Parallelism and Confused Gender Roles in the "Female Economy": *Othello, Moor of Venice* and *Much Ado About Nothing*

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"They are all but stomachs, and we all but food; they eat us hungrily, and when they are full, they belch us."

-Shakespeare, *Othello, Moor of Venice*

In his essay "The Economics of Iago and Others," Robert B. Heilman discusses a "world of economics" in which Desdemona from *Othello, Moor of Venice* is bought and sold to Othello as if she were female currency.[1] This economy that Heilman describes is also evident in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, which draws striking parallels to *Othello*. Both *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Othello, Moor of Venice* have a pair of female protagonists on their respective journeys to love. In *Othello*, Desdemona's relationship with the general Othello progresses throughout the play, ultimately ending in tragedy. The loveless marriage of the antagonist Iago and his wife Emilia contrasts the passionate but deadly relationship of Desdemona and Othello. In the lighter *Much Ado*, dissimilar cousins Beatrice and Hero find differing but legitimate paths to love by the play's finale. The parallelism between Desdemona and Emilia, Beatrice and Hero, reveals indefinable gender roles amongst these female characters. While Desdemona, Emilia, and Hero are, in a sense, bartered by men, Beatrice largely escapes this objectification. Interestingly, both Desdemona and Hero have personalities that are characteristically weaker than those of Beatrice and Emilia, although Desdemona and Emilia are more difficult to define, as they display some stronger traits. Nevertheless, both of these weaker female characters struggle for their partners to trust them, and the stronger female characters must defend the honor of their counterpart. In this sense, Beatrice in particular behaves stereotypically more like a man than she does a woman—acting as a protector for her cousin. This contrast of weak versus strong women directly plays into the ability of

[1] Robert B. Heilman, "The Economics of Iago and Others," *Modern Language Association* 63 (1953): 555–71.

Shakespeare's male characters to use the female characters in both an economic and romantic sense.

In *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Othello, Moor of Venice*, both Hero and Desdemona find themselves in the midst of the female economy. This economy, according to Heilman, is perpetuated in *Othello* through the association of economic terms with women, which suggests their role as sexual commodities.[2] These terms, such as "riches," "gold," "sell," "buy," "gain," and "profit," are also used throughout *Much Ado,* in reference especially to Hero.

When Claudio first sees Hero, he instantly decides that he loves her. This immediate, irrational love establishes Hero's place in the economy, as Claudio appreciates her for her physical characteristics alone. Nevertheless, Claudio does not seem to realize the manner in which he is objectifying, and ultimately, "buying" Hero. When Benedick asks "[w]ould you buy her, that you enquire after her?" Claudio replies, "[c]an the world buy such a jewel?" asserting Hero's monetary value amongst men.[3] Unwittingly, Claudio's association of Hero with a "jewel" furthers her importance as a beautiful thing, as opposed to being appreciated for less corporeal qualities such as character and goodness. Benedick's insinuation that Claudio is "buying" Hero indicates that he is more aware of this economy than his friend. Interestingly, Heilman discusses Shakespeare's use of the words "jewel" and "pearl" in *Othello*, which similarly suggests how "[i]t has been Desdemona's fate to be wrongly valued."[4] Benedick responds to Claudio's defensive statement: "[y]ea, and a case to put it into," implying that Claudio's acquisition of Hero would result in her imprisonment (*Much Ado* 1.1.161). Nonetheless, Benedick's subtle use of "it" as opposed to "her" indicates that he has bought into this economy as well.

Two scenes later, the male characters plan a "model for mischief" in which Prince Pedro "woo[s] Hero for himself, and having obtained her, give[s] her to Count Claudio" (*Much Ado*

[2] Heilman, "The Economics of Iago," 555.
[3] William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, Print, 1.1.159–60. [Subsequent references to this work will be cited parenthetically within the text by act, scene, and line number.]
[4] Heilman, "The Economics of Iago," 571.

1.3.55–6). In this scene, Hero's role as currency in the bartering economy is firmly established. Pedro pretends to woo her for himself, and after obtaining her, gives her to Claudio, regardless of Hero's emotions or opinions. Hero's easy compliance with this plan enables her to be used as a commodity, whereas the stubbornness of her cousin Beatrice, for example, would have complicated such a plot.

The male characters continue to use economic terms when discussing Hero, furthering her usage as female currency. When Benedick approaches Pedro about dancing with Hero, he accuses Pedro of taking Hero from Claudio: "being overjoyed with finding a bird's nest, shows it his companion, and he steals it" (*Much Ado* 2.1.199–201). As when Claudio compares Hero to a jewel, here Benedick compares her to a bird's nest, another beautiful object which could be easily stolen and passed around amongst men. Furthermore, Hero is once again referred to as an "it" in the metaphor instead of a "her."

