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Sensory Confusion and the Generation Gap in *Much Ado About Nothing*

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Abstract

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, characters repeatedly stage moments designed to confuse other figures, a good example being the machinations aimed at Beatrice and Benedick. However, the play contains many more instances in which misrepresentation plays with truth. The supposed offstage seduction of Hero signals the audience that what this unseen (to them) event means will be crucial, making them focus upon the meanings given to the event by the characters. Critics have often noted that the young noblemen get it wrong, and that the play then ironically counterpoints this by making the useless constabulary get it right by apprehending the culprit; they also usually marginalise the older characters, especially the Friar, who is relegated to a plot-function. However, given the play's insistence on perception and misunderstanding, this article revisits their importance in performance as a group that avoids the mistakes made by the younger generation.

The emphasis on forms of representation and misunderstanding in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* is well known and has created a great deal of critical traffic. The multiple puns embedded in the term 'nothing' include the visibility or otherwise of female sexuality: '(*nothing* was slang for the female genitalia, and was pronounced the same as "noting", which could mean "noticing" or "knowing")'.[1] Here we have the Arden 3 editor's (Claire McEachern) parenthetical gloss on this collocation, which she calls the Elizabethan pun.[2] It condenses an awareness of the play as not being about much that matters, as being very much concerned with the woman's place, and also as being a very self-aware dramatic artefact, one that is

intimately concerned with the process of representation as noting/ knowing. Diana E. Henderson has picked up on exactly this point: 'Nowhere is the play of confusion among sight, sound, and word more overt than in *Much Ado About Nothing*, whose very title announces the interpretive duplicity that can become the stuff of either comedy or tragedy'.[3]

Her essay emphasises polyvalency, especially in relation to Hero and what she might signify, or be made to signify; as she states, 'Ironically, it is Hero's virtue that makes her easy to overlook'.[4] This presents a whole series of difficulties in relation to her initial silence at the moment of her repudiation before the altar, as shall become clearer later. However, the play is especially careful to establish Hero early on as an object to be defined:

> CLAUDIO: Benedick, didst thou note the daughter of Signor Leonato?
> BENEDICK: I noted her not, but I looked on her. (1.1.155–56)

The multiple resonances of the play's title reverberate through the very first time that Claudio starts to speak about Hero. Benedick's reply indicates that he did see Hero, but has not recognised in her anything notable, at least not in the same way as Claudio. What she might mean, as with so much else in this play, depends on which character is speaking. Of course, the presence of Beatrice has a great deal to do with this, but the exchange between the two men foregrounds the importance of noting. The point is reinforced and extended a little later when Don Pedro says to Benedick that: 'if thou ever dost fall from this faith, thou wilt prove a notable argument' (1.1.236–37). This comes in direct response to Benedick's swearing off love, and the recurrence of the term serves to focus attention on what it might mean, and how its multiple meanings will work out in practice as the play progresses.

It is important to note that these exchanges about Hero and love take place purely between the men of the play. Shakespeare makes use of a common technique of off-stage representation, or reportage, to focus the audience's attention on what the onstage characters are saying about others who are not present. Examples from other plays would include the different, even conflicting representations of the war that precedes the action of *The Spanish Tragedy* and the multiple descriptions of Desdemona in *Othello* before she finally arrives onstage at 1.3.170. In these two other plays the fact that different interpretations are voiced signals that what is being represented is

crucial to the action. In *Much Ado* the same attention to representation is signified by means of a doubled play on noting, by the characters but also by the audience as well, as Robert Weimann suggests: 'the *platea* occasion holds sway, which foregrounds the time and place and the authority of spectatorship'.[5] Here he is writing about *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* but his point is relevant to *Much Ado* as well. These plays relate the onstage action directly to the audience, especially via the zone of the platea*,* the part of the stage closest to the majority of the audience in Weimann's well known formulation.[6] His work allows us to see how major considerations of physical space and time, the moment of the performance, are combined with a playgoing culture that places authority not in an authorial sanction, but in the range of meanings that is available to the variegated audience. This constitutes a dynamic model of representation that allows us to move beyond the text and the onstage dramatic fictions by which the performance is realised.

'Dynamic' is only one word that could be used to describe the various interactions in *Much Ado*. As has often been noted in criticism, the action moves across and beyond the Hero plot, with all of its attendant gendered anxieties of class and inheritance (Don Pedro says that she is Leonato's 'only heir' at 1.1.276), through the 'merry war' between Beatrice and Benedick, and onto the comedic efforts of the local constables.[7] Dogberry and friends ironically get it right when they apprehend Borachio, although they then have problems explaining it all to Leonato at 3.5. Beatrice and Benedick, however, get it all wrong when each is manipulated by false clues, and so too do Claudio and Don Pedro when they mistake Margaret for Hero.

