

The Unsociable Shades of *Much Ado about Nothing*

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Abstract:

The term Comedy has far many shades of its meaning than a mere humorous one. Breaking the preconceived notions about the nature and its characteristics of comedy, Shakespearean comedies might be difficult to comprehend as some of them are very realistic in nature with a sheer instructive purpose. Comedies are no more a means of entertainment which leads to laughter and merriment but they act as a means of probing perfectly certain thoughtful issues. At times, it serves a didactic purpose as it assists in determining people's feebleness, absurdities, idiosyncrasies and short falls below the seeming aspirations of honour and dignity. The present paper studies the unsociable elements of Much Ado About Nothing. Interestingly, what makes the play more unsociable is the fact that everyone in the play is happily indulging into the art of trickery or deception without the slightest prick of consciences. It won't be wrong to say that these characters undergo a kind of necessary compulsion to be the part of these immoral acts. The play reaches unsociable altitudes in its portrayal of deceptions, overt sexuality and cuckoldry fixation, innuendoes and the present paper endeavours to critically evaluate the unsociable element of the play.

Key words: Comedy, unsociable, deception, cuckoldry, cuckoldry, fixation, sexuality, innuendoes

In the world of a play, the use of humour could be parodied to such a degree that it would practically predestine a character's

behavior. Humour is such a weapon that it makes its point yet it doesn't hurt anyone. It cannot be denied that Shakespeare and his characterization of emblematic characters have to be significantly esteemed. Shakespeare has created some of the most appealing characters the mind of man has ever created. Critically speaking, with reference to his one of the 'mature' comedies '*Much Ado About Nothing*', it can also be seen as the most unsociable comedy which was written somewhere at the end of his decade of extraordinary achievement and invention, which definitely doesn't make it a throwaway play. The very most creditable part about '*Much Ado about Nothing*' is its upfront lucidity which has invited outstandingly diverse responses from its readers. For instance commenting on the *Much Ado about Nothing* Barbara Everett states,

“Social workers sometimes speak of people 'falling through the net'. That's what it can seem that *Much Ado about Nothing* has done, critically speaking. Audiences and readers rarely like it quite as much as the two comedies by Shakespeare which follow it, *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*: they feel that by comparison it lacks some sort of magic.”(167)

The entire play becomes a complex of deceptions and within this exterior one has to explore the theme which would eventually emerge from tragic environments. These deceptions appear in different ways like self-deception, contrivances aimed for the deception of others, which can also be called 'practices', which keeps floating throughout the play creating further confusion. Interestingly, these 'practices' are aimed to manipulate the feelings and effectively work on the perceptions of the targeted person. There is no escaping the fact, that the play is riddled with 'practices' and these deceptions/practices not only shapes the plot but also progresses it. The characters seem to improvise and invent these practices as the occasion demands. These 'seemingly truths' and its ingenuity undergoes a series of scheduling, implementation followed by subsequent

consequence. Interestingly, this play has most of its characters who might have played both of the roles at one time or the other during the play both as 'victims' and practitioners'. Nonetheless to mention that there are enough characters who willingly volunteer to be the part of this 'game-trick'. For example, Don Pedro asks for the assistance from not only the lovers; Hero-Claudio, but also the respectable governor of Messina to play the role of Cupids.

Don Pedro: ".....I will in the interim undertake one of Hercules' labours, which is, to bring Signior Benedick and the Lady Beatrice into a mountain of affection th' one with th' other. I would fain have it a match, and I doubt not but to fashion it, if you three will but minister such assistance as I shall give you direction."
(Act 2, Scene 1, Line- 362-370)

Obviously, a question that arises would be that do these well-motivated 'deceptions' take indefensible jeopardies? Well certainly, the confusion that would be caused by these failures has an answer in the question itself. However not hesitant by the risk factors, and taking it as sports, Don Pedro moves ahead to play the role of Cupid-the love god making him positively confident about the consequences when he says-

"..... I will teach you how to humour your cousin, that she shall fall in love with Benedick, and I, with your two helps, will so practice on Benedick that, in despite of his quick wit and his queasy stomach, he shall fall in love with Beatrice. If we can do this, Cupid is no longer an archer; his glory shall be ours, for we are the only love-gods. Go in with me, and I will tell you my drift. (Act 2, Scene 1, Line- 380-387)

