Rotten Oranges and Other Spoiled Commodities: The Economics of Shame in *Much Ado about Nothing*

Stephanie Chamberlain
Southeast Missouri State University

Near the beginning of act 4 of Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing,* Claudio angrily rejects the "rich and precious gift" (4.1.26) Leonato plans to bestow upon him, declaring, "Give not this rotten orange to your friend" (4.1.30).[1] While it seems clear that "rotten orange" functions metaphorically to describe the shamed Hero, the term likewise references an early modern commodity, one which, because spoiled, loses its value within the marketplace. The "jewel" (1.1.146) Claudio once feared too costly to purchase has devolved into fruit, and rotten fruit at that.

While much has been written about the "traffic in women" in early modern marriage making, the economic implications of Shakespeare's gendered commodity exchanges have not, I believe, been adequately addressed.[2] Indeed, the "rotten orange" Claudio forces back on Leonato during the failed altar scene of *Much Ado* functions, I would argue, as more than a simple metaphor to describe Hero's suddenly degraded state. Not only does it explicitly connect marriage to the early modern marketplace, but it taps into the market's system of valuation as well. In pristine condition, the orange constituted a somewhat prized food commodity. In a bruised and moldering state, however, it necessarily lost all value as an object of exchange. While the unsullied Hero may well represent one of Leonato's most prized assets, she becomes virtually un-exchangeable once her sexual chastity is called into question. Using Shakespeare's *rotten fruit* metaphor as a starting point, my paper will examine the means by which spoilage or shame functions as an instrument of devaluation within the play's marriage exchange.

In his 1615 domestic guide, *The English Housewife,* Gervase Markham outlines the value of fruit within the household economy.

Oranges and lemons in particular are prized for their versatility within the pantry. Not only could they be used in pies, in sauces, and as garnishes, but they were also used to correct the flavor of dishes. "When [a dish is] flat and wallowish [insipid]," Markham advises, "quicken it with oranges and lemons."[3] Oranges, as Markam's editor, Michael Best, explains, "intermingle . . . sour, bitter, and hot or spicy flavours."[4] Perhaps the best indication of its value to the household economy may be glimpsed in fruit's inclusion on the banquet table, where Markham calls for a generous assortment of preserved fruits, "wet suckets" (or candied fruits), and sliced oranges.[5] By its nature somewhat ostentatious, the banquet constituted a virtual cornucopia of culinary wealth, where the worth of the household could be displayed as well as sampled. Moreover, Best suggests, "The ingredients seem to have been chosen more for their expense and rarity than for any logic of the combination of flavours."[6]

Much of this valuation lay in the relative scarcity of fruit. While some fruits, such as apples, were grown locally, others had to be imported from locales with warmer climates and hence longer growing seasons. Figs, for instance, were imported from southern France, while oranges were acquired from Italy and Spain. While, as a rule, such fruits were generally more abundant in port cities such as London, their availability was subject to seasonal limitations. As food historian Ken Albala observes, "Fruits are special precisely because you cannot have them year round, nor do you often find a perfect, beautiful, and ripe specimen."[7] While it is a rotten orange Claudio rejects during the botched altar scene, he nonetheless gestures to fruit's value within the early modern marketplace.

Given its privileged place within the pantry and on the banquet table, it is perhaps surprising to note that fruit was likewise viewed with considerable suspicion in early modern England. Joan Fitzpatrick, author of *Food in Shakespeare*, reports that "some odd beliefs emerge in particular that vegetables and especially fruit should be treated with caution (regarded as an indulgence, as it were) and that animal flesh . . . was especially good for the body."[8] Raw fruit, in particular, was viewed as dangerous to early modern consumers. As Thomas Elyot (1595) explains in his 1595 *The Castell of Health*,

> before that tillage of corne was invented, and that devouring of flesh and fish was of mankind, men undoubtedly lived by fruites, and nature was ther with contented and satisfied, but by change of the diet of our progenitors, there is caused to bee in our bodies such alteration from the nature which

> was in man at the beginning, that now all fruits generally are noyfull to man and doe ingender ill humours, and bee oft times the cause of putrified fevers, if they bee much and continually eaten.[9]

Thomas Venner's *Via Recta Ad Vita Longam* (1650) describes these humours as "crude and waterish . . .that dispose the blood unto petrefaction."[10] Despite these rather dire warnings, consumers not only ate, but also seemed to relish fruit.[11] The forbidden fruits that early modern physicians warned against were, in fact, a prized commodity.