All of these instances are familiar enough, but nevertheless we should acknowledge that the play works through all of them by interlacing each element with an emphasis on the means of its representation. Or, rather, the play's emphasis is on representation, with each of the various plots modulating it in turn. Act 1 Scene 2 is a short emblematic scene that develops the concern with noting we have already seen in the exchanges between Benedick, Claudio and Don Pedro. Antonio meets his brother Leonato and says:

> The Prince and Count Claudio, walking in a thick-pleached alley in mine orchard, were thus much overheard by a man of mine: the prince discovered to Claudio that he loved my niece your daughter. (1.2.7–11)

This is juxtaposed by means of dramatic patterning with the scene immediately following, in which Borachio reports to his master Don John that:

> Being entertained for a perfumer, as I was smoking a musty room comes me the prince and Claudio, hand in hand in sad conference. I whipped me behind the arras, and there heard it agreed upon that the prince should woo Hero for himself, and having obtained her, give her to Count Claudio. (1.3.54–59)

The sequence establishes three crucial elements of the play as whole. The first is the central importance of people watching or overhearing others; the second is the high probability that what is seen or heard will be misunderstood; and the third is the audience's omniscience over all of these events as they unfold, in an especially sophisticated form of what is usually called dramatic irony. All of this is then reinforced in the misunderstandings generated by the masked dance in Act 2 Scene 1.

The complex manoeuvres undertaken by so many people by this point in the play can seem bewildering, especially to a modern audience. There is no simply understood central character or central relationship in *Much Ado*. Instead, there is a constantly shifting engagement with various elements around and across the terrain of representative practice. This is a play that plays with spectatorship, hearing and audience perspectives, and to get it right in performance requires an ensemble production of the highest order. No one strand can predominate if the play is to be allowed to foreground its display of representative practices. Of course, the history of its reception is replete with readings (and I use this word advisedly) that go against the grain of the play, especially the vogue for the popularity of the 'merry war' of the Benedick/Beatrice pairing.

That particular attempt to re-focus the play is instructive, because it draws attention to a post-Renaissance need to find a specific hook on which to hang the whole thing, and of course this requirement is itself driven by the importance of the individual. There is nothing surprising in a play that uses the ensemble to enact a social environment being reinterpreted to suit the different requirements of later period audiences. Claire McEachern spends a great deal of time and effort in her Introduction to the Arden 3 edition of the play on the psychological makeup of the characters, especially the unattractive weaknesses of Claudio. This can partly be explained by the relative

historical weight attached to the Benedick-Beatrice success story, but she moves on to generalise on the basis of what she calls 'this play's peculiar emotional tenor'.[8] Her use of the term 'peculiar' carries the two senses of 'specific' and 'odd'. However, if the play is considered as an ensemble piece, structured in accordance with the exigencies of Renaissance audience expectations, then the systemic importance of individual psychology seems less important. These are roles by means of which the actors impersonate the features of real people; they function as dramatic fictions.

It would seem more fruitful to investigate how these figures relate in their various ways to the play's metadramatic concern with its own presentations. Don Pedro and Claudio are both taken in by the show put on for them offstage, but the very fact that this is not shown directly to the audience builds upon the associations we have already seen in the men's descriptions of Hero earlier on in the play. Of course, the audience already knows that the scene is a set-up, but its absence from the stage draws attention to how the event will be perceived and understood. The contemporary Renaissance audience will have a special interest in the rhetoric used by the characters who have been fooled by it. Like the death of Ophelia or the murder of Duncan, a crucially central occurrence does not happen in direct vision. It is important to note in this connection how all of the scenes just mentioned from different plays inevitably draw the attention of modern film-makers. Polanski feels a need to show Duncan's death; a whole industry has grown up around the death of Ophelia, especially from the Pre-Raphaelites onwards; and Branagh's film of *Much Ado* shows how Margaret is able effectively to impersonate Hero and be mistaken for her from the perspective of the men hiding below. All of these examples zero in upon what is not shown on stage, so much so that it is tempting to theorise a different kind of gaze for later, more individually centred cultures than Shakespeare's. These painters and directors demonstrate a sophisticated awareness of what is necessary for their own cultures' forms of spectatorship. They know that what is required is, precisely, to show what Shakespeare does not, in order for their 'audiences' to understand the importance of these events. In a similar way different cultural expectations also inevitably inflect modern moral reactions against the ending of *Much Ado,* because they are based on assumptions about character psychology that are not pertinent to Renaissance dramatic structures.

