

**A Hero, Not a Zero:
Taking a Look at Hero in Shakespeare's
*Much Ado About Nothing***

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Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* is the story of lively, merry Beatrice, who has found a way to break out of the confining, passive feminine roles expected by society. She strives for happiness by wittily and laughingly taunting and teasing the men as she asserts her independence and wins the hearts of all. Although her active tongue and clever mind make for a great character on stage, she is not a typical woman. Most women, then and now, are not as daring or as clever as she is. However, Shakespeare also shows us a more conventional female, Beatrice's quiet cousin Hero. Talking little, seeming passive and obedient, she almost seems to be a nothing, a "zero." So silent is she that critics for decades have dismissed her as a woman who is of no interest. In 1960, critic Bertrand Evans devoted no time to her because she is "nearly speechless,"¹ a sentiment echoed by Paul and Miriam Mueschke in 1967, who described her as "shadowy and silent."² Since the 1960s, with the advent of feminism, critics have seen her in an even more negative light, a woman of absolutely no importance because she is totally dominated by men. In 1974, James Smith rejected her as a woman who has "bowed to conventions";³ in 1979, Kenneth Muir proclaimed her a "nonentity";⁴ in 1982, Harry Berger asserted that she is the "most male-dominated of heroines";⁵ and in 1994, Marta Straznicky denounced her as a "docile, submissive female."⁶ Quiet and demure, she is hardly noticed by the other characters on stage either. Indeed, when love-struck Claudio asks his friend, "Benedick, didst thou note the daughter of Signoir Leonato?" (1.1.155-156),⁷ Benedick replies, "I noted her not; but I looked on her" (1.1.157).⁸ Scarcely anyone notes Hero, for she appears to be merely background material, a girl looking beautiful and smiling sweetly. But a closer look at Hero shows that she, like Beatrice, struggles against the pressures of conformity and the adherence to societal

rules of being a sweet, passive female. However, she does not do this in the same manner as flamboyant Beatrice who openly asserts herself with much talking and with great humor. Yet, in her quiet ways Hero, like her cousin, actively pursues happiness for herself and for those she loves.

Although their methods and mannerisms are different, Beatrice and Hero are much alike internally. Both possess the same inner strengths necessary for happiness then and now: first, independence; second, love for and understanding of others; third, a realistic perception of the world; fourth, wit, which combines humor and intelligence; and fifth, purity of mind and body. One or more of these qualities are seen every time Hero speaks in the play.

Quiet Hero's love for and understanding of Beatrice is apparent in the opening scene, in which she speaks one seven-word speech addressed to Leonato and the messenger. After Beatrice has inquired about the whereabouts of "Signoir Mountanto" (1.1.30), a name the two men do not recognize, Leonato asks Beatrice, "What is he that you ask for, niece?" (1.1.34). Hero, not Beatrice, replies, "My cousin means Signoir Benedick of Padua" (1.1.36). Her short speech reveals two things about her: first, she knows Beatrice's heart because she understands who it is that Beatrice is concerned about; second, she understands Beatrice's reluctance to let her feelings for Benedick be known. By answering for her cousin, quiet Hero helps Beatrice glean information about her loved one without letting Beatrice embarrass herself in front of the men by revealing the extent of her interest in Benedick. These are the only words Hero says in this long, opening scene where everyone else, except the morbid Don John, talk at length. When she is on the stage, modest, shy Hero stands silently, letting the men and Beatrice do the talking. But her seven-word speech shows her understanding and concern for Beatrice.

The next time Hero speaks, Act 2 Scene 1, she shows a second quality: a realistic perception of others, as she shows herself to be as knowledgeable about people as Beatrice is. When the men ask if Don John was at supper, the ladies respond with comments about his character. Beatrice begins with a humorous but accurate observation: "How tartly that gentlemen looks! I never can see him but I am heartburned an hour after" (2.1.3-4). Hero, in less vivid terms, agrees that Don John is an undesirable person: "He is of a very melancholy disposition" (2.1.5). Both women accurately assess his character while the men say nothing about him. Later in the play we see that the men's failure to perceive the true nature of

Don John leads to great unhappiness and discord as Don Pedro and Claudio, both honorable but naïve men, believe the scoundrel Don John when he reports that Hero is unfaithful to Claudio. Shakespeare is clear that insight into a person's character is essential to attaining happiness in the world.