And genetically spending major of his life commanding people, he runs his deceptions like a military operations and this is suggestive in the following lines-

"And her hearing prisoner with the force.
And strong encounter of my amorous tale;

Then after to her father will I break,
And the conclusion is, she shall be thine. "(Act 1, Scene 1,
Line- 324-328)

This play's dramatic world is markedly military, not to say macho, world in which soldiers live very comfortably and that becomes their whole world, until the previous attitudes and beliefs don't encounter the feminine sensibilities. All of the male champions of the 'Messina' have definitely been attuned with nobility yet these collaboration of characters gives a wonderful means of exploring characteristic assertiveness to sex, the opposite sex and marriage. And these disquietingly illustrative assortments of mannish attitudes, in this perspective keep coming to the surface level in many of the dialogues in the play. For Instance,

BENEDICK

I noted her not; but I looked on her.

CLAUDIO

Is she not a modest young lady? (Act 1, Scene 1, Line-149-150)

And,

DON PEDRO

You embrace your charge too willingly. I think this
is your daughter.

LEONATO

Her mother hath many times told me so.

BENEDICK

Were you in doubt, sir, that you asked her?

LEONATO

Signior Benedick, no; for then were you a child. (Act 1, Scene 1, Line-93-97)

It is this overtness of the language which adds to the plays being unsociable shades at times.

The play reconnoiters and detects the damaging, neurotic-making dynamics of that 'conventional principle that directs the male character's sexual attitudes'. And here comes

the role of a student of literature, who should first be a learner of history, learning to see with what Michael Baxandall calls the “period eye” (103).

Shakespeare’s genius self is obvious in the way he brings such a fine mixture of the major and minor characters assisting each other for the outcome in their deceptions. Likewise, when Claudio seeks Don Pedro’s help- this provides the opening for his ingenuity. Similarly, Don Pedro uses the same while he needs to prepare the complex tricking of Beatrice and Benedick, Don John’s disaffection is ripe for Borachio’s scheme. Note the subtle difference between the two royal princes Don Pedro who ‘fashion’ these practices and Don John who ‘frames’ his villainies as seen above.

Don John: Any bar, any cross, any impediment will be med’cinable to me. I am sick in displeasure to him, and whatsoever comes athwart his affection ranges evenly with mine. How canst thou cross this marriage? (Act 2, Scene 2, Line-4-8)

Sarcastically speaking, though this play embodies the courtly ideas of social grace and wit – the qualities that drive the comedic nature of the play underneath this gentle exterior lies ‘Nothing’- in its all applicable shades. Nevertheless the ‘practices’ if observed minutely, everyone in the play is happily indulging into the art of trickery or deception without the slightest prick of consciences or it won’t be wrong to say that these characters undergo a kind of necessary compulsion to be the part of these immoral acts. For Instance,

LEONATO

My lord, I am for you, though it cost me ten nights' watchings.

CLAUDIO

And I, my lord.

DON PEDRO

And you too, gentle Hero?

HERO

I will do any modest office, my lord, to help my
cousin to a good husband. (Act 2, Scene 1, Line-342-347)

The fact that cannot be put under scrutiny is that these strategies or practices or deceptions can only be operative through the tendencies of the society in which these deceptions are to be worked. Isn't it obvious that right from the beginning we do find the glimpse of a practice of mind which places a ready conviction in appearances and surface values. Almost all of the characters practice deception in a small way yet they do so. This tendency drives readers to think about was this how Elizabethan behaved? Or was pretending normal and necessary? Now this makes the play unsociable in nature and one of the most noteworthy observation from the play would be that people who are aware of the part of the scheme are effortlessly sometimes taken in. Like Don Pedro's attitude towards Hero at the dance scene makes Claudio the victim of the 'practice' which he himself has approved. And unfortunately, the first misunderstanding that is created in the text doesn't teach Claudio any lesson. Funny it might sound but sometimes we do get caught into our own web. When Don John comes with the disastrous news, it doesn't occur to Claudio that he might be the victim of the same practice. Yet, Claudio's example isn't the lone proof, we do see many other characters falling victim to their own trap. Like when the confusion is cleared after the dance, we see Don Pedro actually trying to make a casual proposal to ask Beatrice for marriage which she cleverly rejects saying that she can't afford him.