Patterns

The structure of the play is complex, criss-crossed throughout with a whole variety of dramatic patterning techniques. These patterns reinforce the importance of 'noting' in all of its senses. The most obvious comes in the gulling of Benedick by Don Pedro, Claudio and Leonato from 2.3.91ff, which is then counterpointed in the fooling of Beatrice by Hero and Ursula from 3.1.15ff. The patterned effect is enhanced by the fact that both Benedick and Beatrice utter soliloquies at the end of each scene. Of course, Shakespeare makes sure that the juxtaposition is not too straightforward or static. Benedick has a soliloquy at the start of his scene, while Beatrice does not, and there is the additional insertion of a short comic interlude between Beatrice and Benedick at 2.3.236–47. Beatrice's unwilling invitation to Benedick to come to dinner is interpreted differently by each of them because he has already been gulled while she has not, underscoring the dynamic comic interplay.

These various events, from roughly the first half of the play, are orchestrated by Don Pedro when he says:

> I will teach you how to humour your cousin that she shall fall in love with Benedick; [*to Claudio and Leonato*] and I, with your two helps, will so practise on Benedick that, in despite of his quick wit and his queasy stomach, he shall fall in love with Beatrice. (2.1.351–55)

Don Pedro seems here to be in full command, and he does go on to be successful in this endeavour. However, it should be remembered that his stated intention and the two scenes in which it comes to fruition are themselves sandwiched between the plots of Borachio. The first, an attempt to make Claudio jealous of Don John by making him suspect the Prince's wooing of Hero as indeed for himself and not Claudio, has only just been foiled immediately prior to Act 2 Scene 1.[9] The second, of course, is the supposed seduction of Hero that occurs afterwards. The alternation of Don Pedro's schemes with those constructed and enacted by Borachio on behalf of the prince's illegitimate brother frames one set of plots around the other, a technique of emboxing that is akin to the significance of the play within the play so familiar from works such as *Hamlet, The Spanish Tragedy,* or *Women Beware Women*.[10] Unlike those other plays, the end result is not tragedy as such, although the disturbances that are generated come very near indeed. Don Pedro is close enough in age

to both Claudio and Benedick that the possibility of him acquiring Hero for himself under his stated intention then to pass her onto Claudio can be used by Borachio to sow suspicion in Claudio's mind. At the very beginning of the play, the messenger describes Don Pedro as having 'borne himself beyond the promise of his age, doing in the figure of a lamb the feats of a lion' (1.1.13–15), and we should note at this point the resonance with the name of Leonato. Nicolas Grene relates the prior war action to the events of the play, with 'love-making the light-hearted relaxation from an offstage war', which seems a somewhat weak justification for the treatment of the women in *Much Ado*.[11]

The older Leonato is a particularly useful tool in Don Pedro's manipulation of Benedick, who says in a direct address to the audience that:

> I should think this is a gull, but that the white-bearded fellow speaks it. Knavery cannot, sure, hide himself in such reverence. (2.3.119–21)

The play's movement between 'noting' and misapprehension is here beginning to cohere around a specific visual emblem, and the difference between the generations will continue to grow in importance as the various events unfold. The correlation between these two aspects of the play feeds into the comedy constabulary, marking their profession as at the same time 'ancient and most quiet', as Dogberry describes the Watchman at 3.3.39–40, in the midst of his own series of mispronouncements and misunderstandings. The constables might be old, but quiet comprehension is not one of their strengths, as can be seen when Dogberry is incensed by Conrade calling him an ass in the examination scene: 'Dost thou not suspect my place? Dost thou not suspect my years?' (4.2.76–77). The substitution of suspect years for respectable age condenses the correlation between misrepresentation and advancing age. Of course, the fact that it is the bumbling watchmen who nevertheless stumble on the truth compares with the serious consequences of the supposedly more intelligent Claudio and Don Pedro being fooled by the offstage seeming of Hero's unfaithfulness.

Such comments seem rather obvious and indeed it should be noted that there is a further layering of effects. The structural location that is allocated to the constables needs to be explored, because their roles are as much part of the dramatic patterning that we have already seen in the earlier parts of the play. The three scenes in which the constables

appear are interspersed across and against the main central crises of the action. They are the ones who (correctly) overhear Borachio's description of the events offstage at Hero's window at 3.3.138–56. They also try to let Leonato know what has transpired before the wedding at Act 3 Scene 5, with no success. And they then successfully arraign Conrade and Borachio before the Sexton in Act 4 Scene 2, after Hero has been repudiated at the altar, proving to Leonato that there is indeed, as the Friar realises, 'some strange misprision in the princes' (4.1.185). Of course, the interspersing of the constables' scenes throughout this sequence helps to lighten the mood, but it also plays a crucial structural role. In the earlier part of the play, it is Don Pedro who at first succeeds in his manoeuvres; in the later part, it is Borachio, on behalf of Don John. The change from the one to the other takes place, in systemic terms, across what is by now the joint terrain of 'noting' and generational difference. The constabulary encapsulates this change as the basis for an even larger scale structural shift of the initiative away from the younger generation to their elders, from Claudio and Don Pedro through the constables onto the three figures of Antonio, the Friar and Leonato. They are the ones who bring order to the disruptions occasioned by the play's events, enacting a chiasmic pattern over and across the thematic importance of the constables. This way of looking at the play has the advantage of moving beyond a simple ascription of ironic comedy to the constables, to an awareness of how their role functions as part of an extremely complex dramatic narrative schema.

