taken out of man’” (*The Geneva Bible* 2.22-23). The Bible teaches that the female body was physically produced from the male body; therefore, the man, created first and in God’s own likeness, is superior to the woman, created as a companion for the man. Further support in Genesis for women’s inferiority to men is taken from the story of “The Fall of Man”

(*The Geneva Bible*, Genesis 3.1). The serpent tricked Eve into eating the forbidden fruit, and she in turn offered it to Adam, making her responsible for sin (*The Geneva Bible*, Genesis 3.4-7).

Feminist historians Katherine Usher Henderson and Barbara F. McManus explain in their book *Half Humankind* that “Eve’s fall and consequent subjection to man was the word of God and had to be taken into account” (7). This interpretation of the Bible places responsibility for all sin in the world on woman because Eve mistakenly disobeyed God’s word. The Virgin Mary, the epitome of the chaste wife and mother who is completely obedient to God, counteracts the image of woman as sinful. The word “ave” in the praise “Ave Maria,” sung to Mary, is the literal reversal of the Latin word “Eva.” The patriarchy used Mary – in her complete submissiveness to patriarchal authority – as an example of the ideal woman (Henderson and McManus 7).

In addition to Eve and the Virgin Mary, the patriarchy also routinely used the Biblical writings of St. Paul to prove the importance of women’s subordination to their male rulers. St. Paul explicitly states: “Wiues, submit your selues vnto your hous bands, as vnto the Lord. For the hous band is the wiues head eue as Christ is the head of the Church, & the same is the sauieur of *his* bodie. Therefore as the Church is in subiectio to Christ, euen so *let* the wiues *be* to their hous bands in euerie thing” (*The Geneva Bible*, Ephesians 5.22-24). The household is organized in a hierarchy like the heavenly patriarchy, a model promoting a male ruler. The comparison of the husband to Christ, the highest authoritative power, endows the husbands with complete rule. In *The Patriarch’s Wife: Literary Evidence and the History of the Family*, Margaret J. M. Ezell reiterates that women were expected to obey their husbands just as they would God himself (55). For no reason other than their sex, men were given an escalated and almost divine place in the social hierarchy. According to this system, women should act submissively and obediently to their supposed male superiors. In Corinthians, St. Paul writes of the marriage debt, in which both the husband and the wife submit to each other. The patriarchy failed to draw attention to this

passage; rather, they only quote the parts of the text that serve their purpose of maintaining complete authority.

The ideology of the “Good Wife” was based on traditional values and beliefs found in the Bible, which stressed the submission of women to their male superiors (Ezell 38). Ezell summarizes the characterization of the “Good Wife” as a “conservative force, whose appeal is to tradition, not innovation” (38). She further uses the word “conventional” to reemphasize the strict adherence to Biblical principles. Male authors who construct the ideal woman through their writing frequently use Biblical language. For example, Patrick Hannay’s *The Happy Husband: Or, Directions for a Maide To Choose Her Mate* (1622) in which he states that by marriage, “the *Man* is made the *Womans* head” (169). This language echoes the Biblical metaphors of St. Paul, which gives the husband power to rule his wife. Furthermore, he instructs women that “to keep him good, his wife must be / Obedient, milde” (Hannay 168). The adjectives “obedient” and “mild” reinforce the ideal woman’s passive nature so that her husband may rule her. The moral burden of the family is strategically placed on the wife, suggesting that if the man is not “good,” his wife is to blame for not fulfilling her duties.

Other male treatise writers also echo Biblical writings when creating the image of the wife. Written during the sixteenth century, Juan Luis Vives’ *The Instruction of a Christian Woman* was one of the most influential characterizations of the ideal woman. According to historian Joan Larsen Klein, “It is clear throughout that Vives sees a wife as the physical, social, and religious extension of her husband, inferior and subject to him in all things” (99). Vives echoes the religious teachings of St. Paul as he preaches of feminine inferiority and male dominance. In *A Godly Form of Household Government*, written at the end of the sixteenth century, Robert Cleaver discusses the importance of chastity: “Take from a maide or woman her beautie, take from her, kindred, riches, comelinesse, eloquence, sharpnesse of wit, cunning in her craft, and giue

her *Chastitie*, and you haue giuen her all things” (352). Cleaver’s writing concurs with other male authors, like Hannay and Vives, that a woman’s chastity is the most important virtue she possesses. The sin of adultery or promiscuity strips a woman of her virtue completely. Thus, men clearly used Biblical language in their prescriptive writing to support their claims for male dominance.

Male authors during the Renaissance who describe the ideal woman also focus heavily on her confinement to the domestic sphere. The prescription of domesticity permeates the entirety of Hannay’s passage. He begins, “...[H]er huswifery / Within doores she must tend; her charge / Is that at home; his that at large” (Hannay 168). Keeping women confined to the domestic sphere assured men that their wives were faithful to them. Hannay explains that a Good Wife is ““not gadding, news to know, or tell”” (168). The world outside the domestic sphere promoted conversation between individuals, and if a woman ventured into this environment without her husband, she was likely to engage in free conversation uncensored by her male ruler. Since men viewed women’s speech as a threat to the patriarchy, they attempted to confine women to the enclosed, restricted domestic space, a place where men could observe women at all times. By compelling women to complete traditional household duties, just as their sex had done for generations, men also reduced the risk of women thinking independently and rebelling against the inherently sexist system. Just as Hannay stresses the importance of keeping women within the domestic sphere, so, too, does Vives: “[W]hich if she be good, it were better to be at home within and unknown to other folks” (102). He believes that the outside world will “shake off her demureness and honesty, either all together, or else a great part” (102). Therefore, according to Vives’ teachings, moral women stay within the domestic sphere to ensure their virtue, which cannot be fully maintained if they venture into the supposedly dangerous outside world.

The patriarchy also uses the domestic discourse of Proverbs to confine women’s roles to

the home – a place where a woman could be kept under the close watch of her husband. The proverb of “The Ideal Wife” almost exclusively relates to domestic tasks:

And she riseth, whiles it is still night: and giueth the porcion to her hous holde...

She feleth that her merchandise is good: her candle is not put out by night.

She putteth her hands to the wherue, & her hands handle the spindle.

She maketh her self carpets: fine linen & purple *is* her garment.

Strength and honour *is* her clothing...

She ouerseeth y waies of her housholde, and eateth not the bread of ydlenes. (*The*

Geneva Bible, Proverbs 31.15, 18-19, 22, 25, 27)

This religious view of the virtuous woman focuses on domestic chores, such as the weaving of cloth and the preparation of meals. The language in the Bible for the ideal wife strongly emphasizes a woman’s place in the domestic sphere. The metaphor “strength and honour *is* her clothing” uses the same domestic language – the language of cloth making – to reinforce the rewards that any virtuous woman must possess. If a woman resided only in the domestic space under the supervision of her husband at all times, he would have assurance of her chastity and virtue. The Proverbs further state, “Who shal finde a vertuous woman? for her price *is* farre aboue the pearles. The heart of her hous band trusteth in her, and he shal haue no need of spoile. She wil do him good, and not euil all the daies of her life” (*The Geneva Bible*, Proverbs 31.10-12). This language accentuates the importance of the woman to be virtuous and faithful so that her husband can trust her. Since the time of Eve, sins have been the fault of the woman, the supposed inferior sex more susceptible to sin. Men exploited this view of women to promote their own patriarchal agenda.