Later in this scene, we see that Hero, like Beatrice, is an independent woman who willingly asserts herself to assure her own happiness by choosing her marriage partner herself, although this does not, at first, appear to be the case. Thinking that Hero is going to be courted by the prince, Don Pedro, a worthy man but one Hero does not love, Hero's father and uncle tell her that she must accept his marriage proposal. Her uncle begins, "Well, niece, I trust you will be ruled by your father" (2.1.47-48) and therefore marry Don Pedro. Hero does not answer, thus implying compliance. But independent Beatrice cannot be quiet, because she fears that her gentle cousin will not seek her own happiness and marry Claudio, the man she loves, but will instead follow convention and obey the order of her father to marry the prince. With earnest humor, Beatrice explains, "Yes, faith, it is my cousin's duty to make curtsy and say, 'Father, as it please you'" (2.1.49-50), but she continues by appealing to Hero, "But yet for all that, cousin, let him be a handsome fellow, or else make another curtsy and say, 'Father, as it please me'" (2.1.49-51). Dismissing Beatrice's remarks as pure jest and waiting for no response from Hero, Leonato commands Hero, "Daughter, remember what I told you. If the Prince do solicit you in that kind, you know your answer" (2.1. 61-63). Even now, Hero says nothing. To her family and to the audience, this silent girl appears to be a sweet, compliant young woman who will passively obey her father without question, even to the point of sacrificing her happiness and marrying the man of her father's choice, not hers.

But appearances are deceiving in this play, and silent Hero proves that she is not a doormat when she speaks to Don Pedro at the masked ball. Instead of being shy or compliant, she shows a "surge of spirit," as Berger put it,⁹ becoming the independent, free-thinking woman Beatrice urged her to be, a woman who says, I will marry "as it please me" (2.1.52) and thus assure herself of happiness. Her entire encounter with Don Pedro clearly shows that she is not the simpleton her elders consider her.¹⁰ She asserts her independence as soon as Don Pedro approaches her and asks her to walk with him. Before agreeing to his simple request, she sets down three requirements he must meet: he must "walk softly and look sweetly and say nothing" (2.1.82). Then, she cleverly

plays on the word *walk* by playfully stating, "I am yours for the walk; and especially when I walk away" (2.1. 83-84). When Don Pedro asks if he can be in her company, she shows a definite mark of independence as she says, "I may say so, when I please" (2.1.86). Her independence continues when she responds to the Prince's question, "And when please you to say so?" (2.1. 87). Hero replies, "When I like your favor, for God defend the lute should be like the case!" (2.1.88-89). Although critic David Bevington explains that "favor" means "face," meaning that she will say yes when she likes his face,¹¹ "favor" here could instead stand for "personality"; thus her meaning would be that she will walk with him and listen to his supplications when she better knows his inner self. Either way, she does not appear to be ready to agree to marry this powerful prince. After one more witty comment about his visor, "Why, then, your visor should be thatched," (2.1.92-93), she leaves with him. Clearly, this Hero—unlike the silent, obedient, conventional daughter pictured in the first part of the scene—shows a spirited nature when she speaks to Don Pedro.

When next we see quiet Hero, her independent nature is obvious even though she is silent. We learn that Hero is going to marry Claudio, not the Prince, as her father had ordered. Although Leonato had said nothing about how she should respond to an offer from Claudio, Hero, according to the Prince, accepted Claudio's marriage proposal before her father even knew the young man was interested in his daughter. The Prince tells Claudio, "Here, Claudio, I have wooed in thy name, and fair Hero is won" (2.1.284-285). It is only after Hero has agreed to marry Claudio that her father is informed of the match. Don Pedro goes on, "I have broke with her father and his good will obtained" (2.1.285-286). Thus, Hero breaks with tradition and actively chooses her own husband before her father can give his permission.