Generations

The problem for a modern audience watching a performance of this play is how to make sense of so many shifts in emphasis, especially given the difficulty for such an audience to fully comprehend this Renaissance play's obsession with representation. Part of the problem is, as has already been noted, the modern propensity to value coherent internal character psychology. Such a focus is incompatible with how *Much Ado* regularly moves from one group of characters to another in swift succession. The emerging importance of the older generation can serve in performance as one way of making sense of the play's reflexive representative practice as it moves towards the denouement. Although there is no central character as such in the play, the

differential role played by Leonato becomes crucial as he winds up all of the plot elements. As the play progresses he becomes more and more involved with the various character groups. This is a subtle process that begins very early on when, as we have seen, Antonio confides his suspicions about Don Pedro's interest in Hero. Leonato is closely involved in the gulling of Benedick and he is also the one to whom the constables try to report their findings. All of this makes sense in terms of the notion of 'place'; since he is the local lord it is right and proper that he should be the one informed of all of these goings-on. But in terms of dramatic structure, his position and role, supported by his brother and the Friar, become more and more important.[12] His reaction to the slander of Hero moves from:

> Wherefore? Why, doth not every earthly thing
> Cry shame upon her? Could she here deny
> The story that is printed in her blood?
> Do not live, Hero; do not ope thine eyes! (4.1.119–23)

to:

> I know not. If they speak but truth of her,
> These hands shall tear her; if they wrong her honour,
> The proudest of them shall well hear of it.
> Time hath not yet so dried this blood of mine,
> Nor age so eat up my invention,
> Nor fortune made such havoc of my means,
> Nor my bad life reft me so much of friends
> But they shall find awaked in such a kind
> Both strength of limb and policy of mind,
> Ability in means and choice of friends
> To quit me of them throughly. (4.1.190–200)

In discussion with the other characters, especially the Friar, Leonato reacts violently at first, so much so that Mark Breitenberg feels compelled to describe Leonato's initial outburst as 'pathological, even by Renaissance standards'.[13] But when Leonato begins to entertain the possibility that Don Pedro and Claudio are in the wrong, he couches the terms of this option in a way that is extremely important, because they cast him (in accordance with the associations of his name) as the play's ultimate patriarch. Leonato perceives the slander as a personal affront to himself, in his role as representative of the older generation as it is about to pass power through the body of Hero to Claudio. Despite being older, Leonato is sure that he is still

physically competent, recalling the comments made about Don Pedro by the Messenger at the start of the play; and because he is older, his prowess is enhanced by what he calls his 'policy of mind', with all of its resonances of the Machiavellian prince.

What is most remarkable about Leonato's self-definition, however, is that it seems to completely contradict earlier descriptions of him by Benedick. We have already noted Benedick's response to the gulling conversation between Don Pedro, Claudio and Leonato at 2.3.119–21, which is worth recalling here. Indeed, at 3.2.64 Benedick proceeds to address Leonato as 'Old signor', when he wishes to escape from a mocking conversation with Claudio and Don Pedro by drawing Leonato aside. The issue is how to make sense of such a contradiction. Or, perhaps, it should be seen as one more instance of misreading and misinformation, drawing attention once more to the play's insistence on the importance of misrepresentation.

This suggestion gains more credence if we remember that there is no precise definition of exactly what constitutes old age in this period. Instead of a predetermined threshold, there is instead a range of possibilities, into which the different definitions of Leonato and his behaviour should be placed. In his monumental *History of Old Age*, Georges Minois includes a chapter on the sixteenth century in which he discusses the Renaissance vilification of old age, a section of which is entitled 'Literature and Art: A Cult of Youth Damning Old Age'.[14] He shows how the literary and dramatic texts of the period, as well as essayists such as Erasmus and, later, Montaigne and Bacon, often attack the foibles of the aged, especially those who seek to maintain their hold on political power. This is especially the case with Bacon, although Minois' comments should be further glossed with reference to Bacon's own self-interest given his personal lack of advancement under Elizabeth. However, Minois also notes how More's *Utopia* 'undertook to rehabilitate them within society, and to this end eliminated all notions of retirement from his ideal city'.[15] This may at first sound like a more humane position than that of the others, but it should be remembered that More's theorising of the position of the individual within his ideal society is based first and foremost upon utility; crucially, the emphasis is shifted onto the question of continued activity in old age, and as Anthony Ellis has pointed out, More's resolution for the useless aged is suicide.[16] When it comes to Shakespeare, Minois writes: 'Shakespeare reflected the opinions of his age at the same time as subjecting them to penetrating

analysis, and he was able to give expression to the ambiguous position of old age, not only in a period when the Middle Ages and modern times met, but in its timeless and universal dimension'.[17]