BEATRICE

I would rather have one of your father's getting.
Hath your grace ne'er a brother like you? Your
father got excellent husbands, if a maid could come by them.

DON PEDRO

Will you have me, lady?

BEATRICE

No, my lord, unless I might have another for
working-days: your grace is too costly to wear

every day. But, I beseech your grace, pardon me: I was born to speak all mirth and no matter. (Act 2, scene1, Line 298-306)

What makes this play an unsociable play could be the excessive obsession of cuckoldry with its sexual innuendoes. For Instance,

BENEDICK

That a woman conceived me, I thank her; that she brought me up, I likewise give her most humble thanks: but that I will have a recheat winded in my forehead, or hang my bugle in an invisible baldrick, all women shall pardon me. Because I will not do them the wrong to mistrust any, I will do myself the right to trust none; and the fine is, for the which I may go the finer, I will live a bachelor.

DON PEDRO

I shall see thee, ere I die, look pale with love.

BENEDICK

With anger, with sickness, or with hunger, my lord, not with love: prove that ever I lose more blood with love than I will get again with drinking, pick out mine eyes with a ballad-maker's pen and hang me up at the door of a brothel-house for the sign of blind Cupid. (Act 1, Scene 1, Line-217-231)

Or was the author trying to attribute sexual mistrust to masculine insecurity rather than targeting feminine infidelity? Shakespeare does play on the insecurities of mere social inference which touches all the characters in this play. And this thought rightly reminds us of the lines *As You Like It*

‘I do now remember a saying, ‘The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool’ (Bednaarz cited in Barbera, 231).

Aspects such as portrayal of men, cuckoldry and infidelity that runs down as the themes in many of his plays, surprisingly forces us to think about all of the other plays as there aren't many unfaithful wives portrayed in his plays. Yet this imaginative Cuckoldry practiced by Renaissance culture

produced very quarrelsome and frustrated lovers forming a narcissist personality disorder. We find this cuckoldry anxiety of young, unmarried lovers in many of his plays like *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Comedy of Errors*, and *Love's Labour's Lost*. Adding to this list what comes to our mind are the well-known characters for whom personal jealousy hinders the supervision of their public justice in the plays like *Othello*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *The Winter's Tale*. And not to forget to mention the jealous soldiers in *Much Ado About Nothing*. The fixation of cuckoldry directly emphasizes women's physical virginity and the fear of infidelity was too visible more in the people of upper class. This fretfulness of adultery put women in difficult position to deal with their husbands, finding it too insulting and the idea of considering women to be too weak that they would end up having physical intimacy with anyone they find around was unbearable. Look at how the relationships are at stake with people who do have the cuckoldry fixation. The following words spoken by Claudio clearly reflects the Elizabethan priorities.

“There, Leonato, take her back again.
Give not this rotten orange to your friend.
She's but the sign and semblance of her honor.
Behold how like a maid she blushes here!
Oh, what authority and show of truth
Can cunning sin cover itself withal!
Comes not that blood as modest evidence
To witness simple virtue? Would you not swear,
All you that see her, that she were a maid
By these exterior shows? But she is none.
She knows the heat of a luxurious bed.
Her blush is guiltiness, not modesty. (Act 4, Scene 1, Line 28-39)

This sense of contamination that attaches to the image of Hero in the above lines is very differently seen in the play *'All's Well That Ends Well'* where Shakespeare's warming verbal “Friction”- is on the subject of virginity as another kind of death

“virginity murders itself,” I.i. 139) as mentioned below in the lines of-

Parolles: ...Loss of virginity is rational increase, and there was never virgin got till virginity was first lost....Virginity, by being once lost, may be ten times found; by being ever kept, it is ever lost. 'Tis too cold a companion; away with't!'tis against the rule of nature....Keep it not, you cannot choose but lose by't. Out with't! Within one year it will make itself two, which is a goodly increase, and the principal itself not much the worse. (Act 1, Scene 1, Line 27-49)