Although she has arranged her own marriage, she is still a shy young woman in the company of men. As her engagement to Claudio is announced and celebrated, Hero stands silent, not even uttering a word when Beatrice tells her to "Speak, cousin" (2.1. 296). But talking in front of socially powerful men is not modest Hero's style; she is not like the boisterous Beatrice. As Hunt explains, "All that shy, dutiful Hero can do is whisper."¹² But her happiness is obvious as Beatrice states, and Claudio confirms, that she "tells him in his ear that he is in her heart" (2.1.300-301).

Even as Hero is basking in her own joy, she does not allow herself to forget about her cousin's happiness. Hero's final speech in this scene reveals once more her loving, generous nature toward

her cousin, as well as her insight into Beatrice's heart. When Benedick's friends decide to play matchmaker for their friend and Beatrice, they ask Hero to help. She is very willing: "I will do any modest office, my lord, to help my cousin to a good husband" (2.1.357-8). Lovingly, she wants to help her cousin marry the man she knows Beatrice loves. Unlike the men, who do not recognize that Beatrice and Benedick truly love each other, she knows that Beatrice's choice is Benedick.

In the eavesdropping scene in Act 3, many of Hero's inner strengths are revealed. As Hero is setting the stage for Beatrice to overhear her, she once again demonstrates her realistic knowledge of people. This young, sheltered girl understands that ambitious social climbers have a tendency to destroy others, even those they once needed for their advancement, much like tall honeysuckles overshadow the sun which had originally helped them grow. She states:

. . . honeysuckles, ripened by the sun,
 Forbid the sun to enter, like favorites,
 Made proud by princes, that advance their pride
 Against that power that bred it. (3.1. 7-11)

When Beatrice arrives, other important aspects of Hero are revealed: her love for her cousin, her insight into Beatrice's heart, and her intelligence and wit in knowing how to accomplish her mission of bringing Beatrice and Benedick together. As critic Neely remarks, she uses "aggressiveness, realism and wit,"¹³ much like Beatrice, to achieve her purpose. Hero's role as a matchmaker is a difficult one because she has to help Beatrice do two things: first, recognize that she loves Benedick, and second, learn how to let down her guard and dare show her love to Benedick. Just as Beatrice had been afraid that Hero would not seek her own happiness because she would be too timid to assert herself to marry the man she loved, so Hero worries that Beatrice will not let herself find true happiness because she is too defensive to let Benedick see her true feelings for him. Therefore, Hero needs to make sure that Beatrice sees herself as cold and distant so she can change her ways. To accomplish this, Hero exaggerates Beatrice's imperfect qualities, speaking of her in most unflattering terms. Beatrice, she says, is "too disdainful" (3.1.34); she is "coy and wild" (3.1.35). Her heart is formed "Of prouder stuff" (3.1.50) than any other woman's. "Disdain and scorn ride sparkling in her eyes" (3.1. 51), and "her wit / Values itself so highly that to her / All matter else seems weak" (3.1.52-54). Because "she is so self-endearing" (3.1.56),

“she cannot love” anyone (3.1.54). She goes on to explain how Beatrice “turns every man the wrong side out” (3.1.68). Hero flatly states that Beatrice’s behavior is so opposite to societal standards that it “cannot be commendable” (3.1.73). With these condemning words, Hero forces Beatrice to see herself as too scornful.

Next, Hero shows Beatrice how she uses her clever wit to push loved ones away. Hero explains that even she is afraid to tell Beatrice about her witty disdain because, she says, “If I should speak, / She would mock me into air; O, she would laugh me / Out of myself, press me to death with wit” (3.1.74-76).