Hero's role in the bartering economy reaches a climax during her wedding, when Claudio publicly and wrongfully shames her. Claudio's easy rejection of Hero, regardless of his professed love for her, occurs as effortlessly as if he were tossing away a penny. Hero's and Claudio's interactions throughout the play defy any true relationship and seem to occur as if according to a scheduled courtship. The moment that Claudio suspects Hero of true emotions or feeling, albeit in the form of infidelity, he becomes terrified of her and her femininity, remarking that, "[y]ou seem to me as Dian in her orb / As chaste is the bud ere it be blown; / But you are more intemperate in your blood / Than Venus, or those pamp'red animals / That rage in sensuality" (*Much Ado* 4.1.54–8). Here, it is evident that Claudio's fear of Hero stems from an irrational fear of women. Hero is deemed "intemperate," because she displays qualities more consistent with a human being as opposed to an object.

Later, when Leonato tricks Claudio into remarrying Hero, the truth leads Claudio to take Hero back as easily as he discarded her. Throughout the play, Hero is bounced around in the hands of men—her father, Prince Pedro, and Claudio—without regard to her own will. But

this seems to occur because she seems to *have* no will, unlike her exceptionally willful cousin Beatrice, who is exempted from Hero's fate.

Perhaps the real reason that Beatrice is excluded from the female economy is because Shakespeare depicts her as having more masculine than feminine qualities. As a man, Beatrice would be exempt from being treated as a resource, which would explain why she has the strength and power to defend Hero. Indeed, this personification would make perfect sense: early scenes in *Much Ado About Nothing* depict Beatrice as engaging in witty, often vulgar banter with the play's male characters, almost as if she were one of them. More explicitly, Beatrice longs numerous times throughout the play that she was a man—the repetition of which makes her wish especially significant. After Claudio shames Hero at the altar, Beatrice begs to God that she could be a man so that she could avenge Hero like one, saying, "O that I were a man! . . . O God, that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the market place" (*Much Ado* 4.1.298–302). This typically masculine aggression is consistent with Beatrice's brutally honest, independent character—attributes typically assigned to men. Furthermore, the phrase "I would eat his heart" seems to reinforce this reversal of gender roles; in this fantasy, Claudio, the man who just trampled upon Hero's emotions, would be the one whose heart was "eaten", or physically broken. Uncharacteristic of women, Beatrice yearns to commit a physical—or manly—act to amend emotional wrongs.

Earlier in the play, when discussing with her uncle Leonato the fact that she is unmarried, Beatrice retorts that she will not take a husband, "til God make men of some other metal than earth" (*Much Ado* 2.1.51–2). In this statement, Beatrice seems to indicate that in their natural, God-given state, men do not appeal to her. During this discussion, Beatrice remarks "I could not endure a husband with a beard on his face . . . [w]hat should I do with him? Dress him in my apparel and make him my waiting gentlewoman?" (*Much Ado* 2.1.25–30). Beatrice's disgust of a beard, a definably masculine quality, seems consistent with her aversion to men in their natural state. Furthermore, her joke that she would diminish a man to be her "waiting gentlewoman" implies that she would act as the man in a relationship, and her partner would

be subservient to her. This characterization of Beatrice as masculine would suggest that in order to love her, Benedick must possess traits which oppose her own.

Before they begin their courtship, Benedick describes a similar distaste in the opposite sex, saying "till all graces be in one woman, one woman shall not come in my grace" (*Much Ado* 2.3.27–8). In this passage, Benedick's description of his idea of the perfect woman is deliberately impossible; because no woman could ever be so perfect, what Benedick seems to abhor is women themselves. Although he admits that Beatrice is beautiful, never else does Benedick display a preference to women. He proclaims, "I will live a bachelor," but never seems to indicate that this unmarried state enables him to engage in sexual activities with women, which would arguably be a main reason a heterosexual man would wish to stay unattached (*Much Ado* 1.1.219). Rather, his perfect woman does not exist, and in many ways, illustrates a woman too specific and unattainable even for Beatrice:

> Rich she shall be, that's certain; wise, or I'll none; virtuous, or I'll never cheapen her; fair, or I'll never look on her; mild, or come not near me; noble, or not I for an angel; of good discourse, an excellent musician, and her hair shall be of what color it please God. (*Much Ado* 2.3.27–32)

In the first scenes of the play, when Benedick's character is being established, Beatrice inquires after Benedick's companions, but with no mention of women in his past or present. Rather, she inquires after Benedick's male friends, asking, "[w]ho is his companion now? He hath every month a new sworn brother" (*Much Ado* 1.1.63–4). There seems to be an almost homosexual suggestion in Beatrice's statement, which is perpetuated when the messenger responds by asking "[i]s't possible?" as if he were also considering the truth in the suggestion (*Much Ado* 1.1.65). Benedick's aversion to women and Beatrice's desire to be a man produces blurred gender roles for the two characters. If Beatrice displays more masculine tendencies, then it would make sense that the object of her affection would reject a typically masculine response to the opposite sex.

