

Feminine Silencing as Reoccurring Motif for Illuminating Male Patriarchal Fears of
Dishonor and Shame in Shakespearean Plays

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ENG 371 Shakespeare I

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6 December 2018

William Shakespeare's plays, such as *Much Ado about Nothing* and *Measure for Measure*, provoke close analyses of their female characters and the degree to which they submit to their male counterparts. In *Much Ado about Nothing*, Shakespeare denies Hero any lengthy interaction with her father Leonato. It is only when Hero faints from humiliation that Leonato, also feeling publicly humiliated, laments over his daughter's infidelities before her wedding. Moreover, Innogen, Leonato's wife appears in Act 1, but without any further verbal participation. In stark contrast to the submissive silence of the mother and daughter, Beatrice abhors marriage and arguably speaks her mind more than any other character in the play. Another female character in *Measure for Measure*, Isabella, is bound for the convent, but having to save her brother's life, must prove charismatic enough to persuade those in power. Interestingly, Isabella's charisma is shortened to silence once the Duke of Vienna demands her hand in marriage. Moreover, Shakespeare's romance *The Winter's Tale* encapsulates the tragedy which follows when a female is not silenced and asked to speak up by her husband instead. As Leontes asks his wife Hermione to plead with his childhood friend to stay in Sicily just awhile longer, her rhetorical efforts prove far more successful. This exchange between Hermione and Polixenes induces deranged, unfounded jealousy within Leontes, leading him to destroy his own familial structure. Essentially, Leontes defies traditional gender roles making his worst fears of humiliation come true; death of an heir and death of his wife on his behalf.

Of the various facets in these Shakespearean plays that past literary critics have considered, the trope of female silence and masculine fear is often ambiguous. Whereas scholars like Michael Friedman argue that Beatrice eventually becomes subdued by Benedict, other critics like Carol Cook view her as a "as a champion of the 'feminine principle' and as a kind of 'protofeminist'" (Cook 190). Despite Beatrice's initial "talkative, aggressive" characterization

(2), Friedman bases his argument on her transformation following the exchange of the couple's feelings between each other and Beatrice's supposed silencing in the last twenty-nine lines of the play. Using Hero and Innogen's silencing as template, Friedman portrays Beatrice as ultimately adhering to the silence of dutiful wives in *Much Ado about Nothing*. Much like Friedman, David Weir Baker finds Innogen's excision from past editions of the play counterproductive and argues that her mere silence is "proleptic of Hero's actions and predicament" (233). Interestingly, Baker makes no further mention of the ways in which Innogen's reading could have influenced the birth of Beatrice's dominating character. In the family, but with no immediate blood ties, Beatrice grows up fearing Innogen's silence and the perfected silence Hero learns from her mother. This feminine fear of marriage and submission can be located within Isabella in *Measure for Measure* as well. Barbara J. Baines notes that Isabella, "desires a 'more strict restraint' as additional protection from the masculine world locked outside of the convent ... to escape total subjugation under the law of the patriarch or father" (287). Of her silence when the Duke makes his proposal for her hand in marriage, Baines proposes that Isabella is not defeated, but chooses this silence to forgo engaging in the male discourse, perhaps suggesting that she holds the "key to the convent still in her pocket" (299). This reading of Isabella thus invites further reconsideration of Beatrice's silence. In the last upbeat exchange between Benedict and Beatrice, Leonato interjects with "Peace! [*He gives her hand to Benedict*] I will stop your mouth" (V.4.97-98). Benedict then kisses Beatrice and she does not speak for the short remainder of the play. As Benedict has yet to kiss her publicly, Beatrice's silence may be simply indicative of her shock, not her submission. It has yet to be considered that perhaps Benedict, by denying marriage and its cultural norms, also denies the role of the female in submission.