Considering this line Parolles had used a term “vendible commodity” in his exchange with Helena in Act I of the play ‘*All's Well That Ends Well*’ beautifully echoes a contrasting emphasis on the subject of virginity which has been presented as a commodity that “the longer kept” is “the less worth”

“Off with't while 'tis vendible.” (Act 1, Scene, Line 154-55)

It is dishonorable stigma of cuckoldry that maddens Claudio of his confidence which has resulted in rejection of Hero as a suitable partner. Ironically, virginity, like a life, can only be taken once: the self-tormenting Claudio and his imaginations instruct him that what remains for him to do is to disown Hero forever. This tragicomic irony is horrible and very disturbing. What comes to our mind is a similar thought echoed in the play ‘*Othello*’, when Othello entertains the idea of Desdemona’s infidelity and that to such an extent that he is prepared to murder her. Othello raging in anger says, “Thy Bed lust-stain’d, shall with Lusts blood be spotted”

We see Othello’s devastating collapse after he has murdered his still-virginal bride who was waiting for him on those re-laid, unspotted wedding sheets. However, Claudio is relieved by Shakespeare by not allowing Claudio to go into that ‘devastating collapse’ which is just for a momentary when

Leonato to Claudio's surprise when he was guilty of what he had done unknowingly and asks for forgiveness, Leonato presents Claudio with an 'Another Hero'. Othello's torment disturbs the readers whereas Claudio's lament doesn't create that impact because we do have all the information we need and this serves as a perspective on the action, so that we focus not on 'what will happen next?' as in straight suspense, but on 'when will it happen, and how?', which is the teasing suspense of comedy, giving us a ready appreciation of the dramatic ironies as they happen. (Bradshaw, 365)

Opening up of the discussion of virginity (as a subject and its excessive obsession or demand) makes the text more a forbidden text making it more unsociable in form. All this clubbed together right from with name changes to Hero from Margaret at Hero's bed chamber, a carefully laid down gulling scene, the public humiliation of Hero in the church scene, the feigned death of Hero, proxy wooing, and much more malapropism of Dogberry makes the narrative and its plot a more unsociable play.

Other components of the play like modern conventions of 'honesty' is seen more in danger, characters disguising themselves in one way or another, villainy, scheming, sparkling wordplays, issues confronting Elizabethan values of propriety and social decorum, deception exploiting the emotional instability and play being an inquisition into the values of society that refuses to question its values- all of these put this play in a different degree altogether. Are these the inflation or deflation of values of the society where the play is set in?

The tricks like in '*Much Ado About Nothing*'- a tomb-trick can be considered lesser dangerous in comparison to the bed-tricks in the two later, much darker comedies- *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well*. (Parker, 292) This tomb trick looks more like a kind of 'good deceit' or 'virtuous untruth', a device of worldly accommodation in a light but moral art which does suit the love-comedy type of degree. These casual phrases making it a light comedy does give depth and vitality

which has helped this text to survive even today. In fact the Bard was experimenting this novelistic comedy which might look simple to the eye but its simplicity is a solidity; reminding us not only through its title but also play, that, though life is undeniably grave, most human beings pass much of their time in trivial things, that the ordinary, social fabric of life could have been very thin, made up of trivia, and we can often feel a kind of real nothingness underneath. (Macdonald, 347)

Shakespeare's comedies are a 'Nothing' concerned with thoughtful things; and these grim things are the principles of true human feeling in a world in which an intelligent man knows that so much is nothing. And to be at ease in such reflections demands, at once, ironic detachment. Shakespeare's genius lies plainly in the fact that there is so much of 'Nothing' underneath the nothing. And Shakespeare plainly wanted his text to be it so, the world he had invented to be swept through the currents of pointless energetic bewilderment.