Once she has made Beatrice think about her self-destructive behavior, Hero turns to the merits of Benedick so that Beatrice, knowing that others admire the man she loves, will feel free to acknowledge her love for him. Hero praises Benedick to the hilt, calling him “so rare a gentleman” (3.1.91) that he is “the only man of Italy” (3.1.92). She reiterates this a few lines later when she exclaims, “For shape, for bearing, argument, and valor, / [Benedict] Goes foremost in report through Italy” (3.1.96-97). She concludes her praise of him by stating that he “hath an excellent good name” (3.1.98). Thus Hero, through her exaggerated remarks on both Beatrice and Benedick, has paved the way for Beatrice’s happiness. She has painted an inflated picture of Beatrice’s shortcomings as a person who does not dare reveal her true feelings, covering them up with wit and ridicule, and she has drawn a flattering picture of Benedick, making him the greatest catch of all Italy. Her ploy works; Beatrice immediately bids farewell to “contempt” and “maiden pride” (3.1.109), exclaiming, “Benedick, love on; I will requite thee / Taming my wild heart to thy loving hand” (3.1.111-112).

Typically critics have not looked at this scene as showing Hero in a positive light. Instead they interpret it as a revelation of Hero’s jealousy toward her flamboyant cousin because of her tirade against Beatrice. And, in fact, her original stated intent is to solely talk about Benedick. Before Beatrice arrives, she tells her partner, Ursula,

Our talk must only be of Benedick.
When I do name him, let it be thy part
To praise him more than ever man did merit. (3.1.17-19)

But instead of praising Benedick, most of Hero’s lines condemn Beatrice, perhaps revealing, Neely says, “some resentment of Beatrice’s domination.”¹⁴ Critic Berger agrees that Hero is

envious of Beatrice as he thus states: "The vigor with which she berates her cousin suggests that she is doing more than pretending for Beatrice's benefit. She only pretends to pretend; the game of make-believe is a . . . form behind which she can stalk Beatrice with 'honest slanders' (III.i.84), letting her know what she really thinks of her, what she really feels, without (for once) being interrupted or put down."¹⁵ Hero's speech on honeysuckles and favorites may reinforce this idea: Beatrice could be seen to be the favorite, like the gorgeous honeysuckles which overshadow the sun, symbolic of Hero, that helped them grow and flower. However, critic Smith dismisses the idea that Hero "is knowingly giving a false report, seizing the opportunity, once she feels safe from her cousin's tongue, to return mock for mock."¹⁶ Such techniques, he explains, "would not be in accordance with Hero's submissive or (to repeat the adjective) sallow nature," and furthermore, he says, "Beatrice herself takes occasion to confirm it [Hero's account of Beatrice's disdainful self]."¹⁷ Even if Hero is a little jealous, and it is not clear that she is, we can forgive her, for quiet Hero loves her cousin and helps make her life better.

In Hero's last scene before the tragic wedding, Act 3 Scene 4, many of Hero's underlying attributes are revealed as she is speaking to the women while selecting garments for her approaching marriage: we see her independence, perception, wit, realistic approach to life, and purity. First, her assertiveness and independence come through. Margaret, not liking a garment Hero has chosen, suggests that Hero rely on Beatrice's taste. Hero's reply, "My cousin's a fool, and thou art another. I'll wear none but this" (3.4.10-11), shows her impatience with those who suggest that she should always listen to Beatrice. On her wedding day, she is clear that she will not hear of following anyone's wishes but her own. "I'll wear none but this" (3.4.10-11), she declares. Also, her witty nature and perception are seen when she and Margaret tease Beatrice for acting sick to cover up the fact that she is really in love. Margaret plays on Benedick's sexually suggestive name¹⁸ by telling Beatrice to get some "*carduus benedictus*, and lay it to your heart" (3.4. 68-69), and Hero picks up on the nature of this medicine by adding a slightly bawdy pun: "There thou prick'st her with a thistle" (3.4.71).¹⁹ This short scene also shows Hero's realistic approach to the world and her sexual modesty as she expresses her apprehension over her ensuing marriage.²⁰ Never earlier has she expressed any doubts about marriage or about Claudio, but here, in the presence of her close female friends, Hero reveals that her wedding garments may not give her pleasure because, she says,

“my heart is exceeding heavy” (3.4. 23-24). Then she is appalled by Margaret’s sexual innuendo as Margaret replies, “’Twill be heavier soon by the weight of a man” (3.4.25-26). Shocked, shy Hero exclaims, “Fie upon thee! Art not ashamed?” (3.4.27). Negative female sentiments over marriage are rarely mentioned in comedies, where marriage is seen as the final, happy ending. In this comedy, Shakespeare shows Hero as a realistic young girl who is apprehensive about marriage—giving up her life and body to a man she barely knows.

