

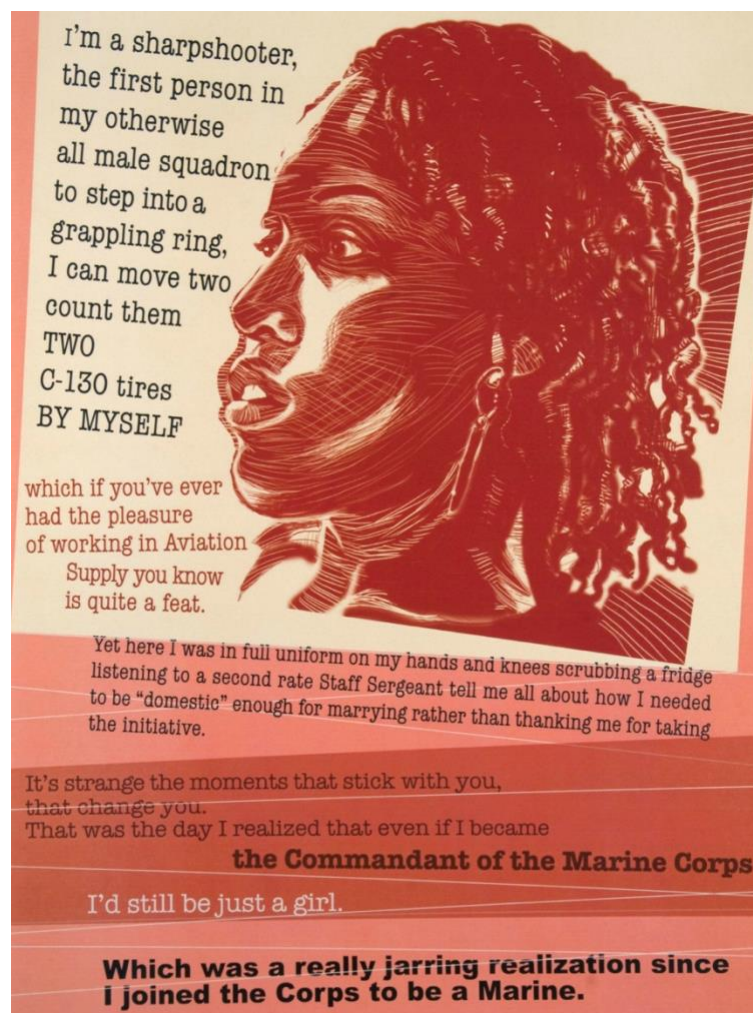
RADICAL TEACHER

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Teaching Note

Reading Masculinity in *Much Ado About Nothing*: Notes from an Indian Classroom

by Saradindu Bhattacharya

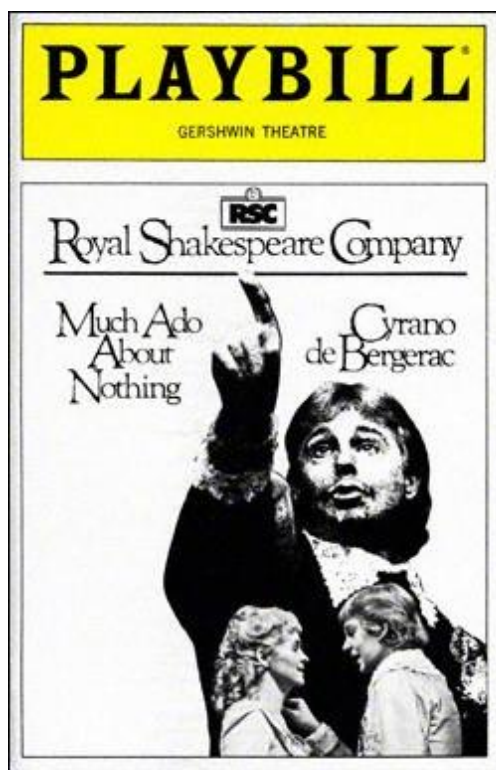


"I'M A SHARPSHOOTER—CHANTELLE BATEMAN" BY SIRI MAGERIN. WAR IS TRAUMA IS A PORTFOLIO OF HANDMADE PRINTS PRODUCED BY THE JUSTSEEDS ARTISTS' COOPERATIVE IN COLLABORATION WITH THE IRAQ VETERANS AGAINST THE WAR (IVAW).