Even if one does not agree with the final statement, the reference to ambiguity can be further explored, especially since Minois goes on to describe a strand of relatively positive representations of old age. A second stereotype stresses respect for the wisdom that comes with experience, instead of attacking the aged.[18] Three things emerge from the welter of literary claims and counter-claims in this period: that there is no simple definition of when one becomes old; that the defining experience of old age varies from person to person; and that even comic stereotypes need to be treated with attention to cultural specificity.[19]

This seems an almost fatuous thing to say – of course it varies. However, the one thing that both the negative and positive stereotypes have in common is that they are conventional literary representations; discourse upon age in the Renaissance is always indebted to a long tradition arguing about the issues associated with ageing.[20] The emphasis here is deliberate: this is an on-going discussion that stretches back at least as far as Cicero's *de Senectute*, and which should not readily be taken at face value as direct evidence of social practice. In an overview essay entitled 'Historical Readings of Old Age and Ageing', Paul Johnson refers to another essay included in the same volume:

> Parkin notes that the extent to which old people in ancient society were an integral part of that society or were in some way excluded from full participation depended on the degree of capability of the individual. The older person would not be wholly marginalised so long as he or she was still capable of performing some useful function, be it as statesman or as childminder. To a large extent, therefore, people were defined as old not according to their chronological age but according to their individual capability to perform duties.[21]

This sounds exactly like the position occupied by Leonato in *Much Ado About Nothing*, a literary/dramatic dynamic that needs further exploration. Johnson is well aware of the slipperiness of textual representations when it comes to direct historical evidence: 'The tropes of old age that appear with a certain monotony in texts on health and morals from the ancient world to the modern are rightly viewed as literary constructions, ripe for any number of equally valid

readings of the way old age was socially and culturally formed in past times'.[22]

In the essay to which Johnson refers, Tim G. Parkin explores the literary history of the representation of old age in antiquity:

> Suffice it to say that in my opinion, and despite the philosophical and literary tradition of the *aetates hominum* (ages of humankind), no specific age limit applied. Literary evidence from antiquity could be adduced to 'show' that old age could be stated as beginning as early as the age of 42 years or as late as 77 years. A word like *senex* (old man) was not strictly defined in terms of number of years, but was related more to appearance and circumstances.[23]

Here again it is the position of the individual that matters, not whether or not he (and it is almost always a 'he') fits into a preconceived pattern that defines precisely when one is treated as old. Within his overall discussion of the debate, Parkin sees Cicero's philosophical tract as relatively positive in tone. However, he also treats *de Senectute* as over-determined by its own context, Cicero's relative powerlessness as he retreated from direct political engagement as the late Roman Republic lurched from one crisis to another.[24] He later contextualises Seneca's negative view of old age in a similar manner.[25]

Ultimately, what matters is how socially visible and active one can remain as one ages, a process that is inevitably imbricated in a web of social factors that include, but are not limited to, age alone – gender and social position are of equal or even greater importance. Even though he obviously felt disempowered, Cicero was still able to influence events, eventually being murdered on the orders of Marcus Antonius at the age of sixty-three. As a man of high standing (having reached the pinnacle of Roman society as Consul), Cicero could act effectively in ways that would be barred to men of lesser status, or women: 'The satirical/comic tradition is the harshest, directed especially against women. If Juvenal provides the strongest overall picture, then others, particularly Horace and Martial, have left us the most offensive and devastating indictments of the aged female. The stereotyped old woman is toothless, haggard, sex-crazed and disgusting'.[26]

In other words, gender makes the Latin literary tradition that vilifies old age even more extreme. The old are doubly marginalised when they happen to be women, reinforcing the fact that a whole range of

possible subject positions is available. There is no simple, stable definition, as Parkin realises:

> Two extremes in attitude towards the elderly have been seen to recur, explicitly or implicitly, in the ancient evidence: that old people have a definite role to play and contribution to make; and that old people are an unwelcome burden and at best must be tolerated. These are gross generalisations, but the awareness of the fact that such attitudes, at both extremes, may co-exist, rather than be mutually exclusive, is important.[27]

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, then, it could be argued that figures such as Leonato inhabit an intermediate zone that permits them some flexibility, some room for manoeuvre. When combining Parkin's insistence on the gender divide with the importance for the Renaissance play of degrees of social rank, it becomes possible to think through the contradictions in the representations of Leonato, if only because they have such a long history. Indeed, the play manipulates those meanings in the same way that it does other matters of representation; age is another 'nothing' that is ripe for dramatic exploitation.