The education that men prescribed for upper-class women was limited to that which would help women attain a virtuous moral character and domestic skills. Overall, this educational

system was attractive to men because it produced virtuous women while reducing threats to the patriarchy. In her *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance*, Ruth Kelso clearly illustrates the gap between men's and women's education: "Education for the gentleman was a wide-flung subject, involving all that was called liberal and drawing on the best pedagogical advice of the time. Education for the lady looked to her proficiency in domestic affairs and what in moral and religious training would keep her safely concerned only with them" (4). While men developed their philosophical education and political beliefs in the larger public space, women were taught only skills that allowed them to benefit their male rulers in some way within the domestic space. Vives preached that women's education should focus on teaching them to be good and virtuous, so he recommended that pure women should be taught classical and Christian literature that best presented those virtues (101). He believed that reading about the lives of other women who had been "the keepers of chastity and pureness, and the copies of virtues" would inspire women to live similar lives of virtue (101). However, men did fear the risks involved with creating literate, learned women. It was difficult to limit the literature that women read and to ensure that they were only reading for the purposes of virtue (101). Vives stresses the dangers of educating women: "I do not allow in a subtle and crafty woman such learning as should teach her deceit and teach her no good manners and virtues" (101). Vives recognized the threats that women could pose if they began cultivating their intellects; ultimately, female learning could result in significant threats to the patriarchy.

Critical thinking for women was not only discouraged, but looked down upon by society. Hull describes male attitudes toward women's education: "Respectable or 'good' girls and women were expected to stay close to home and learn household skills and duties and little else. They had inferior minds, incapable of handling complex subjects" (*Women* 23). By keeping women physically confined to the household as much as possible, men also sought to restrict

feminine minds solely to the domestic sphere as well. If women were taught how to think, to read, and to write critically, they might threaten patriarchal authority. While many people during this time may have genuinely believed that women were not capable of the same learning as men, labeling women as intellectually inferior also functioned as a strategy for upholding traditional male authority.

Arguably the single most important characteristic for a woman to have during the sixteenth century was a silent tongue, and male authors covered this topic in great detail in their prescriptive writings. Men praised “that other great virtue in women, silence” (Kelso 100). Vives equates a virtuous woman with a silent woman, advising her “in company to hold her tongue demurely, and to let few see her, and none at all hear her” (102). Men equated a loose tongue with a loose body; therefore, by silencing themselves, women proved their purity and virtue. The use of the word “demurely” reinforces the necessity for extreme modesty when in public so that a women’s virtue would not be questioned (*Oxford English Dictionary*). The silencing of the feminine voice was a method of control used by men to keep women submissive to them. Even if a woman had adequate reason to be angry with her husband, silence was still required. Henderson and McManus confirm that “the standards of the domestic conduct books...mandate silence as a virtue appropriate for women under almost all circumstances” (53). Women who failed to silence their tongues against their husbands were liable to be condemned for overstepping their bounds.

Men further justified the demand for women’s silence on the premise that women were less capable of intelligent speech, thus lessening their right to use their tongues. Many men still believed in the ancient philosophical beliefs of Aristotle, who claimed that it was a “natural scientific ‘fact’” that women were less capable than men of intellectual learning (Jardine 40). These beliefs are evident in the fifteenth century writings of Francesco Barbaro. In *Directions for*

Love and Marriage, Barbaro explains that women should be “reluctant rather than eager to open their mouths, and may be praised for their brevity in serious speech rather than for their lengthy eloquence” (qtd. in Kelso 101). Barbaro does not consider women to be capable of the same level of “serious” conversation as men, and he therefore encourages them to employ the use of their tongue as little as possible. Kelso’s research also proves that men believed that “silence is a great preserver of love in husbands, who thus are not plagued by idle words but are listened to reverently when they wish to speak, whose anger is not aroused or increased by the sharp words of that most unnatural animal, a wife who wishes to conquer” (100). Many men found women’s speech to be an unnecessary irritant (100). Kelso’s description illustrates the ways in which men dehumanized outspoken women, referring to them as “that most unnatural animal” (100). Men used the argument of women’s inferiority to deduce that women’s speech was inferior as well. By describing women’s speech as unequal and unworthy to men’s speech, the patriarchy stressed the necessity of women’s silence.

By creating an argument for the necessity of women’s silence, the patriarchy promoted its own agenda of complete rule without the threat of women’s speech. In *Still Harping on Daughters*, Lisa Jardine argues, “This emphasis on the need for women to control their tongue is hardly surprising, for within the tightly-knit Renaissance household the wife’s tongue is her only weapon. Both gossiping and scolding give her a semblance of power, which threatens disorder” (107). For a woman who was confined to the domestic space, her tongue was her primary means of gaining power or control, and so her speech threatened the supposed natural hierarchy of male power. Thus, the ideal Renaissance woman exhibited the crucial virtue of silence – among her other necessary virtues of chastity, obedience, and domesticity.

In *Much Ado*, Hero’s character enacts the patriarchy’s ideal woman. Hero represents all desirable aspects of a conventional woman: chastity, virtue, honor, obedience, wealth, and

beauty. These characteristics are prescribed in men's writings regarding women's roles during the Renaissance. Moreover, she provides domestic salvation for Claudio as an alternative to the war that he has endured, further promoting the patriarchy. Hero's submissiveness to her father and to her newly appointed husband also demonstrates her obedience to their authority as her rulers. Moreover, her silence characterizes her as the ideal woman, and this silence is especially apparent in the opening scene of the play when she stands for over 150 lines without uttering a word (Shakespeare 1.1). As Leonato and Antonio discuss the plans for her marriage to Don Pedro, Hero never speaks. Since unmarried women acted as their fathers instructed them, Hero has no voice in her marriage. Antonio reminds Hero, "Well, niece, I trust you will be ruled by your father" (2.1.47-48). Hero enacts the role of the ideal Renaissance woman because she follows Antonio's instructions, silently and passively listening as her father makes marriage arrangements for her. When Leonato promises her to Claudio, Hero never vocalizes her consent; rather, she whispers in Claudio's ear, and she later chooses the silent action of a kiss (2.1). Hero keeps her tongue silent throughout the marriage discussion, aligning her actions with the patriarchy's desires for women. Critic Diane Elizabeth Dreher explains, "In her silence and modesty, she exemplifies the perfect Renaissance woman... Hero listens in silent and modest obedience to her father's instructions about her marriage in a manner Juan Luis Vives would have applauded" (85). Hero represents on stage the prescribed ideal woman, which promotes the ideal created by male writers. Furthermore, it is important to remember that Hero would have been played by a young boy, not a woman. Just as men wrote prescriptively of a woman's ideal role, so, too, did men enact this ideal role on stage.

I argue that Hero's striking silence not only establishes her role as the ideal woman, but also is her greatest affirmation of the patriarchy. Claudio, who upholds the conventional patriarchal system and desires a "socially eligible wife" (Bevington 221), identifies the pivotal

role of silence as he states, “Silence is the perfectest herald of joy” (Shakespeare 2.1.292). Silence allows the patriarchy to continue to rule unchallenged, ensuring that the safe, familiar, predictable system will be maintained. However, while Hero does not speak, the act of her silence does: silence indicates complacency, acceptance, and affirmation, therefore displaying her consent to the patriarchy and reinforcing it. Silencing women in society also silences the possibility of social change – change that would address the inequality between the sexes, change that would create more opportunities for women, and change that would remove the nearly absolute power from the patriarchy and empower women to govern themselves. By remaining silent, women continue to occupy that marginalized space in society without objection, and such compliance promotes the status quo. Thus, Hero’s silence actually supports male domination.

Hero’s mother, Innogen, creates a precedent for Hero’s silence since she herself never speaks in the play. The Quarto and the Folio versions of *Much Ado* list Innogen’s name in the cast list, and she enters on stage with Leonato, her husband, in the first scenes of the first two acts (Friedman 359). Yet, never once does she speak a word. Most directors have chosen to eliminate this nonverbal character entirely from the play (359); however, I believe that her inclusion in the play would certainly prove interesting from a feminist point of view. If Hero’s mother demonstrates complete silence, it is logical that Hero would follow her mother’s example. Thus, the audience can see the conformity to patriarchal values being passed down from generation to generation. Critic Michael Friedman in his article, “‘Hush’d on Purpose to Grace Harmony’: Wives and Silence in *Much Ado about Nothing*,” supports this interpretation as one possibility for the play’s inclusion of Innogen: “Brought up by such a mother, it would not be surprising that Hero should also defer obediently to men in all aspects” (361). Hero would simply enact the same behavior that she has seen in her mother. Furthermore, Innogen’s silence while her daughter’s reputation is slandered might dramatize the mother’s powerlessness to

defend a daughter. Her physical presence on stage would draw attention to itself, and the powerful act of her complete silence would demonstrate the inability of even an adult woman, a mother, to participate in a male-dominated society.