That fruit was sexualized in early modern England contributes perhaps both to its appeal as well as perceived danger. Historian Albala warns that

> the sensual and almost erotic attention to the texture and glistening skin of ripe wet fruit gives some indication of how interested diners were in eating it . . . [Indeed, fruits] flaunt more than a hint of erotic suggestion, particularly with swollen, rubescent peaches about to pour forth unctuous juice, figs yearning to split from internal pressure, revealing seed-studded flesh, and melons ripe with anticipation before the fork plunges in. In the case of candied and conserved fruit, literally dripping with syrup, a suggestively sexual message probably could not be avoided.[12]

Nor, apparently, could the ripe and preserved fruits lavishly displayed on early modern banquet tables. Fruit was a succulent culinary event in early modern England, an almost guilty pleasure more likely embraced than avoided. Of course, one knew, but at the same time, ignored the dangers that could lie within. Whether that danger lay with "putrefaction" produced from ill humours within the body or from spoiled flesh that hid beneath an undamaged exterior, raw fruit, untempered through the stabilizing process of heat or preservation, proved an uncertain, however enticing, commodity. The same could be said of women.

That women were treated as commodities on the early modern marriage exchange has, of course, been well established. Numerous social historians of the early modern period have documented the value attached to daughters as a means by which to advance family name and social position. Although marriage formations differed widely according to social ranking, as B. J. Sokol and Mary Sokol note in *Shakespeare, Law, and Marriage*, "the convention among the gentry and aristocracy was for marriages to be arranged by families with a view to securing advantages or alliances, conforming to a

patriarchal model."[13] Keith Wrightson supports this assessment, adding that "among the propertied, from husbandman to lord, economic arrangements involving both families were often critical to the making or marring of a prospective match, and negotiations were begun as soon as a serious 'motion of marriage' was entertained."[14] Much was obviously at stake in the matter of valuation, including reputation (both of the individual as well as the family) and economic assets (what, in other words, the bride was able to bring to the marriage in the form of money, movables, or, less likely, land). Nor were reputation and asset valuation easily separated. Amy Louise Erickson, discussing *Women and Property in Early Modern England*, argues, "At some level, a bride's portion was not merely a nest egg for the new household—it was a token of her character, and thus of her sexual honour."[15]

As with other perishable commodities, a women's value within the marriage market could be lost. Numerous early modern conduct manuals and sermons, in fact, warn that a woman's worth was linked to her chastity, a worth which could be lost or diminished due to real or, in the case of Shakespeare's Hero, perceived sexual indiscretion. Juan Luis Vives's cautionary treatise is illustrative. As he cautions in his *Instruction of a Christian Woman* (1524),

> You will not easily find an evil woman unless she be one who is ignorant of or at any rate gives no thought to the importance of the virtue of chastity. She is unaware of the evil she commits if she loses it, not considering the blessing she exchanges for a base, empty, and momentary illusion of pleasure and what a train of evils she ushers in with the loss of chastity. She does not consider how empty and senseless a thing physical pleasure is and that one should not even lift a finger for its sake, let alone cast away woman's most beautiful and priceless possession.[16]

While Vives equates chastity with moral integrity, he likewise quantifies it as a "priceless possession," one which, by implication, could be used as a bargaining point. Moreover, the reputation of a woman damaged through sexual impropriety could also interfere with the overall economic system. Laura Gowing notes that while "for both men and women . . . credit [or the ability to transact within the marketplace] was measured through a combination of factors . . . For women, that combination was filtered through the lens of sexual honesty . . . Whatever made a good reputation, sexual discredit could threaten it."[17] Indeed, Craig Muldrew observes that, because reputation and economics were linked in early modern England, "making a distinction between economically rational

transactions and other social transactions, such as courtship, sex, patronage or parenthood, does not make sense."[18] If, as Anthony Fletcher has argued, early modern "women were seen as possessing a powerful and potentially destructive sexuality which made them naturally lascivious predators,"[19] women, like fruit, proved a most dangerous, if desirable, commodity, indeed.