Thus, in the first three acts, Hero’s stellar inner qualities are portrayed as she quietly strives for happiness for herself and those she loves.

But in Act 4, her strength of character is severely tested when Claudio publicly accuses her of infidelity in the mock wedding scene. This “repudiation and shaming of Hero is a social disaster” for her, as Jacobs says,²¹ because this public denunciation of her can ruin her reputation for the rest of her life. Unwilling to stand passively and watch herself be destroyed, Hero shows her assertiveness and independence as she actively defends herself against the influential men who accuse her, even though they are her social superiors. Earlier she has barely spoken to them, so great is her shyness and modesty. But now, she cries out: “O, God, defend me! How am I beset! / What kind of catechizing call you this?” (4.1.77-78). She pleads with Claudio, “Who can blot that name [Hero] / With any just reproach?” (4.1.81-82) And she denies that she met with a man in her room, “I talk’d with no man at that hour, my Lord” (4.1.86). But she is silenced, passively swooning in a faint after almost all of the powerful men in attendance—the prince Don Pedro, his brother Don John, her fiancé Claudio, and her father Leonato—condemn her. Only Benedick withholds judgment. When the young men leave, she rallies herself once more, showing her strength of character. So sure is she in her innocence that she tells her father that he can “Refuse me, hate me, torture me to death!” (4.1.184) if he can “Prove . . . that any man with me conversed / At hours unmeet or that I yesternight / Maintained the change of words with any creature” (4.1.181-183).

Then she falls silent, letting others make plans to defend her honor. Without consulting her, the men decide that she should pretend to be dead and passively wait for her name be cleared in time. Acting much more aggressively, Beatrice, who is “commit[ed] to justice,” as Straznicky states,²² attempts to clear her cousin’s name through actions, telling Benedick to “Kill Claudio” (4.1.288),

and thus defend Hero's honor, a challenge he undertakes but, luckily, does not have time to execute. Later, when Hero is found innocent, her father and uncle attempt to bring honor to Hero by berating and challenging Claudio. During all of these actions, Hero is silent, appearing to fall back into her prescribed role as a dependent woman in a society, letting the men (and Beatrice) make all the important decisions relating to her.

Although Hero does not speak, it is clear that she approves of the actions, for she is a realist who knows that she can have no happiness or honor in her society unless her name is cleared. Therefore, she willingly pretends to be dead while she is in disgrace and waits for time to bring the truth to light, which critic Neely describes as "both an involuntary, passive escape from degradation and a voluntary constructive means to alter it."²³ But realistic Hero also knows that the pretense of death is merely a temporary measure. She realizes that the only way to really regain her reputation and be accepted by the community is to marry the man who once renounced her. Thus, her happiness depends on marriage to Claudio.

In the recantation scene in Act 5, Hero's words to Claudio show her kindness, her love, her willingness to actively seek happiness with Claudio, and, of course, her purity. Masked and pretending to be a cousin, not risking another scene of denunciation, she waits for Claudio to announce his intentions. Only when he tells her, "I am your husband, if you like of me" (5.4.58), does she reveal herself. Unmasking she replies: "And when I lived, I was your other wife; / And when you loved, you were my other husband" (5.4.59-60), adding, "One Hero died defiled, but I do live, / And surely as I live, I am a maid" (5.4.62-63). These lines clearly reveal the generous side of pure Hero; never does she chastise Claudio or berate him. She is ready to love and forget. Her happiness decided, Hero falls silent while her two male guardians explain her "resurrection" to the others.