Shakespearean plays often rely on feminine silencing as a stark contrast to the male dominated discourse to highlight the deeply situated fears of public shaming and humiliation in the traditionally patriarchal male characters. Despite Hero's silencing throughout much of the play, she does have moments of extended speech in the company of women, furthering the argument of the female silencing acting as a highlighter for the masculine fears of shame and dishonor. As Gina Bloom notes, "The basic structure of early modern English society was both patriarchal and moderately gerontocratic" (333). In this sense, Hero succumbs to silence to fit the role of the wife in Shakespeare's society. Whereas some could argue that Hero is not a talkative person, this only seems to be the case in the company of men. In the private interaction between Hero, Margaret, and Ursula, Hero displays the agency she previously is not given and singlehandedly appears as the master of the brilliant plan to dupe Beatrice into believing that Benedict is in love with her. Not only does Hero mastermind the plan, in her discourse with other female characters, she is able to lead the operation. As Hero opens the dialogue, her speech is direct, assured, and marked with commands. She begins with, "Good Margaret, run thee to the parlor," (III.1.1) and continuing with similar commands throughout, Hero ends with, "This is thy office. / Bear thee well in it, and leave us alone" (III.1.12-13). Shakespeare purposefully allows the audience to experience a different side of Hero amongst women. Hero's character is not silent or submissive, but rather adheres to the societal role she has been raised to fulfill. Hero's silence in the presence of men emphasizes the very fear of feminine expression, as uncovered when Hero is accused of being unfaithful by Claudio and her father's objectifying reaction.

On the contrary to Hero's silencing, Beatrice proves to be one of the main interlocutors in *Much Ado about Nothing*, provoking the audience to consider Shakespeare's motivation in characterizing both women. As Beatrice is raised close to Leonato's family, she grows up fearing

and abhorring marriage, perhaps because of the silence she would have to endure. Hero is raised to fill her mother's shoes, but Beatrice does not have to adhere to the fear inducing silence Innogen presents as the ideal for the two characters. In her defense of resenting marriage, Beatrice expresses such fears of becoming silenced and presenting herself as what Cook refers to as "protofeminism" (Cook 190). She argues that she will not marry until, "God make men of some other metal than earth." Beatrice then questions, "Would it not grieve a woman to be overmastered with a piece of valiant dust?" (II.1.50-52). Although Beatrice is silent for the last twenty-nine lines of the play, she is nonetheless relatively unchanged in her speech with Benedict and therefore Friedman's notion that there is "a contradiction between the eloquence of Beatrice's original subversive position and the play's representation of the eventual stopping of her mouth" (351). Overall, as a strong female character, Beatrice is fearful of the male dominance that she would have to endure in a traditionally patriarchal household.

Unlike the dominant men Beatrice does not want to marry, Benedict presents himself as a much better choice for a husband since he is attracted to Beatrice's loud, expressive nature and abhors the idea of marriage as well. Indeed, it is Benedict's lack of traditionality concerning marriage that spares him the fears of public humiliation and dishonor facing Leonato and Claudio, Hero's fiancée, within the play. Benedict expresses his argument against marriage as being a definitive agent of stagnation in life and therefore does not intend to silence Beatrice. In a long speech about the changes he perceives in Claudio since falling in love with Hero, Benedict expresses his own likelihood of falling love. Of Claudio he notices, "He was wont to speak plain and to the purpose, like / an honest man and a soldier; and now is he turned ortography" (II.3.17-19). Here, Benedict notices that love has propelled Claudio to speak in a more elaborate, flowery language. In the lines following, he doubts that falling in love would

cause him to change like Claudio has. Benedict contemplates: “I will not be sworn but love / may transform me to an oyster; but I’ll take my oath on it, till / he hath made an oyster of me, he shall never make me such / a fool” (II.1.21-24). The metaphor of a man in love being compared to an oyster encompasses the very fear of stagnation and becoming soft in Benedict. Oysters are soft inside, but Benedict believes that his behavior should be as hard as his physical exterior. Despite falling in love with Beatrice, the couple’s interaction remains flirtatiously combative as they pick at each other’s wit even after the revelation of their mutual feelings. At the core of Benedict’s renunciation of marriage is the fear of boredom, change, and stagnation, yet Beatrice’s playful, witty, and direct personality promises Benedict a fulfilling marriage. Unlike the traditionally patriarchal characters in the play, Shakespeare designs Benedict’s character to contradict that of Leonato and Claudio and specifically targets the Leonato and Claudio to becoming victimized by their own fears of dishonor based on feminine agency. Hero and Innogen’s silence, thus, illuminates those fears.

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Leonato embodies the role of a domineering patriarch as he explicitly objectifies Hero for bringing shame to his name. Although Hero’s trespassing is far from verbal, Leonato finally engages in an extended conversation with Hero through a series of dramatic lamentations in Act IV. This address toward Hero suggests that the less women converse amongst the men, the less likelihood there will be for the female characters to dishonor their patriarchal counterparts. Whereas Leonato speaks to another female character, Beatrice, throughout the work, he has a relatively limited interaction with his daughter. Although Beatrice is not a part of Leonato’s immediate family, she has been raised under his supervision. Without the possible pressures of becoming a proper lady to honor the man of the household, Beatrice expresses herself even in the presence of men. Moreover, although Innogen is present in

various scenes, Shakespeare excludes Leonato's wife from participating in any dialogue. With this taken into consideration, Leonato's condemning speech, at IV.1.118-141, objectifies Hero and reduces her to a mere extension of her father even more. In the hyperbolic verse marked by objectifying syntax and metaphor, Shakespeare progresses the implication of female subservience to men in a familial structure.