Hero's name further characterizes her as the ideal female image. In his epitaph, Claudio calls her "the Hero that here lies" (5.3.5). The pun on "Hero" emphasizes the way that men perceive Hero as their savior – once they have reaffirmed her virtue and faithfulness of course. Her chastity and obedience to her father and future husband affirm the power of the patriarchy; in contrast, the figurative death of her chastity, literalized by her mock death and funeral, implies the failure of the patriarchy to maintain control. The "death" of Hero in *Much Ado* parallels the story of Hero of Sestos, who allowed Leander to take her virginity. After Leander drowned at sea, Hero threw herself from her tower to her death (Lindemans n.pag.). Hero of Sestos, like Hero in *Much Ado*, was left unchaste with a stained reputation. Both of these women suffer "deaths" as a result of careless men ruining their reputations. Furthermore, the name "Hero" contains a masculine ending rather than a feminine one. She is significantly not the female version, "Heroine," but the male version, thus reflecting her affirmation of the patriarchy. Since Hero's existence is solely to benefit the men, it makes sense that she reflects the traits of this masculine world. Even the actor playing Hero's character would have been a young boy since women did not act on stage during the sixteenth century. Thus, the Hero enacted for the audience during the original production would have embodied "her" masculine reflection of patriarchal values. Men promoted their social agenda regarding the ideal roles of women both onstage and in text, and social norms allowed women no role in this process.

Since ideal women, like Hero, existed solely to benefit the patriarchy, the play enacts the disastrous results that occur when a woman's flawless reputation is questioned. In *Much Ado*, the devious villain, Don John, plays a trick to make the men believe that Hero is unfaithful.

Bringing Don Pedro and Leonato to watch outside Hero's window, he stages a scene to make the men believe that Hero is unfaithful; however, the woman at the window is not Hero, but rather her servant, Margaret. Don John even reemphasizes the magnitude of Hero's supposed lack of fidelity by referring to her as "Leonato's Hero, [Claudio's] Hero, every man's Hero" (3.2.100-101). The use of the possessive accentuates male ownership of the female body as property. Hero is the epitome of the conventional Elizabethan woman, capable of enhancing the reputations of Leonato, Claudio, or any man who might take ownership of her in marriage. Yet, the reverse is true as well: she also has the powerful capability as a woman to make a cuckold of any man who "possesses" her. This scene further enacts the social problems with the ideal woman. Because prescriptive texts state that women should not disagree with men under any circumstances (Henderson and McManus 53), Hero's role as the silent, feminine ideal strips her of a tongue with which to defend herself when her character is slandered. She only has access to passive, nonverbal actions. When accused of being unfaithful, she faints, physically incapacitating herself and allowing the men to continue to destroy her reputation through their words. Since Hero does represent the ideal woman and embodies patriarchal discourse, one would expect her to receive its rewards. Instead, despite her perfections, her worth is subsumed by Don John's slander. This play in effect enacts the disastrous results of powerful male speech, and in doing so, it calls the patriarchy it represents into question

Hero's passivity and silence provide the men in the play full, uninterrupted access to interpret her as a text. The men search for symbolic meaning in Hero's physiognomy. For example, Claudio describes, "Behold how like a maid she blushes here! / ... Comes not that blood as modest evidence / to witness simple virtue?" (Shakespeare 4.1.33, 36-7). In this interpretation, Hero's blushing – as a result of the blood in her cheeks – represents her modesty. Yet, Claudio refutes his earlier interpretation by proclaiming, "Her blush is guiltiness, not

modesty” (4.1.41). The same blush can convey two opposing meanings. Feminist semiotician Carol Cook argues that these two interpretations illustrate Claudio’s recognition of the “dichotomy [for Hero’s identity] to be one between her surface and her hidden nature” (194). Claudio believes that on the surface, Hero’s blush gives the appearance of innocence, while concealing the truth of her infidelity deep within. Claudio now believes that Hero is “but the sign and semblance of her honor” (Shakespeare 4.1.32). He accuses her of only resembling the honor that she once possessed; moreover, he thinks that it is the impression left from that honor that she once possessed that the men mistakenly interpret as virtue now. Clearly, men’s own agendas heavily influence their subjective interpretations of women, thus illustrating the problematic nature of such a system.

Ironically, it is Hero’s passivity - the result of her compliance with the patriarchy’s rules - that leads the men to interpret her features. Cook alerts us to the pun on “nothing” and “noting” in the title of the play. She calls attention to the fact that “to note can mean to observe (to read) or to make note of (to inscribe); both involve acts of interpretation” (192). I believe that both meanings of “noting” apply to the play. The men read Hero as a text, and they inscribe their interpretations onto her, just as Claudio does with her blushes. Ironically, it is her silence that causes the men to derive the most meaning from her: “Hero’s nothing invites noting, her blankness produces marking” (192). Because Hero does not speak, the men interpret her meaning and speak for her: “Her place in the world of this play is most apparent in this scene, where, nearly silent and finally subsiding into unconsciousness under the onslaught of abuse, she becomes in effect a sign to be read and interpreted by others” (194). The men read her as a text, and she does not provide any vocalization to prove otherwise because, as the embodiment of the ideal Elizabethan woman, she is silent.

Leonato also interprets Hero as a text that contains the truth about her infidelity as he

attempts to read her. His metaphorical language further accentuates his belief in interpretation:

Why, she, oh, she, is fallen
 Into a pit of ink, that the wide sea
 Hath drops too few to wash her clean again
 And salt too little which may season give
 To her foul-tainted flesh! (Shakespeare 4.1.139-143)

Leonato's words dehumanize Hero by reducing her to paper rather than an individual. The metaphor of ink exemplifies the ways that men read women as a text. Just as ink is used to write words on paper that will be read, so, too, is Hero's character viewed as the "ink" that imprints itself on the "paper" of her body. Her body, like words on paper, is read by the men as a text, and they use the supposed meanings as testimony to her guilt. Cook describes Hero in this situation as "a kind of cipher or space, which other characters...fill with readings of their own" (192). Leonato also rashly concludes that "the story [...] is printed in her blood" (Shakespeare 4.1.122). Like Claudio, Leonato also believes that Hero's blood contains the truth about her chastity, and he attempts to read it as a text. Hero's body is merely the paper containing the text that the men have written upon her. She contains no meaning other than what the men who wield the power in society have given her. Dreher affirms this interpretation as she writes, "[O]ne 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" (86). Women's reputations can never be stable in a patriarchal world where female voices are silenced and their characters are dependent on men's interpretations of them. True to Vives and Cleaver's instructions, Hero, as the ideal woman, never disagrees with her rulers, even when false charges are brought against her. Through Hero's character, the play enacts the social problems for women when they are completely silenced.

As a member of the patriarchy, the Friar also reads Hero as a text and voices his own interpretations; yet, in contrast to Claudio and Leonato, the Friar perceives Hero's physical characteristics as testimony to her innocence. The Friar argues, "I have marked / A thousand blushing apparitions / To start into her face, a thousand innocent shames" (4.1.158-60). The Friar believes that Hero's blushing is simply the shame of false accusations brought against her character. He further describes:

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. (4.1.158-164)

The Friar interprets the whiteness that overcomes Hero after she faints as an outward sign of her purity. He further believes that he sees a symbolic flame in her eyes that cleanses her of the slander against her character. Hero has no control over the men's interpretation of her; rather, she functions as a passive, inanimate text for the men to decipher. Although the Friar's interpretation of Hero supports her chastity, he still reads her physical body as a text, and she as a woman is powerless to agree or to disagree with him.