We see a great emphasize of the dramatic connection between the extension of life with respect to Hero's feigns death and the extending of words. The curious phallic language with its undertone of the sexual sense of different evocation makes 'Language', also the protagonist of this text. Shakespeare must have been an innate mimic, as he loves to break up his languages with mockery, and has kind of chameleon quality which makes him seize on any opportunity for a change of style. And this is evident in the play where the honest and original people use prose and the conventional people make use of verse. Language becomes more a weapon of 'Wit' for the strong, only those with the poise to remain balanced and adaptive can have the privilege of it. And hence it's appropriate use is only by a privilege group of people- where Dogberry and his fellow mates fail to register their names. However, it should be noted that the use of language also determine the degree of proximity to the aristocracy in this play. For example in the play '*Much Ado About Nothing*', Messenger at the beginning of the play does

make a good impression by his elegant use of aristocratic language in the following words-

Messenger- Much deserved on his part, and equally remembered by Don Pedro. He hath borne himself beyond the promise of his age, doing in the figure of a lamb the feats of a lion. He hath indeed better bettered expectation than you must expect of me to tell you how." (Act 1, Scene 1, Line- 11-16)

Language was definitely a very important parameter to belong to an aristocratic class and being witty or intelligent were the traits that the characters were identified with. In fact, linguistic abilities were more a tester. And possessing these traits made the characters more desirable and more eligible.

Messina, the setting of the play is a world where all and sundry talks or loves to talk. And it is this skill with words which help them to socially survive and it is this delight in language which is shared by all the characters involved in the play from courtiers, soldiers to the lowest form of survivals in form of constables. However, Don John - the Bastard cannot join in:

Don John: 'I am not of many words.'" (Act 1, Scene 1, Line- 143-144)

The society of 'Messina' is directed by demureness, convention and style as we are very much aware of but this wonderfully real and recognizable world of Messina also has one alternative bred within itself- a self-proclaimed hostile isolationist in form of Don John- the lawless brother who has dogged himself to a stand as to –

"Therefore I have decreed not to sing in my cage." (Act 1, Scene 3, Line- 90)

Interestingly, Shakespeare did need a villain in his play and he did find a ready-made in the popular theories about

psychological types. Francis Bacon referring to this tendency observes,

‘Bastards are envious: for he that cannot possibly mend his case will do what he can to impair others’ Francis Bacon, ‘Of Envy’ (Gill, 23)

This idea of having an illegitimate prince in the society amidst the aristocratic people sounds unpleasant not only to the ear but to the attitudes and the sensibilities of the people. Villain in any given comedy is always a threat to the play but a Bastard son is much more beyond the capacity of the comical text. To readers Don John doesn’t come to as a pack of surprise as he is not the only Bastard son or the illegitimate character whose presence stands as a constant threat to the stability of a society which is grounded in marriage and family values. We do find two other memorable ‘Bastards’ in different other plays like- Philip Falconbridge in *King John*, and Edmund, the bastard son of Gloucester, in *King Lear*.

What is absorbingly evocative about Shakespeare’s works is to obfuscate our reactions to the play and it’s supposedly nature as it is basically a comedy but with a difference. But we do find more of confirmations rather than surprises in the play. At times in the play we might think of something is evidently wrong, but how much is wrong in Shakespeare’s play? This of course raises fundamental questions about what Shakespeare’s play is ‘about’. Isn’t there a need to dismiss this horribly long-lived idea that the play depends upon a deception and practices to make its action credible – it might give a critical relief, but it is historically disquieting. In putting that question, I certainly do not want to press for some moralistic judgement of the nature of this text. Yet, the text does provide a cultural context in a fine expertise of dramatic context as well.

The merits of *‘Much Ado About Nothing’* also governs its confines. The sharpness of wit, the embellishments of tersely deceit, the coolness of tone- all these must be acknowledged

that this play is certainly not a trivial play- one cannot say that the play has ‘nothing’ in it but the plays elusiveness remains a little intangible. Yet Much Ado is serious in its concerns while always wearing the air of being entertainingly ‘About Nothing’. Despite its lack of a ballasted society, the play has very much to do about “society” and it is more concerned with society and the contentment of life in society. If it does not present a breathing society in action, it presents and comments on outlines of conduct which withstand societies at large. The play features its concern with concepts of styles, ways of language and gesticulation and action which befit, in varying degrees, the intercourse of civilized people etc. And being a comedy it is also much to do with the follies of human beings, since this is the perpetual source of any comedy. Things like cuckoldry, deceptions, tricks, sexual innuendoes, duplicity might suggest misdemeanors against the value of modesty yet how come we fail to recognize the fact that it was yet the sixteenth century wherein these issues had not yet been fossilized in its society the way it has surprisingly evolved today.

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