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## **“There’s a Double Meaning in That”: Heroism and Blessedness in Much Ado About Nothing**

### **Cover Page Footnote**

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## “THERE’S A DOUBLE MEANING IN THAT”: HEROISM AND BLESSEDNESS IN *MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING*

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### ABSTRACT:

*I have chosen to include this line “There’s a double meaning in that” (spoken by Benedick in Act 2 scene 3) in the title of this analysis as a way of introducing the play’s two heroines: Hero and Beatrice, and my argument that these women’s names at once symbolically exemplify and ironically contrast with their characters’ natures. While referring to scholarship on Shakesporean names, allegory, and societal and gender roles, I will consider the meaning of these names—Hero meaning “hero” and Beatrice meaning “blessed” or “blessing”—and examine the ways that these characters define and are defined by heroism, blessing, and womanhood. Moreover, I will argue that as these characters are so closely knit and supportive of each other, they define and are defined by each other’s names as well as their own. Although I will be focusing on these women, I will also refer to Benedick—whose name can also be translated as “blessed”—and his noteworthy decision to advocate for these women when they find themselves at odds with a male-led society. Ultimately, I will conclude that both Hero and Beatrice are as cursed as they are blessed, as heroic as they are victimized by circumstance, and that these loving and supportive cousins help each other to find happiness by making the most of their name-given, definitive strengths.*

In the context of any Shakesporean comedy—rife with puns, misunderstandings, and mistaken identities—the words “There’s a double meaning in that” could not be more apt. When Benedick delivers these words (at the end of Act 2 scene 3) they serve primarily to make him look foolish, as he is responding to some of the dullest, most literal lines in the play and allowing his love-struck imagination to give them romantic overtones. Yet *Much Ado About Nothing* is still Shakespeare’s, and double meanings pervade the entire work. Much can be made of the title itself. “Nothing” could have been homophonous with “noting” to Elizabethan audiences, and “the plot of the comedy certainly turns on what this pun implies: notetaking, spying, eavesdropping. No other play in Shakespeare introduces so much eavesdropping—each new turn of the action depends on it” (Everett 75). In the end, each misinterpreted noting and misguided turn of action amounts to nothing.

Because double meanings are integral to this play, I have chosen to analyze its two heroines—Hero and Beatrice—with a focus on the double meanings behind their names. Each woman’s name symbolically exemplifies and ironically contrasts with her nature. Moreover, as these women are so closely knit, they are defined—sincerely and ironically—by each other’s names as well as their own. Both Hero and Beatrice are as cursed as they are blessed and as heroic as they are victimized by circumstance, but ultimately, the true meaning of each name outweighs the ironic one, and both women find happiness in marriage by making the most of their name-given strengths.

“Beatrice” derives from the Latin *beatrix* or “bringer of joy.” Murray J. Levith points out that “Benedick might argue with [this definition] when related to his lady’s character” (85). There’s no “might” about it. Beatrice and Benedick (whose name could mean “blessed” or “well-spoken” (Murray 85)) tease each other throughout the play, and are said to have waged “a kind of merry war” as long as they have known each other, but there is one “skirmish of wit” (I, i, 60-61) between them in which Beatrice has the last word, after which Benedick complains that “if her breath were as terrible as her terminations, there were no living near her” and further that “all disquiet, horror, and perturbation follow her” (II, i, 245-246, 257). Despite her blessed designation, Beatrice’s speech amounts at times to anathema, making her a bringer of curses.

Nor is Benedick the only character to criticize Beatrice’s speech—though his pride is the most deeply wounded by it. Beatrice’s uncles make a blatant pun on her name, criticizing her for being “too curst” to ever marry— “curst” in this context meaning too talkative, quarrelsome, or shrewish. Beatrice, the bringer of joy, is too cursed. In response to this criticism, Beatrice glibly acknowledges that indeed God has sent her no husband “for the which blessing [she is] at Him upon [her] knees every morning and evening” (II, i, 27-29). She speaks jestingly, but Beatrice’s lightness of speech often belies the depth of her convictions:<sup>1</sup> in this case, that a husband is not the only blessing a woman may receive, that an unloved husband is no blessing at all, and that Beatrice herself is blessing enough.