As a woman subjected to the patriarchy, Hero does not seem to possess nor articulate any innate meaning; rather, her meaning is only apparent when the male authority figures read her as a text. While the text of *Much Ado* clearly depicts Hero as the faithful, obedient daughter, the men of the patriarchal system nevertheless succeed in tainting her character. When Claudio challenges Hero's character by "mak[ing her] answer truly to [her] name (Shakespeare 4.1.79), Hero, attempting to prove her faithfulness, asks Claudio, "Is it not Hero? Who can blot that name / With any just reproach?" (4.1.80-81). Claudio answers, "Marry, that can Hero! / Hero itself can blot out Hero's virtue" (4.1.82-83). To Claudio and the other males in the play,

“Hero’s virtue” represents all of the ideal female characteristics. Hero is a text to be interpreted by the male characters; therefore, she functions as the female embodiment of the ideal virtues only as long as the men interpret her in this way. Hero’s reputation, like the reputations of most women during the sixteenth century, remains dangerously unstable since it depends upon the interpretation of her character by the men in positions of authority. Using comedy as a shield, the play successfully criticizes a society that can falsely disgrace a woman while she remains powerless to prove otherwise.

Hero’s value as a woman in sixteenth century society depends upon her ability to be read and interpreted as the idealized, chaste maiden that enhances the reputation of the patriarchy; however, when the men believe her to be unfaithful, they immediately wish to discard her to save their own reputations. When Don John testifies that “the lady is disloyal” (3.2.98), Claudio reads her physiognomy, looking for abstract evidence that supports this interpretation – which of course he finds since such a practice of reading and interpreting is completely subjective. Once the men interpret Hero as unfaithful, they immediately wish themselves to be rid of her in order to salvage their own reputations from the shame that she could bring upon them. Claudio refuses to marry her in the interest of his own reputation: a marriage to a virtuous woman will enhance his reputation while a marriage to a loose woman will make him a cuckold. Leonato harshly denounces his daughter and the shame she has brought upon him as father, exclaiming, “O Fate, take not away thy heavy hand! / Death is the fairest cover for her shame/ That may be wished for” (4.1.113-15). Leonato further commands, “Do not live, Hero, do not ope thine eyes” (4.1.123). Leonato would rather have his daughter die than dishonor him with her infidelity. He disowns his daughter and wishes her dead, based on accusations that other men have made against her purity. Bevington explains, “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 a

patriarchal society, his responsibility is to guarantee the chastity of his daughter” (222). Leonato only values Hero for what she represents, which is her virtuous nature that enhances his reputation. Both Leonato and Claudio react rashly and impulsively without consideration that the accusations could be false. The men demonstrate greater concern for their own reputations rather than for the welfare of the women closest to them.

In their search for truth, the men ironically choose their inaccurate system of interpreting women as text rather than listening to the women’s rational voices. Beatrice refuses to believe the accusations and defends her cousin. Yet, Leonato ignores Beatrice’s protests, placing more faith in the interpretations of men than the words of women. He believes in the subjectivity of signs and meanings circulated and guaranteed by the patriarchy while disregarding all other logical objections. Significantly, however, Beatrice does not interpret Hero as a text to be read as the men do in the play; so she is never deceived by these false interpretations. As a woman, she relies instead on her intimate knowledge of Hero’s character, which causes her to never doubt her cousin’s purity. The play illustrates the truth that is lost when masculine voices overpower feminine voices simply because of their sex.

These signs of unfaithfulness that the men believe to read in Hero are caused by both fathers’ and husbands’ preoccupation with the possibility of unfaithfulness and cuckoldry that the men read or believe they see. This preoccupation is evident from the very beginning of the play. When Benedick rejects marriage, he explains, “But that I will have a recheat winded in my forehead or hang my bugle in an invisible baldrick, all women shall pardon me” (Shakespeare 1.1.229-32). Benedick associates marriage with cuckoldry because, as he admits, he does not trust women to be faithful. Later in the scene, Benedick references the horns of a bull that should be placed upon his head, and Claudio replies that he would be “horn-mad,” a reference to the horns of a cuckold. Even as early as the first scene in the play, men’s conversations illustrate

their preoccupation with cuckoldry in marriage, foreshadowing the false conclusions that will be drawn out of fear regarding Hero's fidelity later in the play.

The social implications of cuckoldry during the Renaissance explain the men's preoccupation with women's chastity. A sexually loose woman reflects poorly on her father. For example, if Hero had been loose with her body, her promiscuity would be a sign of Leonato's inability to control his daughter. Such actions will prevent him from being able to marry her to a socially respectable man, so her actions would completely destroy her father's reputation. Cook argues that there is a "larger cultural picture in which men share a sense of vulnerability because they have only a woman's word for the paternity of their children. A man may be a cuckold...and not be aware of his horns" (187). In *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays*, Carol Thomas Neely suggests several defense mechanisms that men used to protect themselves against the dreaded embarrassment of cuckoldry. First and foremost, they "deny its possibility through idealization" (Neely 41). For example, men emphasized the importance of female chastity in their writings. Prescriptive texts, like Vives' *Instruction for a Christian Woman*, for example, stress chastity above all else for an unmarried woman under her father's care (Vives 112). Vives even continues to state that a "married woman ought to be of greater chastity than an unmarried" because a married woman will "offend and displease at once with one wicked deed...almighty God...And next unto God, thou offendest thine husband, unto whom only thou hast given thyself, in whom thou breakest all loves and charities if thou once be defiled" (112). Vives describes unfaithfulness as the worst crime a woman can commit since it will irreconcilably offend both of her male masters. Vives further discusses the severity of infidelity as writes, "Wherefore thou dost the more wrong to give away that thing which is another body's, without the owner's license" (113). Women do not even possess the rights to their own bodies; rather, their physical bodies are owned by their fathers until they are married, and then they are the

property of their husbands. Being cuckolded indicated a man's complete loss of his most important piece of property: his wife.

The central conflict of *Much Ado* revolves around men's fears of women's sexuality. Claudio's fears of being cuckolded by Hero cause him to make rash judgments against her character. In *Comic Women, Tragic Men*, Linda Bamber suggests that these anxieties about cuckoldry are calmed by the end of the play: "Similarly, the woman problem is raised only to be dismissed. We are titillated with reminders that women might be unfaithful; the cuckoldry jokes of *Much Ado About Nothing*...remind us of what could happen. But it never does. The women are as transparently faithful as the plot is transparently comic" (21). However, I would argue that the play is not "transparently comic," as Bamber suggests. There is no humor in the destroyed reputation of an innocent, faithful woman; moreover, the lack of respect and trust that the male figureheads have for their wives, fiancés, daughters, and nieces is appalling and disturbing. I would argue that the ending does not resolve all of the serious issues confronted in this problem comedy. Hero's staged death, symbolizing the death of her virtue, creates far too serious a mood to be simply resolved by a marriage, as Bamber claims. I believe that the play uses the genre of comedy to address men's fears of being cuckolded; in such a case, a man is completely overruled by the woman, and he is stripped bare of his masculine authority and pride. The patriarchy's fear of female sexuality caused men to rigorously reinforce the ideal image of women as the submissive, chaste, obedient wife. The play criticizes the extreme measures that men take to protect themselves from being cuckolded. As enacted in *Much Ado*, these measures leave women completely vulnerable to slanderous ruin. Wojcik agrees that "in a patriarchal system, the mother is not far from the prostitute or rape victim, if only in the sense that her sexuality is available" (22). Men continuously question women's fidelity simply because women have the means to cuckold them. While these issues are layered beneath the veil of comedy, the

marriage proposals at the end of the play do not completely resolve the underlying problems in the social system.