Reading *Much Ado About Nothing* (c.1599) in a course on Renaissance literature, students of M.A. English at the Central University of Tamil Nadu, India, detected resonances between the generic conventions of Shakespearean comedy and the cultural codes of gender and matrimony in contemporary India. In a class where a majority of the students were female – studying literature and the arts in India being still considered a more appropriate choice for women than for men – the play presented a surprisingly rich ground for a comparative analysis between the literary construction of “romantic love” through the conventions of Elizabethan drama and the gender politics of family and marriage in contemporary India. The students, from both rural and urban centres in southern India, identified and responded to the dominant code of masculinity operative within the Shakespearean play as one that informs their own understanding of the genre of romantic comedy as well as exposes the dramatic and cultural inequity underlying such generic representation of relations between men and women. My attempt in class was to critically examine how Hero, one of the central female characters in the play, functions as the dramatic means of defining and performing masculinity for the male characters around her, and how her palpable silence in the unfolding of her own “romantic” plot can point to the similarity of the gender politics of romance and marriage between Elizabethan England and 21st century India.

I initiated discussion in the class by suggesting that both the “complication” and the “resolution” in the play – ending with the conventional promise of marriage – depend crucially on the performance of gender roles that privilege “masculine” codes of honour and allegiance at the expense of “feminine” desire and agency. (This is true, of course, only of the Hero-Claudio plot, as Hero, unlike her wilfully rebellious cousin, Beatrice, never speaks for herself, and Benedick, unlike Claudio, learns to trust and respect the woman he loves.) Thus, Claudio’s initial infatuation with Hero is based, as students were quick to observe, not on a close familiarity between the two (of the kind Benedick and Beatrice seem to share) but on the former’s admiration of Hero’s physical charms (she is “modest”, “sweet”, “fair” and “a jewel”) and his awareness of her economic status (she is Leonato’s “only heir”). Significantly, Claudio can be sure of his own romantic intentions towards Hero only after seeking Benedick’s opinion of her beauty and Don Pedro’s assurance that “the lady is very well worthy”. The romantic suitability of Hero is thus subject to assessment and confirmation by Claudio’s male peers in a display of fraternal support and approval. One of the male students pointed out that a similar “bro code” is a standard ingredient in the recipe for “romantic love” in popular Indian cinema, especially Bollywood, wherein the hero’s friends often assist him in his romantic

pursuit of the heroine and thus implicitly corroborate her “value” as an object of desire. Another male student admitted, rather coyly, that there exists an informal system of peer ranking among young male friends based on the perceived desirability of young women that one might want to date. Students familiar with the emphasis on women’s physical beauty and their familial wealth – Indian matrimonial advertisements typically demand “fair” and “slender” brides and parents of the groom negotiate in advance over the dowry the bride is expected to bring to her in-laws – were quick to realize that the romantic “love-at-first-sight” trope in the play operates within a patriarchal system where men judge women’s “worth” as matrimonial objects. In fact, Don Pedro’s active role in courting Hero on behalf of Claudio and in formally proposing their marriage to Leonato, as well as Leonato’s instructions to his daughter “that she may be the better prepared for an answer” to Don Pedro, indicate Hero’s silent passivity in the entire matter. The students perceived a resemblance between this romantic alliance (in which Shakespeare turns on its head the comedic convention of parental opposition to their children’s romantic pursuits) and that peculiar, hybrid phenomenon popularly known in India as “love-cum-arranged” marriage, where the respective (usually) male guardians negotiate, organize and fund the wedding of a young couple in love.