Furthermore, to recall Minois' observations on the Renaissance as a period in which the Middle Ages meets the modern, it is possible to discern some resonances of medieval perceptions of old age in Shakespeare's play:

> In the images, attitudes and expectations as to conduct and state of mind that are developed in the various discourses, no distinction is drawn between various social strata. The elderly constitute one marginal group represented along with women, children, invalids, poor folk or foreigners. Sometimes the common denominator attributed to them and to those who are represented alongside them is their physical weakness, or their social distinctiveness. However, in these representations, they are always contrasted with adult males – the wielders of authority and power.[28]

Here Shulamith Shahar provides another interesting essay on representations of old age from the same useful collection as Johnson and Parkin. Her observation above allows us to focus more closely upon the relationship between old age and gender, in that Shakespeare's Renaissance play inherits an ideology that privileges active masculinity as the defining central factor in social roles. Activity requires physical and/or mental capability, if not youth, for the

mechanisms of authority and power to be upheld, and Shahar investigates the terrain over which these concepts are played out:

> Authority and role were not based on an ascriptive criterion of age. Ideally, mature middle-aged males were expected to wield authority, and a minimal age was fixed by both canon and secular law for appointment or election for various offices […] What determined the time of retirement in all strata of society was functioning and not chronological age. Thus if not forced into retirement by family or political circumstances, elderly men who had the functional capacity could continue to fulfil their roles, each in accordance with his social position.[29]

This sounds almost exactly like a case-study for the particular instance of Leonato, Governor of Messina on behalf of the Spanish King, in *Much Ado About Nothing*. His actual age is hardly represented at all; instead he is defined both as respectfully aged by Benedick and by himself as physically and politically powerful. This sets out Leonato's position as liminal, in that he is ill-defined and able to encompass different roles. The resulting imprecision is culturally specific:

> As the most recent historical research on old age points out, three of the most common ways of defining old age are chronological, functional, and cultural. Chronological old age is when one reaches a pre-determined calendar age. Functional old age begins when an individual can no longer care for himself/herself. Cultural old age combines aspects of both calendar age and functional age, and along with other factors is defined according to a particular value system that is culturally determined. All three of these definitions of old age can co-exist as well as conflict.[30]

In her introduction to an edited collection on cultural representations of old age in Early Modern Europe, Erin Campbell here sketches the space within which figures such as Leonato should be placed. Difficulty of definition is only to be expected in such a situation. However, what still needs further explanation is the ability that Leonato demonstrates when he effectively takes over the plot of his play, aided ably by his brother Antonio and the Friar, the other members of the senior generation. The Friar is the first of the three to realise that Hero has been wrongfully slandered:

> Hear me a little:
> For I have only been silent so long,
> And given way unto this course of fortune,
> By noting of the lady. I have marked

> A thousand blushing apparitions
> To start into her face, a thousand innocent shames
> 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. Call me a fool,
> Trust not my reading nor my observations,
> Which with experimental seal doth warrant
> The tenor of my book; trust not my age,
> My reverence, calling nor divinity,
> If this sweet lady lie not guiltless here
> Under some biting error. (4.1.155–70)

This speech brings together all of the major considerations that have been building throughout the play. That term 'noting' appears again, as the Friar describes what he has seen in Hero's face. In effect, he speaks for her as he delineates her face and ventriloquises her innocence. He roots his 'observations' in terms that are already familiar from Benedick's earlier comments on Leonato's role in the arbour scene. However, Leonato remains initially unconvinced by the Friar's assertion of Hero's innocence because she has not denied the accusations against her. She finally speaks when authorised to do so by the Friar, which leads to the latter's comment on misprision already mentioned previously. This then leads immediately to the Friar's invention of the concealment plot, which he constructs in order to postpone the wedding, rather than cancel it: 'This wedding day/ Perhaps is but prolonged' (4.1.266).

Leonato continues to worry about the lack of evidence to prove Hero's innocence. Even after Borachio's confession, the support of Antonio is critical to the stratagem:

> Yet bend not all the harm upon yourself;
> Make those that do offend you suffer too. (5.1.39–40)

It is the weight of the three older characters, invested more and more in Leonato, which brings the play to its conclusion. As the drama approaches its climax, or perhaps anti-climax, Leonato functions as the leader of a group of characters that will re-assert patriarchal control over the women and younger men of the play.

Nevertheless, they cannot do so simply by virtue of being older and wiser than Don Pedro and Claudio. The social power invested in Don Pedro in particular would ordinarily preclude such an eventuality.