The very men who criticize Beatrice’s curst tongue also acknowledge and take pleasure in its wit. After Beatrice has refused Don Pedro’s marriage proposal, the prince expresses his continued admiration for her, deeming her a “pleasant-spirited lady,” in response to which her uncle praises her merry spirit, saying that according to Hero, Beatrice “hath often dreamt of unhappiness and waked herself with laughing” (II, i, 338-339). Eventually, once Benedick has come to terms with his love for Beatrice, he is happy to continue his long-standing “merry war” with her, concluding that the two of them are “too wise to woo peaceably” (V, ii, 72). Beatrice is ultimately true to her name—blessed with a merry nature and marital happiness—and the very friends and family who worry that her tongue is too sharp continually find that it brings them joy.

Like Beatrice, Hero also bears a double-edged name, though the meaning of Hero’s name—a good and noble character noted for outstanding courage—stands in more dramatic contrast to her situation. Hero initially seems to be “more victim than hero” (Bate 70). A secondary double meaning may be attributed to Hero’s name, as it may be an allusion to Hero of Sestos: a model of constancy who, in one version of the myth of Hero and Leander, is accused of wantonness (as Shakespeare’s Hero is). The central conflict of *Much Ado* is caused by slander (that Hero has been unfaithful to her betrothed Claudio) spoken against Hero by others, and finally disproved by others while Hero herself is pretending to be dead. Hero’s character has very few lines and most of these are about others—often that “other” is Beatrice, the more assertive of the two heroines, who curses the female state that prevents her from fighting to defend her cousin’s honor. Any male hero would fight, and surely any heroic female would want to do the same.

But what’s in a hero? Jonathan Bate points out that Hero “says far less than the other major characters, but we hear her name more often than that of any other character” indicating has left “an impression on the minds of the other characters” (74). Moreover, at all times except when she

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<sup>1</sup> Two notable contrasting instances include her “What fire is in my ears” and “O God that I were a man” soliloquies, both of which are turning points for her character and are influenced (in earnest style and content) by her respect for Hero.

is publicly slandered, Hero's name is spoken as that of an unquestionably reliable source. It is not only the proof of Leonato's own observation, but of what he has heard *from Hero*, that confirms his belief in Beatrice's merry nature. Even Benedick—who begins the play professing disdain for women in general, and when asked about Hero in particular states that he “noted her not” (I, i, 160)—is convinced that Beatrice loves him not merely because he notes Don Pedro, Leonato, and Claudio saying so, but because “they have the truth of this from Hero” (II, iii, 224-225). Though Hero is made a victim to the slander that puts her virtuous reputation in doubt, she is initially believed and finally proved to be the most respected character.

Hero does need the help of others to prove her virtue. All characters in this play, heroes and villains alike, depend on the noting, tricks, and encouragements of others to lead them to act. If self-sufficiency is a definitive element of heroism, no character fits the definition. But Hero comes close. At their intended wedding, Claudio accuses Hero of wantonness, urging her “to answer truly to [her] name” which he believes she has defiled, saying that “Hero itself can blot out Hero's virtue” (IV, i, 83, 87). The truth of these words surpasses Claudio's understanding of them and applies as strongly to the opposing argument: that Hero's behavior alone makes her a paragon of her own name. The slander of others blots out Hero's name temporarily, but Hero herself reclaims Hero's virtue by remaining constant to Claudio. It takes the accidental noting of others to provide proof of Hero's constancy, but then Hero is able to reveal herself as living proof of her own virtue.

It is through this slander that Hero becomes as cursed as Beatrice. Slander falls as a double curse on Hero and on those she loves—it “has trampled upon a sacred vow-in-the-making and ruined a woman's life. Hero's loss of name is perceived as a social death with dire consequences” (Tassi 107). Leonato, upon realizing the social death of his daughter, wishes that she were dead in earnest, or that she had never been born to become a shameful curse to herself and her family. Beatrice too is victimized by the slander that curses Hero. She is forced to suffer the grief of seeing her cousin's name destroyed, and the indignity having to watch, unable even to provide her with an alibi. Beatrice the bringer of joy is honest, even when forced to tell the grievous truth that on the night of Hero's alleged fidelity, she was not with Hero, though until that night she had “this twelvemonth been her bedfellow” (IV, i, 158). Heroism and the bringer of joy keep allegorically apt company together, and on the one night they are apart, they fall victim to the curse of slander.