Despite the fear of cuckoldry, marriage was a very necessary component of social life, and Don Pedro reveals the patriarchy's overwhelming concern with marriage. His primary purpose is to arrange marriages for other characters in the play – even though he himself remains a bachelor. When Claudio reveals his passion for Hero, Don Pedro replies, “Amen, if you love her, for the lady is very well worthy” (Shakespeare 1.1.211-12). A woman's chastity must be guaranteed in order for the marriage to be respectable, and Don Pedro addresses this concern. Don Pedro also ensures that Claudio will have the lady that he desires: “If thou dost love fair Hero, cherish it, / And I will break with her and with her father, / And thou shalt have her” (1.1.196-98). Through Don Pedro's confident assurance to Claudio, the audience understands that upper class men usually obtain the women that they desire; clearly women's wishes are not a vital consideration. Don Pedro's role in the play seems to be to actively arrange marriage for the other men. He promises Benedick, “I shall see thee, ere I die, look pale with love” (1.1.236-37). Even though Benedick has no interest in marriage, Don Pedro facilitates a trick to make the two recognize their love for each other. Claudio comments on Don Pedro's role as matchmaker when he states, “How sweetly you do minister to love, / That know love's grief by his complexion” (1.1.300-01). While Don Pedro's function throughout the play is to arrange marriages for other men, never does he woo a woman for himself. He clearly possesses the skills to do so, which he demonstrates when he woos Hero on behalf of Claudio. Unlike Benedick, who transforms from being resistant to marriage to marrying Beatrice, Don Pedro never takes a wife. It is ironic that two characters so adamantly opposed to marriage – Benedick and Beatrice – decide to marry while an avid proponent of marriage like Don Pedro remains a bachelor. While he is the driving force behind the development of Beatrice and Benedick's characters, Don

Pedro's own character is the same in the beginning of the play as at the end of the play.

The reasons for Don Pedro's static, flat character address larger social issues. His failure to take a wife implies that he will not produce an heir to secure his fortune. His question to Beatrice, "Will you have me, lady?" (2.1.311), suggests his anxiety about finding a wife himself, and her immediate rejection of his proposal might enhance his fears. Yet, Don Pedro also reflects the social acceptability of men waiting to marry until they are older; in contrast, women must marry at a much younger age to ensure their physical desirability and ability to bear children. The audience is assured that Don Pedro's high social position makes him a favorable husband for any young woman regardless of his age. When Leonato believes that Don Pedro might ask for Hero's hand in marriage, he instructs her to accept such an advantageous proposal. Moreover, women were more dependent on marriage than men to promote their social status because "ultimately, for a woman in a solidly-structured patriarchal society such as this one, there are no prospects other than marriage or a barely-tolerated maiden-aunt status. Beatrice's fantasy of spending eternity 'where the bachelors sit...' is recognisably that – a fantasy – in the context of the clearly divided male and female spheres of the society which the play presents" (Gay 144). While a man could afford to live an unmarried life due to the other opportunities available to him in the public space, women lack these types of opportunities, and marriage is a necessity. Both female lead characters in the play, Beatrice and Hero, are married, while male characters, Don Pedro and Don John, remain unmarried. The play points toward yet another disadvantage for women in a patriarchal society: women's only means of opportunity and advancement is through marriage, increasing the pressure on them to find a husband.

While Hero represents the ideal silent, obedient woman, her foil is presented through Beatrice, a gentlewoman like the one described in Brathwaite's *The English Gentlewoman*. She is well educated and overseen by Leonato, an upper class gentleman who owns property. Beatrice

is allowed more liberties with her speech: she employs an outspoken, dominant tongue that asserts her independence. Beatrice rejects marriage at the beginning of the play, resisting the male rule of a husband. However, despite her assertive and independent character, Beatrice remains subject to the male patriarchy. By the end of the play, even the strong-willed Beatrice has succumbed to marriage to Benedick. More importantly, while her cousin is unjustly accused of infidelity, Beatrice protests, but the men in authority ignore her, so she remains powerless as a direct result of her sex. I believe that even Beatrice's outspoken tongue is silenced by the patriarchy, despite the fact that her wit is so attractive to the audience.

Beatrice's voice clearly contrasts Hero's silence. The play opens with Beatrice's witty insults directed toward Benedick. She compares him to a disease when she states, "If [Claudio] have caught the Benedick, it will cost him a thousand pound ere 'a be cured" (Shakespeare 1.1.84-85). Beatrice also describes Benedick as a "stuffed man" (1.1.55-56), questioning his masculinity. She further doubts his supposed courage in battle as she mockingly asks, "How many hath he killed and eaten in these wars? [...] For indeed I promised to eat all of his killing. [...] He is a very valiant trencherman; he hath an excellent stomach" (1.1.40-42, 47-49). Beatrice diminishes the seriousness of war by comparing it to food and appetites; in doing so, she even seems to question masculine claims, refusing to accept traditional beliefs that men are inherently superior to women. Beatrice's ability to pun on language to arouse humor provides her much more freedom with her tongue since the men find it a source of amusement. Furthermore, Beatrice not only insults Benedick in his absence from the scene but also in his presence. After Benedick nicknames her "Lady Disdain," she retorts, "Is it possible disdain should die while she hath such meet food to feed it as Signor Benedick?" (1.1.115-16). Beatrice demonstrates her quick wit and unrestrained tongue even in the presence of upper class males. Such outspoken language against men would have been unacceptable in the late sixteenth century; however, her

creation of humorous puns to address social issues illustrates her strategic use of her tongue. She understands her limitations, and she knows that the men will only allow her speech if they find amusement in it. The humor functions as a shield to conceal her harsh criticism of the patriarchy. Beatrice wants to be heard by the men in power, and she is able to do that through her deliberate use of language.

As shown through her outspoken language, Beatrice speaks her mind and refuses to be silenced in the presence of men. McDonald explains, "If ideology and law limited independence of action, they exerted less influence over freedom of thought" (McDonald 256). Beatrice not only engages the freedom of her mind to the fullest, but also dares to speak those independent thoughts. Beatrice's wit functions as a source of harmless entertainment for the men, which most likely explains why they allow her so many liberties with her tongue. Yet, the audience is reminded of the atypical nature of her outspoken tongue. When the messenger delivers word of Benedick, Leonato must excuse Beatrice's outspokenness: "You must not, sir, mistake my niece. There is a kind of merry war betwixt Signor Benedick and her" (1.1.57-58). Beatrice's behavior is quite unusual for a woman in a patriarchal society, especially with Hero's silence demonstrating the prescriptive norm. According to critic Russ McDonald, in a society where the speech of educated women criticized and threatened the male-dominated power structure, "Looseness of tongue came to symbolize looseness of body and spirit" (258). As we see here, Leonato must ensure that Beatrice's unrestricted speech does not mistakenly stigmatize her as a promiscuous woman. Despite these limitations, Beatrice does use her speech tactfully to rebel against the margins and voice opposition to the dominating male rule.