Even though her happiness is secured, Hero does not forget about her cousin. When Beatrice and Benedick's marriage seems doomed because neither is willing to admit love for the other, it is quiet Hero who takes action to ensure her cousin's happiness. She steals a love note from Beatrice's pocket and shows it to the assembly, telling them, "And here's another [note] / Writ in my cousin's hand, stol'n from her pocket, / Containing her affection unto Benedick" (5.4. 87-89). Thus, the way is paved for Beatrice to marry the man of her choice, her soul mate, Benedick. Hero ends as she begins—thinking of the happiness and well being of her cousin.

Silent Hero, outwardly looking like a “zero” as a conventional, quiet, passive woman, seemingly so different from her laughing, vocal cousin, is, in reality, much like Beatrice—-independent, loving, realistic, witty, and pure. With strength of character, love and concern for others, a clear understanding of the world, humor mixed with intelligence, and purity of mind and body, Hero, like Beatrice, shows that stifling roles set by society can be counteracted and true happiness can be found. Through these two cousins, Shakespeare shows that women with very different personalities can find happiness, as Beatrice laughs and talks her way through the maze of life while Hero quietly but actively pursues her own path to happiness.

Notes

1. Bertrand Evans, *Shakespeare's Comedies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 73.
2. Paul Mueschke and Miriam Mueschke, “Illusion and Metamorphosis in *Much Ado About Nothing*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 18.1 (1967): 53.
3. James Smith, *Shakespearian and Other Essays* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 36.
4. Kenneth Muir, *Shakespeare's Comic Sequence* (New York: Harper-Row, 1979), 72.
5. Harry Berger, “Against the Sink-a-Pace: Sexual and Family Politics in *Much Ado About Nothing*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 33.3 (1982): 303.
6. Marta Straznicky, “Shakespeare and the Government of Comedy: *Much Ado About Nothing*,” *Shakespeare Studies* 22 (1994): 157.
7. William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, in *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. David Bevington, updated 4th ed. (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1997), 1.1.155-156. All further references to this play will be placed in parenthesis immediately following the quote.
8. “Noting in this play refers to “habits of observation and interpretations.” Nova Myhill, “Spectatorship in/of *Much Ado About Nothing*,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 39.2 (Spring 1999): 294.
9. Berger, “Against the Sink-a-Pace: Sexual and Family Politics in *Much Ado About Nothing*,” 303.
10. As Berger says, “Hero peels off her mask of soft, sweet silence and becomes frisky. She tries to flirt, then to banter like Beatrice.” Berger, “Against the Sink-a-Pace: Sexual and Family Politics in *Much Ado About Nothing*,” 304.
11. David Bevington, Introduction to *Much Ado About Nothing*, in *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. David Bevington, updated 4th ed. (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1997), 225; Note 2.1.88.
12. Maurice Hunt, “The Reclamation of Language in *Much Ado About Nothing*,” *Studies in Philology* 97.2 (Spring 2000): 177.
13. Carol Thomas Neely, “Broken Nuptials: *Much Ado About Nothing*,” *Shakespeare's Comedies*, ed. Gary Waller (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1996), 147.

14. Ibid.
15. Berger, "Against the Sink-a-Pace: Sexual and Family Politics in *Much Ado About Nothing*," 305.
16. Smith, *Shakespearian and Other Essays*, 30.
17. Ibid.
18. See Stephen B. Dobranski, "Children of the Mind: Miscarried Natives in *Much Ado About Nothing*," *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 38.2 (1998): 240.
19. Ibid.
20. See Neely, "Broken Nuptials: *Much Ado About Nothing*," 143.
21. Katherine Jacobs, "Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, 5.4.109-18," *The Explicator* 59.3 (Spring 2001): 116.
22. Straznicky, "Shakespeare and the Government of Comedy: *Much Ado About Nothing*," 160
23. Neely, "Broken Nuptials: *Much Ado About Nothing*," 148.