Beatrice and Benedick's courtship is remarkable in *Much Ado* because of both characters' unusual stubbornness about marrying, which would have been even more atypical in the

Elizabethan era, when gender roles were clearly defined and marriage was essential for social survival. It could also be argued that Beatrice barters Benedick, contributing to her characterization as a man. Beatrice's powerful manipulation of Benedick's desires in order to achieve her own ends is a testament to her role as—although a woman herself—a dominating force in the "female economy."

After Claudio debases Hero at the altar, Beatrice's fury is channeled into a powerful dialogue with Benedick in which she displays her formidable strength. In this conversation, Beatrice withholds her affections from Benedick unless he submits to her wishes and kills his friend Claudio. Benedick begs for her love, saying, "[c]ome, let me do anything for thee," to which Beatrice retorts "[k]ill Claudio" (4.1.284–5). Despite Benedick's reluctance to murder his friend, he ultimately acquiesces, a testament to Beatrice's manipulative, almost manly prowess. Beatrice's demand and Benedick's submission contradicts traditional gender roles and reinforces Beatrice's masculinity.

If love is a game of give and take, then perhaps Beatrice's most feminist virtue is that she is not only able to behave as an equal partner with Benedick, but that she is able to truly use and barter him, as if she were the man in their relationship. The difference, perhaps, is that Beatrice barters Benedick's emotions, whereas Shakespeare's male characters barter the women themselves. In this sense, it seems that Shakespeare created a masculine woman and a man adverse to femininity to be compatible with each other to muddle our perceptions of what is womanly and what is manly in the female economy.

Although she is a typically weaker character, especially in the hour of her death, Desdemona uniquely exemplifies attributes of both of *Much Ado*'s female characters in her personality. Desdemona portrays the subservience and willingness to love of Hero while also often being in control of her sexuality and the men around her in a manner more evocative of Beatrice. In contrast, the different personalities of Hero and Beatrice are more clearly defined. Initially, Desdemona refuses to enter the bartering economy, and resists it by assertively marrying a man of her choosing. Unlike Hero, who would have likely accepted any man for her

husband, Desdemona clearly chooses and fights for Othello. Her choice was unconventional and controversial, and she needed to convince her father and society of her love for the General before such a union could be accepted.

In the opening scene, Iago and Roderigo aim to reduce Desdemona to a weak piece of currency in the economy by implying that she was "covered with a Barbary horse" and "robbed" by Othello.[5] However, Desdemona's strong nature defies this objectification, especially when she fights for the opportunity to travel with her new husband by exclaiming, "[l]et me go with him" (*Othello* 1.3.259). Furthermore, whereas Hero's acceptance of a union with Claudio is based on nothing more than a willingness to marry, Desdemona's attraction to Othello is undoubtedly based in strong, passionate love, as Othello expresses "[h]ow I did thrive in this fair lady's love, / And she in mine" (*Othello* 1.3.127–8).

In spite of Desdemona's independence and stubborn insistence to marry Othello, these early scenes still portray her unwanted usage in the bartering economy. Regardless of her self-determined love of Othello, she still needs her father, the Duke, and the senators to approve their union. In these discussions, it is clear that Desdemona will become currency later in her life; "[u]se Desdemona well," warns a senator before their departure, implying that Desdemona will undoubtedly be "used" by some means (*Othello* 1.3.291). Even in his own words, Othello states that "I won his daughter," a testament to Desdemona's role as a prize and something valuable to be obtained and kept (*Othello* 1.3.94).

The fatality of Desdemona's independence is hinted at by her father before the couple's departure, who says "[l]ook to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: She has deceived her father, and may thee" (*Othello* 1.3.292–3). Here, it is clear that Desdemona's independent courtship with Othello translates in the male society to deception, and such independence could later lead her to similarly "deceive" her husband. As the "holder" of Desdemona in her youth,

[5] William Shakespeare, *Othello, Moor of Venice*, Print, 1.1. [Subsequent references to this work will be cited parenthetically within the text by act, scene, and line number.]