Shortly after she is unable to give Hero an alibi, Beatrice delivers her famous and beloved “O that I were a man” speech, expressing her desire to fight for Hero and concluding, “I cannot be a man with wishing; therefore, I will die a woman with grieving” (IV, i, 336-338). Beatrice believes that since she is not a man she cannot fight, and since she cannot fight, she can do nothing. By contrast, Hero never expresses a wish to do anything dramatically gallant, nor grieves at her inability to do so. Instead, she states, “I will do any modest office...to help my cousin to a good husband” (II, ii, 366-367). Herein lies these cousins' characteristic heroism. Hero is willing to do any small, unnoteworthy deed if it may bring joy and blessing to those she loves. Beatrice wishes to fight for the Hero she loves, but failing that, she will use her sharp and curst tongue to incite Benedick to advocate for her.

Despite each woman's desire to advocate for her cousin by whatever means lies within her power, both women choose to remain true to their names rather than be heavily influenced by each other. At one dramatically-packed point, Hero criticizes Beatrice very harshly—and this is the only criticism that Beatrice takes to heart. Following the Prince Don Pedro's plan to trick Beatrice and Benedick into discovering their love for one another, staged conversations are set up for both

characters to overhear and thereby learn how intensely they are loved. Once Beatrice is standing where she may overhear, Hero states her certainty that Benedick is in love with Beatrice, and her equal certainty the Beatrice must never know of it. Hero then berates Beatrice for having been hypercritical of all her past suiters, and for refusing to listen to anyone who would dare to urge her to be wooed, saying “She would mock me into air. O, she would laugh me/Out of myself, press me to death with wit” (III, i, 79-81). Indeed, this was exactly how Beatrice reacted when her uncles chided her for being too curst: she laughed and made them laugh with her. Hero further says will urge Benedick resist his feeling for Beatrice, and goes so far as to say,

I’ll devise some honest slanders  
To stain my cousin with. One doth not know  
How much an ill word may empoison liking (89-91).

Though she only means to give Beatrice an added sense of urgency to acknowledge and confess her love as soon as possible, here Hero unwittingly articulates the moral of the play and foreshadows her own temporary undoing by slander. If Beatrice had overheard these words from any other character in Messina, she would probably still have laughed, but because the criticism comes from Hero, she is shocked into saying,

Stand I condemned for pride and scorn so much?  
Contempt, farewell, and maiden pride, adieu!  
No glory lives behind the back of such (114-116).

But though Beatrice makes this earnest vow to change her way of thinking and speaking, she continues her merry war with Benedick in much the same way that she began it, returning each verbal spar with one of her own. Though Beatrice notes Hero’s criticism, she remains curst.

There is even less indication that Hero follows the advice given to her by Beatrice. In the same conversation where her uncles reproach Beatrice for her sharp and untamed tongue, they express their hope that Hero will accept the proposal they believe to be forthcoming from Don Pedro. Beatrice interjects,

Yes, faith, 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” (II, i, 52-56).

Once again, Beatrice speaks jestingly, but with serious matter behind her speech. Though Beatrice has her uncles, she has no father to rule her and no filial duty to perform. This undoubtedly contributes to her conviction that she is blessing enough without a husband. When Beatrice herself later receives Don Pedro’s marriage proposal, she is able to refuse him gently—without angering or disappointing any father—and exits wishing Hero and Claudio joy. Beatrice knows that Hero cannot defy her father (any more than she can be a man with wishing). Still, Beatrice takes this opportunity to gently encourage both her cousin and her uncle to allow Hero to marry a man who pleases her. Hero says nothing in response to Beatrice’s encouragement. Though Don Pedro does later woo Hero, he does so in Claudio’s name. Hero accepts this proposal, and with her father’s consent, eventually marries Claudio, a man who appears to please her. Because Don Pedro does not woo Hero for himself, she is not forced to choose between her father’s wishes and her own, and it remains unclear how she would have chosen.

What is clear is that both Beatrice and Hero make a point of encouraging each other to do what each cousin believes will help the other to find happiness in marriage. Hero urges Beatrice to be less scornful of men in general (and of Benedick in particular), and Beatrice encourages Hero to marry someone who will please her, rather than settle for whatever man her father deems most suitable. Each woman takes note of the other's advice, but neither undergoes dramatic change in response to it. Beatrice keeps her curst tongue and does what brings her joy. Hero remains obedient to the point of victimhood but is as true and constant as the noblest hero. Though they are bedfellows, companions, and influences on each other's character, it is by staying true to her multifaceted name that each woman finds happiness.

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