Beatrice further employs her witty tongue to openly oppose male-dominated marriages. When Leonato and Antonio discuss a possible marriage for Hero, Beatrice defiantly states, "It is my cousin's duty to make curtsy and say, 'Father, as it please you.' But yet for all that, cousin,

let him be a handsome fellow, or else make another curtsy and say, 'Father, as it please me'" (Shakespeare 2.1.49-52). Beatrice encourages Hero to reject a marriage proposal with which she does not agree; yet, for upper class women, arranged marriages were not only frequent, but necessary as a result of the system of inheritance. In an attempt to overcome this obstacle, Beatrice employs her intelligent wit to use the Bible to support her argument against marriage: "Adam's sons are my brethren, and truly I hold it a sin to match in my kindred" (2.1.59-60). Beatrice notes that all humanity descended from Adam, implying that all marriages are incestuous. Employing religion and wit testify to Beatrice's education and extensive vocal capabilities. Her impressive use of her tongue proves her strong argumentation techniques as well as her willingness to speak openly against patriarchal domination. However, the men find Beatrice's arguments more amusing than serious. As soon as Beatrice makes her comment about the incest of marriage, Leonato immediately reminds Hero, "Daughter, remember what I told you. If the Prince do solicit you in that kind, you know your answer" (2.1.61-3). Clearly Leonato has disregarded Beatrice's objections to marriage, since he tells his daughter to accept a favorable proposal if one is offered to her. Hero is Leonato's only heir, so he has a strong economic interest in her marriage, making a woman's virtue somewhat of an economic commodity. Hero's silence suggests that she will comply with her father's wishes. However, Beatrice's speech articulates the daughter's point of view that Hero's passivity prevents her from voicing herself.

For a marriage of her own, Beatrice denies all men because she does not believe that any could be worthy enough to meet her high standards: "Not till God make men of some other metal than earth. Would it not grieve a woman to be overmastered with a piece of valiant dust? [...] No, uncle, I'll none" (Shakespeare 2.1.55-57). Beatrice's use of the word "overmastered" suggests she understands the male dominance in the system of marriage; her refusal to marry protects her independence as a self-ruled woman. She prefers to remain unmarried, explaining,

“So deliver I up my apes, and away to Saint Peter, for the heavens; he shows me where the bachelors sit, and there live we as merry as the day is long” (2.1.43-46). Beatrice fantasizes about remaining free of the intrusive dominance of a husband. She also rejects men’s love when she states to Benedick, “I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me” (1.1.126-27). Beatrice associates men’s love with male domination over her, and so she denies love to protect her independence. Beatrice makes this bold statement in the presence of several upper class males, further demonstrating her desire to be heard by the patriarchy. I think that text of the play criticizes the male-dominated institution of marriage through Beatrice’s rebellious character. Voicing such criticism through the lips of a boy actor provided the playwright with more liberties: the audience would have been more likely to take such a radical idea seriously since it is voiced on stage, by a male actor “performing” a woman, in a comedy.

While Beatrice does remain true to her word, denying Don Pedro’s marriage proposal, she eventually falls in love with Benedick and agrees to marry him. Despite her adamant rejection of the male-dominated institution of marriage, even this strong female character cannot resist it forever. Immediately after Beatrice consents to the marriage, Benedick silences her wit with a kiss, stating, “Peace! I will stop your mouth” (5.4.97). Beatrice has no further lines in the play and it seems that, at least for the moment, Benedick has succeeded in ruling her by silencing her tongue. By creating a female character as strong-willed as Beatrice and then marrying her off, I believe that *Much Ado* illustrates the lack of opportunity for a woman to remain free of a husband in a patriarchal society. If any character possessed the will to remain unwed, it would be Beatrice. Yet even she succumbs to taking a husband. In England during the Renaissance, little hope exists for women who wish to remain independent of men.

The most striking depiction of Beatrice’s rule by the patriarchy occurs during the slander of Hero’s character. Immediately after Hero is accused of infidelity, Beatrice exclaims, “Oh, on

my soul, my cousin is belied!” (4.1.147). At the end of this scene, she further asserts to Benedick, “Sweet Hero! She is wronged, she is slandered, she is undone” (4.1.311-12). Beatrice is sure of Hero’s virtue because she has seen proof of Hero’s fidelity: “Until last night, / I have this twelvemonth been her bedfellow” (4.1.148-49). Hero has a reputation of always being chaste and pure, and Beatrice trusts this pattern of consistent behavior over the speculation of two men. Just as Christine de Pisan du Castel, a woman writer during the early fifteenth century, uses examples of virtuous women to defend the value of her sex in *Le Livre de la Cite des Dames* (qtd. in Hull, *Chaste* 107), Beatrice too uses examples of Hero’s virtuous reputation to defend her cousin’s reputation. Instead of focusing on this behavior as evidence of Hero’s virtue, as Beatrice does, the men instead view the one night that Hero was alone as evidence that she could have been unfaithful, as illustrated from Leonato’s pronouncement, “Confirmed, confirmed!” (4.1.150). In the presence of doubt, men automatically assume that women are guilty, despite their long-standing reputations. Bamber believes that “in the comedies[,] that world is manifestly reliable, orderly, a source of pleasure rather than a threat – and so is the nature of the feminine...The possibility of betrayal in this world is very slight. The world of Shakespearean comedy is fundamentally safe and its women fundamentally good” (20). Yet, clearly in *Much Ado*, the patriarchy *does* perceive the feminine as a threat, as shown when men automatically assume the worst in women just because the opportunity for unfaithfulness exists. While it is true that the women in the play are actually good, the men do not always perceive them in this way and seem to live in constant fear of cuckoldry. Beatrice attempts to use her feminine logic to persuade the men, but they ignore her. As the patriarchal society silences the feminine voice, it also silences the truth of Hero’s fidelity.

Much Ado criticizes male judgment in a number of ways. First, the play omits any scene in which the men mistake Margaret for Hero. Rather, Borachio relates how he wooed Margaret,

who “bid [him] a thousand times good night” (Shakespeare 3.3.145-46), in Hero’s chamber window. The exclusion of this scene forces the audience to visualize the scene for themselves as Borachio retells it. Since everyone in the audience would then picture different versions of the scene in their minds, the play illustrates the unreliability of this supposed evidence that the men believe. Moreover, when the scene is verbalized to the audience, it is done so through the medium of Borachio’s speech as he states: “I tell this tale vilely; I should first tell thee how the Prince, Claudio, and my master, planted and placed and possessed by my master Don John, saw afar off in the orchard this amiable encounter” (3.3.146-49). The audience knows that Borachio is a scheming, underhanded villain; yet, the patriarchy considers him a reliable source. Thus, the play’s omission of the wooing scene further causes the audience to question the judgment of the patriarchy. Moreover, Beatrice’s testimony that she has spent every night with Hero but one disproves Don John’s accusation that she is “every man’s Hero” (3.2.101). Clearly she did not give herself to “every man” in one night, illustrating a crucial flaw in Don John’s accusation. While Beatrice’s judgment forms from the reliable evidence of Hero’s pattern of past behavior, the patriarchy’s judgment forms from the lies of deceitful characters. The play ultimately invites the audience to criticize the way that men rashly discount women’s virtue, illustrating the constant instability of a woman’s reputation during the Renaissance.

Beatrice recognizes the clear disadvantages of her sex. She exclaims in frustration, “Oh, that I were a man! What, bear her in hand until they come to take hands, and then, with public accusation, uncovered slander, unmitigated rancor – Oh, God, that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the marketplace” (4.1.302-06). Beatrice clearly recognizes the limitations placed on her character due to her femininity. While she exhibits an independent, courageous character and violent, vengeful speech, she remains physically incapable of helping Hero regain her spotless reputation. Furthermore, Beatrice continues:

Oh, that I were a man for his sake! Or that I had any friend would be a man for my sake! But manhood is melted into curtsies, valor into compliment, and men are only turned into tongue, and trim ones too. He is not as valiant as Hercules that only tells a lie and swears it. I cannot be a man with wishing, therefore I will die a woman with grieving.” (4.1.316-22)

Beatrice criticizes a system which will endow men with power merely based on their sex. She argues that men do nothing to earn the respect or the credibility that they are given; yet, society takes their words as truth, even if they are lies. Although treatise writers accuse women of idly gossiping, it is ironically the men in *Much Ado* who engage in this destructive behavior. When an injustice is committed against her cousin, the limitations placed on Beatrice because she is a woman incapacitate her. She can only weep and seek a man to speak for her. Whereas the males in authority will not listen to Beatrice, they will listen to Benedick, and so he speaks on her behalf in an attempt to salvage Hero’s reputation from slanderous ruin. Near-tragic misinterpretation could have been avoided entirely had Beatrice’s voice been given the same credibility as Claudio and Don Pedro’s. Yet, because the patriarchy silences the feminine voice, Beatrice is powerless to contradict the allegations proposed by the men.