However, these two have effectively demonstrated that they are at least as easily fooled by Borachio and Don John as Beatrice and Benedick were by the others in the gardens. Anthony Ellis has analysed the comic pattern that normally exists in comedy: 'For the comedies to achieve their resolution and renewal, before the younger generation can ascend to take its rightful place, the dramatic world of the play must first attempt to cure the pathology'.[31]

In his discussion of the generations in *The Tempest*, Ellis posits that the later play needs to assert the dominance of the older generation in the form of Prospero, but only in order to discard it so that it can be properly superseded by the marriage required for a comic resolution. The way in which the older generation clings onto power can become a major obstacle for the younger characters, and it is this that Ellis figures as a form of 'pathology'. However, *Much Ado About Nothing* inverts the comic paradigm, forcing Leonato and his compatriots to take action because a vacuum has been created by the younger men.[32] Of course the play concentrates upon the marriage resolution as the only way to redress the balance and restore harmony, or at least what passes for it in a resolutely patriarchal society. In this respect, though, the insistence on closure by means of the tried and tested comedic logic of multiple marriages seems forced, as *Much Ado* plays its plot events over and against the form of the comedy.

In anthropological terms, the young men can only attain full social power by getting married, a rite of passage that is inscribed upon the structure of the play. But in a sense this play also enacts something that is very rare indeed, given the discussion of old age above. It provides for marriage as a rite of passage for the older generation as well, since it is the mechanism by which they pass their daughters over to the next generation of men. The marriages at the end of the play mark the point at which Leonato and the others can finally and legitimately 'retire' and be replaced by properly chastened and instructed youths, but it takes a great deal of plotting to achieve this result.

Recalling the comments about gender made earlier, it is important to note how the veiling of Hero, Beatrice, Margaret and Ursula counterpoints the earlier masked ball, visually condensing the moment of their recuperation. Leonato's full control is underlined when he silences Beatrice for ever:

> Peace! [*to Beatrice*] I will stop your mouth.
> [*Hands her to Benedick*] (5.4.97)

The stage direction, of course, is an editorial interpolation, but it seems appropriate because of the way it functions as a gestus to epitomise the patriarchal moment. Modern audiences of the play often find the whole end piece morally reprehensible, not to mention repugnant, a response which of course is shaded by the importance attached to individual character psychology. However, if we think of Leonato not so much as a person but as functioning to contain the threats to patriarchy that have emerged during this play, then we begin to glimpse how the play's structural organisation endows him with this role.

A return to all of the senses of 'noting' is of course crucial, because it helps to further account for the progressive foregrounding of Leonato. He does not just recuperate patriarchy; he does so brazenly, powerfully and violently, so openly, indeed, that the ease with which the end of the play is stage-managed itself becomes open to interpretation. The conventional artistic closure is self-referentially dramatised as it neatly ties together all of the various plot lines. Its sheer artifice and conventionality draw attention to how it operates, and also to its failure to contain the energetic ruptures engendered during the play's action. In systemic terms, the ending is facile by comparison with the energy of what precedes it.

The structure of *Much Ado About Nothing* is therefore very similar to that of the so-called 'problem plays', unsettling any easy assumptions of a straightforward and satisfying conclusion. The roles played in this self-aware and self-dramatising resolution by the three older men of the play are systemically crucial to both the dramatic and the patriarchal structures. Within the terms of patriarchy, they operate as far more effective versions of the younger men, especially Claudio and Don Pedro. Leonato in particular enacts the strictures of patriarchy, sealing both Hero and Beatrice into them so that the masculine prerogative can safely be handed on to the next generation. Even so, it should be noted that the masculine ending effectively excludes Don Pedro, since he is the only one of the younger male onstage characters who remains unmarried. Benedick tries to make a joke out of it by saying 'Prince, thou art sad – get thee a wife, get thee a wife!' (5.4.120) but as Simon Shepherd perceptively realises: '*Much Ado* specifically seems an exercise in comparing forms of partnership and assessing their validity; Don Pedro is rejected from the theatrical plenitude and procreative promise of the hetero marriage'.[33]

This is important because the potential implication of homoerotic preference elides with the play's insistence on investigating various forms of relationship, as Shepherd suggests. The ending is haunted by echoes of other possibilities, many of which have emerged during the course of the play only to be excised in one way or another: female intransigence in the figure of Beatrice; Don John's illegitimacy; and now Don Pedro's possibly over-determined reluctance to marry.[34] The Prince of Aragon is happy enough to act as matchmaker, and there are hints of possible marriage alliances for him, or at least enough on which to base some suspicions (Claudio) and a very brief flirtation with Beatrice, but there is no definite marriage resolution for him. Leonato and his two supporters serve to ensure that there will be no more such misprision or alternative possibilities, and that the play's nothings will be noted and safely and securely policed. But they do so in an aggressively contrived ending that displays its own operations, in which both age and place are most definitely 'suspect', to borrow Dogberry's formulation. The speed and bare-faced ruthlessness with which the resolution is accomplished makes it a particularly audacious piece of staging, by turning the events of the play against itself. Order is restored, but the price is the unveiling of its hidden mechanisms.