If Claudio relies on a fraternal network of friends to express, evaluate and advance his romantic interest in Hero, he also falls prey to false male testimony about female character through Don John and Borachio’s manipulative plot to besmirch Hero’s reputation the night before the wedding. While I drew attention to Shakespeare’s use of gossip and eavesdropping as central plot devices to create a dramatic crisis in the Claudio-Hero romantic track, the students diagnosed Claudio’s over-dependence on other men’s accounts of Hero’s character as being the *real* cause behind the misunderstanding. In this, they felt, Hero’s situation in the play is similar to that of Imogen, Hermione, Desdemona and Gertrude, since these women are also subject to the tragic consequences of men’s

construction of their characters. While most students concurred with this line of thought, a few of them (both male and female) from conservative familial backgrounds, pointed out that in their own cultural context, where interaction between young men and women prior to marriage is considered taboo, the risk of falling prey to rumour is built into the social system and renders Claudio’s duping rather more credible, if not justifiable. The masculine anxiety over feminine “virtue” (indicated, as I pointed out, in the title of the play through the pun on “nothing,” Elizabethan slang for

vagina) is one that enabled students to locate the play thematically within the cultural context of India, where the idea of sexual purity is central to a woman's desirability in the marriage market. Many of the students cited the unflattering portrayal of unwed mothers and sex workers in popular Indian cinema as a symptom of the stigma associated with women's sexual expression outside the domain of matrimony. In fact, Hero's public interrogation and humiliation is predicated on a sense of hurt masculine pride, as Claudio and Don Pedro complain about being "dishonoured" by Leonato, who they think has tried to gift them "a rotten orange," "a common stale." Hero's supposed transgression of femininity is thus perceived as a source of threat and contamination to the fraternal order that binds these men. Leonato himself wishes for Hero's death, as it would be "the fairest cover for her shame" and proposes to "strike at [her] life" should she revive; the Friar recommends that Hero be proclaimed dead for the time being or be sent away to a nunnery; Benedick, upon Beatrice's oath, swears to challenge Claudio to a duel to claim justice for the "wronged" Hero and so does Leonato's brother, Antonio. To a class of students all-too-familiar with media reports of "honour killings" in India, the idea of a father disowning or even killing his own daughter for her "misgovernment," or of male members of the family/community embarking upon murderous revenge on unapproved male suitors, was more a grim social reality than rhetorical flourish.

The resolution of this crisis, necessary for the play to end "happily" in marriage, occurs only once Hero's "wounded reputation" is restored by the very men who first maligned her. Claudio's penance, as recommended by Leonato, is a matter of public performance and of restoring the masculine alliance of honour through marriage – an epitaph proclaiming Hero's innocence and the promise to wed her (fabricated) identical cousin is the form it is to take. This matrimonial contract, mirroring the first one "arranged" between Leonato, Claudio and Don Pedro, easily substitutes Hero even if, and perhaps because, she exists only as a story of who she is/was. There is no reference in the play to Hero's own feelings on the matter, since she is once again commanded by her father to play along with the final stratagem of deceit. As a student pointed out, Hero is like Ahalya in the Indian epic *Ramayana*, a woman who is seduced by Lord Indra (a Zeus-like figure, the Hindu god of thunder and lightning) in the guise of her husband, the sage Gautama, who in turn curses her with petrification for her "infidelity," and is ultimately brought back to life with the touch of Lord Rama's feet. Both women become victims of character assassination by the men around them and subsequently also the tools of restoring masculine honour and justice. As irksome and un-romantic as many students found the Claudio-Hero reunion at the end of the play, they also recognized that in their own cultural context, where rape victims often become the subject of public scandal and juridical harassment, leading, in many cases, to suicide or even a forced marriage between the victim and the perpetrator, and legislation to criminalize marital rape meets open administrative resistance, female sexuality continues

to be the subject of patriarchal definition and control. The survival of a Hero, in Renaissance England and in 21st century India, depends on the subsuming of her voice to the stories men tell of her: "She died, my lord, but whiles her slander lived."



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