As portrayed in the play, authorities in the patriarchal society acquire power due to their birth and their sex. Men of noble, wealthy birth have the influential voice of the patriarchy. In the play, Leonato, Don Pedro, Claudio, and Benedick are such men, and it is their voices that make decisions. During the scene in which Hero’s marriage to Claudio is decided, only Claudio, Leonato, and Don Pedro are present (Shakespeare 2.1.338-44). All of these well-respected gentlemen decide Hero’s future in her absence, illustrating their power as prominent men in society and her lack of power due to her sex. It is also these men who determine Hero’s character. As long as they believe her to be the ideal, virtuous woman, she is. However, once

they doubt her chastity, she immediately loses her virtue. Don John approaches Claudio and Don Pedro because he knows that these influential men have the power to change society's view of Hero. Claudio swears, "If I see anything tonight why I should not marry her, tomorrow in the congregation, where I should wed, there will I shame her" (3.2.117-19). Don Pedro also joins Claudio, promising, "And, as I wooed for thee to obtain her, I will join with thee to disgrace her" (3.2.120-21). Because the men possess such influential positions in society due to their class and sex, they know that their accusations will be believed by everyone without challenge.

While it is true that prominent, educated, land-owning men have influential voices that govern society, the play also provides opportunities to men of the lower class to be the voices of justice. Dogberry and Verges are established as uneducated, lower class, bumbling fools. They repeatedly use words that have the opposite meaning that they intend them to have – and they never recognize their errors. For example, Verges uses the word "salvation" instead of "damnation" (3.3.3). Directly following, Dogberry uses "allegiance" instead of "treachery" and "senseless" instead of "sensible" (3.3.5, 22). While their misuse of language provides humor for the audience and a point of mockery by the other characters, it also establishes them as the least competent characters in the play. Their incompetence makes it extremely ironic that they are the characters who reveal the truth of Don John's treachery and bring about justice. Despite the fact that Dogberry and Verges are of the uneducated lower class, they can solve the mystery that confounds the educated, upper class men.

In contrast to the flexible birthright criterion, the play suggests that sex is rigid and static. During the first three acts of the play, Beatrice has the authority to employ her tongue, and she puns and insults with intelligence and quick wit. For example, in response to Benedick's insult that she is a "rare parrot-teacher," Beatrice replies, "A bird of my tongue is better than a best of yours" (Shakespeare 1.1.133-35). Moreover, regarding Hero's arranged marriage, Leonato

comments to Beatrice, “Cousin, you apprehend passing shrewdly,” to which Beatrice replies, “I have a good eye, uncle; I can see a church by daylight” (2.1.75-77). Beatrice’s keen insight, as well as her ability to speak out against social injustice, foreshadows her role as the voice of truth later in the play. Because she is a strong female voice in the first half of the play, the audience expects Beatrice to emerge as Hero’s defender, who employs her intelligence and uses her tongue to save her cousin. Yet, during the scene in which Claudio and Don Pedro make false accusations against Hero, Beatrice only has seven lines (4.1.30-254). Her lack of speech and her weeping at the end of that scene illustrate her recognition of the limitations of her speech. Only a man’s speech can convince the men of the truth, not her own. Even Beatrice’s strong voice cannot make influential decisions in the public space. *Much Ado* suggests that only men have the influential tongues in a patriarchy when deciding matters of utmost social importance.

From a feminist perspective, women’s silence maintain the status quo, while women’s voices in writing and speech promote social change . Cixous describes:

The repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over....Where woman has never *her* turn to speak – this being all the more serious and unpardonable in that writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures. (278)

Cixous further argues that speech has historically been “governed by the phallus,” and the symbolic silence of women has “conned [them] into accepting a domain which is the margin” (279). Not all women during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries complied with patriarchal prescriptions by allowing themselves to be silenced. Some women did employ their tongues – and their pens – to make their voices heard above the predominantly male speech. A few did join men in the public space through their writing, although they often confronted more restrictions

and criticism. Ezell explains that “recent interpretations do not deny that an occasional female slipped through the net to acquire a more advanced intellectual education, but the consensus is that her accomplishment was considered by her contemporaries to be a disfiguring, defeminizing mark” (Ezell 10). When women did attempt to voice their opinions through writing and speech, they were met with resistance and disdain.

Anne Askew was one woman who actively rebelled against the limitations placed upon her as a woman. She attempted to divorce her husband, Thomas Kyme, from an arranged marriage. When she was denied the right to do so by the courts, she refused to live with Kyme, instead living independent – an uncommon and inappropriate action for a woman in the sixteenth century (Martin, ed. 58). Askew converted from Catholicism to Protestantism, and she “publicly debated with some of the most powerful men in the country,” making her an enemy of the Catholic Church and a social outcast (Beilin 29). In *The Latter Examination*, Askew demonstrates her ability to use language to enter the male arena. When asked questioned about her beliefs in transubstantiation, Askew replies:

Christ’s meaning was there, as in those other places of scripture: “I am the door” (John 10), “I am the vine” (John 15), “Behold the Lamb of God” (John 1), “The rock-stone was Christ” (Corinthians 10), and such other like. “Ye may not here”, said I, “take Christ for the material thing that is signified by, for then ye will make him a very door, a vine, a lamb, and a stone, clean contrary to the Holy Ghost’s meaning. All these indeed do signify Christ, like as the bread doth his body in that place.” (73)

Askew’s quoting of the Bible to support her position demonstrates her education and her “moral” status. Yet, it is her tactful and brilliant logic that dares to expose flaws in Catholic doctrine that makes her such an extraordinarily outspoken woman. In his introduction to

Askew's *Examinations*, Randall Martin asserts that that "what emerges is patriarchal insecurity: Askew is a unhusbanded woman meddling in religious matters reserved to men" (59). Askew possessed all of the qualities that threatened patriarchal authority: independence; a lack of obedience; an outspoken tongue; a voice in the public space; a lack of compliance with religious values; and the absence of a man to oversee her. Her brutal torture, condemnation as a heretic, and death by burning at the stake in Smithfield in 1546 illustrate the lengths to which the patriarchy would go to silence independent women who challenged and threatened their authority (Beilin 29). Askew's bold voice and martyrdom was not the social norm for all women; however, she does prove that some women did refuse to be silenced, even when confronted with death itself.

Other women also challenged men's traditional antifeminist interpretations of the Bible, replacing them with their own readings that asserted women's value. Rachel Speght used the Bible to refute men's slander against the female sex and to assert women's value. In *A Muzzle for Melastomus*, written in the early seventeenth century, Speght references the creation story in Genesis and argues that "man was an unperfect building afore woman was made" (134), thus explaining God's need to create another being before determining that "'All was very good'" (qtd. in Speght 135). Speght uses the Bible as support because her female audience would have been familiar with this authoritative work. The strength of her writing further lies in the fact that she takes the same evidence that men used to argue the inferiority of women, and she uses that text to defend her sex (Martin, ed. 127). Aemilia Lanyer likewise appeals to a female audience in *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*. Adopting a bold, feminist tone in her address, "To the Virtuous Reader," Lanyer rebukes the "folly" of "evil-disposed men, who forge[t] they were born of women, nourished of women, and that if it were not by the means of women, they would be quite extinguished out of the world" (Lanyer 366). By focusing on the necessity of women in society,

she upholds the virtue and the worth of their sex. She further progresses through each stage of the Passion of Christ, explaining the crucial roles that women played during this journey of salvation (367). In the actual text of *Salve*, Lanyer continues to focus on women's roles in the Bible much more heavily and favorably than traditional male writers do. When describing the story of the Fall, she acquits Eve of blame:

Our mother Eve, who tasted of the tree,
Giving to Adam what she held most dear,
Was simply good, and she had no power to see,
The after-coming harm did not appear:
The subtle serpent that our sex betrayed,
Before our fall so sure a plot had laid. (6.3-8)

In this proto-feminist interpretation of the Bible, the responsibility for sin is removed from Eve. Lanyer instead portrays her as acting as a generous, maternal figure. Her ignorance of the fruit's dangers depicts her as a victim rather than an intentional sinner. Lanyer's view of Eve discredits the patriarchy, which uses Eve's responsibility for sin as support for female inferiority.