Notes

1. *Much Ado About Nothing*, ed. Claire McEachern (London: Cengage, 2006), 2. Subsequent quotations refer to this edition.
2. *Much Ado About Nothing*, 2.
3. Diana E. Henderson, 'Mind the Gaps: The Ear, the Eye, and the Senses of a Woman in *Much Ado About Nothing*', in *Knowing Shakespeare: Scenes, Embodiment and Cognition*, ed. Lowell Gallagher and Shankar Rama (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 193.
4. Henderson, *Mind the Gaps*, 193.
5. Robert Weimann, *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice: Playing and Writing in Shakespeare's Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 207.
6. Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press), 208–46.

7.   For a full critical treatment of the relationship between Beatrice and Benedick, see Penny Gay, *As She Likes It: Shakespeare's Unruly Women* (London: Routledge, 1994), 143–77.

8.   *Much Ado About Nothing*, 23.

9.   Don Pedro also temporises with Beatrice, as remarked in Heather Dubrow, *Shakespeare and Domestic Loss: Forms of Deprivation, Mourning and Recuperation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1.

10.   This term is used by John Brockington to describe techniques of sub-narration in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, but it is also a useful to term for multi-layered narration in general. See John Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics* (London, Boston and Cologne: Brill, 1998), 18.

11.   Nicholas Grene, *Shakespeare's Tragic Imagination* (London: Macmillan, 1996), 65.

12.   Carol Thomas Neely suggests the importance of the motif of the broken nuptial as a central component of *Much Ado*, supplied by means of source material in the Italian novella: Carol Thomas Neely, *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays* (Chicago: Illini Books, second edition, 1993), 24–57. My concern here is to discuss the structural significance of the moment of Hero's repudiation.

13.   Mark Breitenberg, *Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 114.

14.   Georges Minois, *History of Old Age*, trans. Sarah Hanbury Tenison (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), 250–54.

15.   Minois, *History of Old Age*, 277.

16.   Anthony Ellis, *Old Age, Masculinity and Early Modern Drama: Comic Elders on the Italian and Shakespearean Stage* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 161.

17.   Minois, *History of Old Age*, 281.

18.   Minois, *History of Old Age*, 286–87.

19.   Anthony Ellis suggests that a 'heterogeneity' of comic types inherited by the Italians from the classical tradition is added to native English elements in the period of Shakespeare's drama – see Ellis, *Old Age, Masculinity and Early Modern Drama*, 4.

20.   For a discussion of the common topos of the seven ages of man, see Nina Taunton, *Fictions of Old Age in Early Modern Literature and Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), 1–2.

21.   Paul Johnson, 'Historical Readings of Old Age and Ageing', in *Old Age from Antiquity to Post-Modernity*, ed. Paul Johnson and Pat Thane (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 6.

22.   Johnson, 'Historical Readings of Old Age and Ageing', 17.

23.   Tim G. Parkin, 'Ageing in Antiquity', in *Old Age from Antiquity to Post-Modernity*, ed. Johnson and Thane, 21.

24.   Parkin, 'Ageing in Antiquity', 25–26.

25.   Parkin, 'Ageing in Antiquity', 27–29.

26.   Parkin, 'Ageing in Antiquity', 33.

27.   Parkin, 'Ageing in Antiquity', 34.

28.   Shulamith Shahar, 'Old Age in the High and Late Middle Ages', in *Old Age from Antiquity to Post-Modernity*, ed. Johnson and Thane, 44.

29.   Shahar, 'Old Age in the High and Late Middle Ages', 54.

30.   Erin Campbell, *Growing Old in Early Modern Europe: Cultural Representations*, ed. Erin Campbell (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 3. See also Taunton, *Fictions of Old Age in Early Modern Literature and Culture*, 3–4.

31.   Ellis, *Old Age, Masculinity and Early Modern Drama*, 155–56. He suggests (158) that anger empowers Prospero, allowing him to act effectively in spite of the strictures against old age, and of course this could be applied to Leonato as well. However, one does not necessarily need to locate the logic of *Much Ado* only in character motivation, since the play's structure reserves such an important function for the figure of Leonato.

32.   Nina Taunton argues for a similar role for the older characters in *All's Well that Ends Well*; see Taunton, *Fictions of Old Age in Early Modern Literature and Culture*, 159–68.

33.   Simon Shepherd, 'Shakespeare's Private Drawer: Shakespeare and Homosexuality', in *The Shakespeare Myth*, ed Graham Holderness (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 102.

34.   This train of thought also suggests that the supposedly 'Ghost' figure of Innogen, Hero's mother, should be retained for reasons of making a thematic unity more visible. Terry Hawkes has read this persona over and against the function of absent mothers in *Meaning By Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 1992), 156n9.

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