Desdemona's father Brabantio figuratively transfers this hold to Othello, implying an ownership typical of the bartering economy.

In these early scenes, Desdemona seems to act more like Beatrice than Hero, in spite of the fact that she is unwittingly being traded and sold amongst men. However, her participation in the economy is likely made possible by her weaker side—a side more evocative of Hero, which is clearly displayed in her last interaction with Othello.

Prior to her murder, Desdemona mulls over what it means to be a woman in Elizabethan society with Emilia, her maid. Despite streaks of earlier independence, in this scene it is clear that Desdemona yearns for requited love and wants to obey her husband. Naively, Desdemona asks "tell me, Emilia—That there be women do abuse their husbands / In such gross kind?" (*Othello* 4.3.59–61). This discussion of fidelity, in which Desdemona incredulously considers such an act for the first time, is highly reminiscent of Hero's accused infidelity. Like Desdemona, Hero is accused of adultery—ironically, not only a crime she did not commit, but a crime she would never commit. But unlike Hero, Desdemona's "crime" results in her death.

Even upon her death, Desdemona continues to portray an ambiguous combination of Hero and Beatrice's tendencies. On the one hand, she becomes submissive, pleading and begging for some mercy from her husband, "O, banish me, my lord, but kill me not! . . . [k]ill me to-morrow; let me live to-night" (*Othello* 5.2.78–80). Yet simultaneously, she refuses to become a docile victim and accepts her own actions for her death. Emilia asks "who hath done this deed?" to which Desdemona, in her last words, responds "[n]obody—I myself. Farewell" (*Othello* 5.2.124–5). Despite Othello's vicious actions, Desdemona does not want to die submissively, and she would rather believe that it was she who killed herself rather than a man.

Although Hero and Beatrice serve to juxtapose each other, Emilia acts as a softer echo of Desdemona's personality. Part of this is influenced by *Othello Moor of Venice*'s plot, which focuses solely on Desdemona, whereas *Much Ado About Nothing* equally follows the two subplots of Hero and Beatrice. Like Desdemona, Emilia is governed by conflicting traits; on the one hand, she often acts submissive to Iago, but on other occasions she asserts her sense of self

and independence. Most pivotal to the plot is Emilia's submission when she concurs to steal Desdemona's handkerchief, which becomes the main piece of evidence in Othello's accusation. However, she also speaks eloquently about the liberties women should have, and tries to convince Desdemona of her opinions. Emilia's view on fidelity seems more like what Beatrice's response would be; Emilia responds "I do think it is their husbands' faults / If wives do fall . . . [t]he ills we do, their ills instruct us so" (*Othello* 4.3.85–102). In contrast to Desdemona's love for and acceptance of men, Emilia is extremely aware of the economy and describes it perfectly in an earlier act when she observes that "[t]hey are all but stomachs, and we all but food; they eat us hungrily, and when they are full, they belch us" (*Othello* 3.4.104–6). This description is consistent with Othello's and Claudio's treatment of Desdemona and Hero: quick acquisition and even quicker disposal.

Perhaps the reason Shakespeare enables *Much Ado About Nothing* to be a light comedy while *Othello, Moor of Venice* is an appalling tragedy is due to *Much Ado's* clear and understandable female characters. Hero visibly buys into the female economy with her simple nature, compliance and even acceptance of the way men barter her. Although unconventional, Beatrice's complete rejection of this economy enables her to fully escape it, and leads her to Benedick, whose place in the economy is also confused. However, Desdemona's more juxtaposed personality leaves her with no clear avenue in her relationships with men. She represents an unusual union of Hero's resigned acceptance and Beatrice's complete independence. Her initial autonomous act of choosing Othello is horrifically undermined by the dramatically male-dominated and violent society she lives in. In contrast, despite Claudio's equally unjust treatment of Hero, her death is merely pretend. In this sense, it seems as if Othello's sheer fury towards Desdemona is ignited by his acknowledgement of her independence and tendency to assert herself like Beatrice. Desdemona's initial autonomy in choosing Othello enables him to believe that she would display such "deception" in other venues, such as by committing adultery. In a male-dominated society, what is understandable about women is uncomplicated, and therefore, acceptable. Perhaps the men in *Much Ado* are

able to understand that Hero is weak and Beatrice is unfeminine; however, Desdemona's ambiguity makes her something to fear. In this sense, Desdemona's juxtaposed personality not only makes her a union of Hero and Beatrice, but also consigns her to death.