As Leonato attempts to save the family name from Hero's shame, he is unable to separate himself from Hero's character. In line 29, he says, "Why had I not with charitable hand / Took up a beggar's issue at my gates, / Who, smirched thus and mired with infamy, / I might have said, 'No part of it is mine. This shame derives itself from unknown loins.'" Leonato feels personally responsible for Hero's shameful infidelity. Here, Leonato questions why he had not adopted a child instead and with that, he says he would have been able to avoid the dishonor brought about by his daughter. He would be able to simply separate himself from the situation as this theoretically adopted child "derives itself from unknown loins" and therefore, is not his biologically. Interestingly, instead of giving this adopted child a human quality, Leonato reduces "it" to shame. Earlier on in the verse, Leonato also questions, "Grieved I, I had but one?" (IV.1.125). Shakespeare's syntactical choice to use the word "one" in this phrase takes away Hero's individuality as it is typically used to refer to an object. Further on in the verse, Leonato similarly laments, "But mine, and mine I loved, and mine I praised, / And mine that I was proud on, mine so much / That I myself was to myself not mine / Valuing of her" (IV.1.134-137). Of course, it is undisputable that Leonato expresses his affection for Hero in these lines, caring more for her than for himself. At the same time, however, Shakespeare's repetition of the possessive pronoun "mine" implies ownership and Hero's objectification. Leonato's inability to separate his honor from that of Hero's shame derives from the perception that Hero lacks her own

individuality as a woman in Leonato's household. Much like Leonato's wife, Innogen, Hero is often present in the company of men, yet keeps silent. Shakespeare's feminine silencing helps embellish male tyranny and the masculine fears which stem from any possibility of being dishonored by something a woman could say or do.

Isabella, in *Measure for Measure*, shares many of the similarly outspoken qualities that Beatrice represents and through her speech, directly inspires fears of shame and dishonor in Angelo. In the beginning of the play, Isabella is bound for the convent, and therefore renounces marriage based on this principle. As Shakespeare's plot gains momentum, Isabella is placed in an uncomfortable situation. She must plead for her brother's mercy and save him from being executed. Unfortunately, a temporary transition in power leaves the morally ambivalent and domineering Angelo in charge of ruling Vienna. In Angelo and Isabella's discourse, Angelo proves far from chaste as he makes the proposition of Isabella to sleep with her brother in exchange for his life. In her response to Angelo calling women frail, Isabella exclaims, "Help, heaven! Men their creation mar / In profiting by them" (II.4.124-125). Therefore, Isabella feels that men exploit women to their advantage and this is possibly the reason she would rather enter the convent. Much like Beatrice, Isabella does not want to be dominated by a man in marriage or else. As the scene moves to Angelo making another offer for Isabella to sleep with him instead in exchange for her brother's life, Isabella mocks him for using the expression, "Believe me on mine honor" (II.4.145) and uses the opportunity to threaten him unless he pardons her brother. Isabella gives Angelo an ultimatum:

"I will proclaim thee, Angelo, look for't.

Sign me a present pardon for my brother,

Or with an outstretched throat I'll tell the world aloud

What man thou art.” (II.4.147-151)

Shakespeare syntactical choice for “world” instead of “Vienna” or the “Duke” places her directly in the sphere of male dominated public speech. Isabella’s self-assurance explicitly propels Angelo to fears of shame and dishonor, yet Angelo attempts to silence Isabella arguing that no one will believe her. Despite disguised Mariana fulfilling Angelo’s offer instead, Angelo proceeds to sentence Isabella’s brother to death. This furthers the argument that Angelo has a true fear of feminine expression leading to dishonor and shame. If Claudio is spared, then he becomes a possible male witness to Isabella’s disparaging words against Angelo. Whereas Beatrice’s short silence in *Much Ado about Nothing* spans the last twenty-nine lines of the play, Isabella’s silence is far more noticeable as she remains silent for the last eighty-five lines of the play. Within those lines, the Duke unquestioningly takes her hand in marriage. On the contrary to Baines’ argument that Isabella chooses this silence to forgo engaging in the male discourse, perhaps suggesting that she holds the “key to the convent still in her pocket” (299), Isabella’s prolonged silence symbolizes the defeat of her feminist spirit. The Duke advises Isabella: “And for your lovely sake / Give me your hand, and say you will be mine” (V.1.495-496). Through the Duke’s uncontestable marriage proposal, Isabella is forced to surrender her previous sense of selfhood and agency. Although now more assertive, the Duke takes away Isabella’s assertiveness by giving her no choice in the matter. Therefore, in *Measure for Measure*, Isabella’s character represents feminine expression leading to patriarchal male fears of dishonor and simultaneously loses her expressive individuality as the suddenly powerful Duke orders her to take his hand in marriage.