Lanyer's writing offers women a new way to view the Bible and themselves, "undistorted by traditional constructions of male scholars" (Martin, ed. 364). Women like Speght and Lanyer provide examples of women who did compose authoritative texts free of patriarchal bias.

Not all women chose the radical path of directly challenging male authority; in contrast, many women employed their pens in the translation of religious works, which many men believed to be "the only proper pursuit for women writers" (Martin, ed. 311). Since men did have anxieties about the education and independent writings of women, Martin documents that "sixteenth-century Englishwomen wrote and occasionally published far more translations, nearly all of religious texts, than original works...to uphold traditional virtues of piety and obedience"

(311). Rather than have their newly attained intellectual freedom stripped from them by an apprehensive patriarchy, women consented to focus on religious writings that would be more likely to pass the watchful eye of the patriarchy without scrutiny. Martin further explains that “translation thus permitted educated women only limited opportunities for creative autonomy. It kept them under intellectual control, since their writing remained artistically subordinate to male-authored compositions...and dependent on fathers or male relations...for support and public approval of their work” (311). Even the little freedom women did have in their writing reminded them of their inferior position to men in a patriarchal society. Mary Sidney Herbert, a female writer who translated the *Psalms*, did create her own poetical style in her translations, which were “neither literal...nor quaint works of piety” (311). While Sidney did produce strikingly original creations, she was undeniably limited by the religious text (312). Religious translations remained the most popular and widely accepted type of writing for women during the Renaissance.

Many women complied with the patriarchy’s ideal woman and believed that they should use their education as a means of proving their virtue. Margaret More Roper, daughter of Sir Thomas More, exemplifies such a situation through her writing. Her tutor, Richard Hyrde, translated Vives’ *Instruction of a Christian Woman*, so throughout her education, she was heavily influenced by his writings (Beilin 5). Roper wrote speeches and poetry in Latin, although they were unpublished because of Roper’s humility and reservation due to her sex (22). However, she did allow her English translation of Erasmus’ *Precatio Dominica in Septem Portiones Distributa*, *A Devout Treatise upon the Pater noster* to be published in 1524 (22-3). Roper’s work is described by critics as exemplifying her “womanly modesty, piety, and humility” (23). Roper’s mild, obedient tongue that complies with patriarchal ideals clearly contrasts Askew’s rebellious, outspoken tongue that defies the patriarchy completely. In *Redeeming Eve: Women Writers in*

the English Renaissance, Elaine V. Beilin asserts that many women engaged in “continuous attempts to please, to write what is appropriate, and to avoid censure” because “in the public eye, she must actively prove her virtue” (112). Unlike men, women constantly needed to enact their chastity, silence, and obedience to the patriarchy to avoid raising doubt about their character. Since many prescriptive books written for women focused on education as a means of increasing women’s virtue, Beilin explains that “as their own writings consistently show, women received this message and often felt compelled to reveal how their learning had indeed increased their virtue” (4). Thus, much of women’s writings affirmed women’s character, an aspect that was always in danger of being challenged by the patriarchy.

Women were not the only writers arguing for women’s virtue; in fact, some men also refuted the degradation and the claims of inferiority against the female character. While some male writers used the Bible as support for women’s silence, obedience, and inferiority, Erasmus uses Biblical stories to prove women’s necessity and value. He references the creation story in Genesis as he writes, “He [God] had made man of the slime of the earth... Wherefore He brought forth the woman not of the earth, as he did man, but out of the ribs of Adam, whereby it is to be understood that nothing ought to be more dear to us than the wife, nothing more conjoined, nothing more fast glued unto us” (Erasmus 73). Erasmus argues that women should be respected and embraced by men, not degraded and criticized. Many supporters of women used Genesis to counteract the arguments of women’s inferiority. They argued that because God created women in the Garden of Eden, located in Paradise, women were “if not superior, at least praiseworthy” (Hull, *Chaste* 106). Erasmus quotes a passage from Mark 10:7 to support the necessity of women’s roles in marriage and reproduction: “For this cause shal man leaue his father and mother and cleaue vnto his wife” (*The Geneva Bible*). Erasmus contends that God created “this law first, not that we should love bachelorship, but to [in]crease, to multiply, to replenish the earth” (73).

Men need to embrace women as their counterparts in marriage, an idea ironically taken from St. Paul, thus showing how the Bible was used as support for both women's inferiority and equality. Erasmus further explains that the love of a wife is the highest form of love since man and wife are joined not only with "the benevolence of minds," but with "permixture of bodies, with the confederate band of the sacrament, and finally with the fellowship of all chances" as well (82). In his writings, Erasmus' progressive interpretations of women's roles remind society of the value of women.

Richard Brathwaite's *The English Gentlewoman*, published in 1631, also provided a more liberal writing of women's roles in society. However, his audience is restricted to gentlewomen – women whose husbands or fathers owned property and the title of gentlemen (Klein, ed. 233). These women would have been educated, and as a result of their higher status, Brathwaite provides them with more liberties: "Her education hath so enabled her as she can converse with you of all places, deliver her judgment conceivingly of most persons, and discourse most delightfully of all fashions" (Brathwaite 236). Brathwaite describes women employing their tongues in conversation and even making convincing arguments. According to Klein in her introduction to Brathwaite's piece, "Brathwaite writes in a conversational rather than a prescriptive mode, and spends more time describing the life of ladies in society than he does their duties at home" (234). The distinction between prescriptive and descriptive writing is an important one. While Vives prescribes only silence for women (102), Brathwaite describes speech (236). While Vives prescribes only men voicing their opinions unchallenged (102), Brathwaite describes women formulating and voicing their arguments (236). While Vives prescribes the confinement of women to the domestic space (102), Brathwaite describes the delight of women's presence in the public space (236). Brathwaite's writing suggests that upper class women were not always the ideal silent, submissive, obedient wives and daughters that

confined themselves only to the domestic space.

While patriarchy still remains very much intact at the end of the play, the audience is aware that the authoritarian male hierarchy in Renaissance England is not without its flaws. Although some may criticize *Much Ado* for failing to resolve the problematic position of women, Irene Dash explains that “raising questions does not necessarily mean providing answers. Rather, such a technique heightens audience awareness of unresolved issues” (27). The play succeeds in illustrating the problematic patriarchal structure through its limitations on and destruction of the female characters. Hero, who acts submissively and in direct accordance with the wishes of the men who rule her, is almost stripped of her spotless reputation. In contrast, Beatrice attempts to defy the norms set by the patriarchy by not marrying and by boldly speaking her mind. She does, however, take a husband and is silenced by the men when she attempts to defend Hero against false accusations. For audience members cheering on Beatrice’s independence and assertiveness, there seems to be a noticeable loss when she accepts a marriage proposal and allows herself to be silenced for the rest of the play. Beatrice fails to rise as the defender in the play, illustrating the plight of women during the Renaissance. The play suggests that the limitations of class can be overcome while the restrictions on sex cannot. *Much Ado*’s portrayal of Beatrice and Hero demonstrates the powerlessness of women regardless of their differing responses to the unjust patriarchal rule. Whether women act submissively or rebelliously in their speech and actions toward male authority, they remain powerless and silenced.

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