Unlike the comedies, Shakespeare’s romance *The Winter’s Tale* presents a tragic situation in which the forcing of feminine expression by a patriarchal and domineering male

character, Leontes, uncovers his unreasonable fear surrounding public humiliation and ultimately leads to the downfall of his familial structure. At the beginning of the play, Leontes attempts to have his childhood friend stay in Sicily for a while longer, but Polixenes refuses his offers and his wife Hermione remains silent. Leontes demands of Hermione: “Tongue-tied our queen? Speak you” (I.1.28). In this eerie foreshadowing of his tragic delusion, Leontes refers to Hermione as “our queen,” rather than “my queen,” when urging Hermione to persuade Polixenes. In their very friendly and courteous exchange, Hermione is successful in having Polixenes remain in Sicily. Suddenly, after the stage direction of Hermione and Polixenes holding hands, Leontes cannot withhold his irrational jealousy any longer. In an aside, Leontes verbalizes his suspicious delusion:

“But to be paddling palms and pinching fingers
 As now they are, and making practiced smiles
 As in a looking glass; and then to sigh, as ‘twere
 The mort o’th’ deer – oh, that is entertainment
 My bosom likes not, nor my brows.” (I.2.115-119)

Here, Leontes conveys to the audience that he is suspicious of being a cuckold through the allusion to sprouting horns from his brows. However, the overreactive accusation seems to have very little basis other than seeing his wife conversate with another powerful male character. This overreaction is not stemming from any true occurrence, but only from within himself. Bloom informs that, “Critics have often seen Leontes’ paranoia and antagonism toward Hermione as stemming from anxieties about his, and all men’s dependence on women” (331). Shortly after, in another aside, Leontes imagines: “How she holds up the neb, the bill, to him / And arms her with the boldness of a wife to her allowing husband” (I.2.182-184). In the aside, he also mentions

that, “Contempt and clamor / Will be my knell.” (I.2.188-189). As Williamson notes, “In Shakespeare, the fictions consistently deny profit motives in marriage through male prodigality and deal with men’s anxieties about women’s power and male rivalries through the theme of cuckoldry” (21). Therefore, Leontes discloses that at the very core of his illusion sparked by feminine expression, or Williamson’s “women’s power,” is the fear of being dishonored “through the theme of cuckoldry.” Instead of waiting for such a day to come, Leontes acts immediately. In his delusions, Leontes envisions pregnant Hermione having an affair with Polixenes. Moreover, he starts to doubt that his own son and the unborn baby are his. To reassert his manhood and power in the face of shame and dishonor that is prompted by cuckoldry, Leontes initiates a plan to murder Polixenes and to punish Hermione. Disregarding the possibility that he may be wrong, by his own volition, Leontes loses an heir to the throne and his wife Hermione. Sparked by feminine expression, the domineering male character creates illusions based on his internal struggle with fears of dishonor. In *The Winter’s Tale*, Shakespeare singlehandedly creates a domino effect of events that spiral out of control based on feminine speech highlighting the masculine fears it brings forth. Whereas the comedies utilize the motif of feminine silence as a tool for dramatizing the fears of dishonor in their traditionally patriarchal male characters, and as a contrast, *The Winter’s Tale* portrays feminine speech as a catalyst for the extreme and irrational outcome tied to such fears in the traditionally patriarchal male.

Although there is yet so much to be considered when interpreting female speech and silence in Shakespearean plays, one may nonetheless conclude that there is a pattern between the motif and fears of dishonor and shame in the traditionally patriarchal male characters. Comedies like *Much Ado about Nothing* and *Measure for Measure*, as well as romances like *The Winter’s*

Tale, provide much insight into the ways that Shakespeare employs feminine expression and silence to navigate fears of emasculation and shame.

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