Shame, a kind of spoilage, proved the mechanism by which to devalue women within the marriage marketplace in early modern England. Ewan Fernie has argued that "shame constitutes an unwelcome revelation of the self . . . The subject of shame may be ashamed of itself directly or because of others upon whom its honour depends: the closer the connection, the greater the shame here; the disgrace of one's own parent, spouse or child is especially grievous. The subject may feel shame as part of a group. Or it may feel shame vicariously, on the part of another or of others."[20] It is important to consider, however, that *to shame*, in other words, to judge the moral integrity of another, is qualifiedly different than *to feel* shame, although the two may share some connections. Indeed, *to shame* constitutes a disciplinary action taken against one guilty of some kind of moral indiscretion. Fernie further argues, "It is precisely because shame is so private, so intimate a sensation, because the shamed self is *literally not fit to be seen,* that it recoils from exposure."[21] I would suggest, however, that shame always, to some extent, argues public judgment. There is no shame, in other words, unless there is at least the threat of public exposure. And it is this public judgment which ultimately functions as a moral corrective to force the offending individual to conform to accepted community standards.

Despite her ostensible absence from the public arena, an early modern woman's reputation had far reaching implications due primarily to the fact that shame, as Fernie further remarks, was "a largely male affair."[22] S. P. Cerasano observes that "a woman's reputation belonged to her male superior, who owned her and to whom she could bring honour or disgrace. In so far as a woman was 'renamed' when she was slandered and her identity thus altered, her husband lost his good name and was rechristened with abuse—slandered by association."[23] A woman's shame, in other words, constituted household shame, and fathers and husbands necessarily shared in its negative consequences. Not only was a man's good name at stake, but the economic viability of the household as a whole was threatened. Indeed, without good reputation, a household could not easily obtain the credit it needed to purchase basic necessities within the marketplace. Craig Muldrew, in *The*

Economy of Obligation, observes that "because much buying and selling was done by wives, servants and apprentices, the honesty, fidelity and modesty of a wife, and the honesty and diligence of servants, all contributed to the credit or reputation of a family."[24] As Thomas Wilson notes in his 1560 *The Art of Rhetorique*, "A good name is better than all the goodes in the world. . .the losse of money maye be recovered, but the losse of mannes good name, can not be called back againe."[25] In the case of unmarried daughters, good reputation proved key not only to fathers, for whom unblemished family names proved crucial to the arrangement of marital alliances, but to potential grooms, whose future credit potential could well hinge on the unsullied reputations of their wives. Shame, in short, proved damaging not only to individual and family reputation, but to a community's overall economic viability.

Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* offers important insight into the economics of shame in early modern England. Not only is woman treated as commodity within Messina's marriage exchange, but her value noticeably fluctuates according to assessments of sexual integrity. Claudio's first mention of Hero, in fact, addresses her moral state. His query, "Is she not a modest young lady?" (1.1.133), proves less a question than an observation. Judging from all outward appearances, the blushing Hero appears virginal and duly obedient: a virtual prize within the marriage exchange. Benedick's decidedly cynical, "Would you buy her, that enquire after her?" (1.1.145), in some respect reflects our own bewilderment that Hero could be represented as an object. Claudio's response, "Can the world buy such a jewel?" (1.1.146), however, proves less an objection to Benedick's crass comment than to an appraisal of her worth. Hero's commodity status is underscored a short time later, when Claudio inquires of Don Pedro, "Hath Leonato any son, my lord?" (1.1.242). While it may be argued that he likewise sees her as "the sweetest lady that ever I looked on" (1.1.151-152), Hero's desirability as marriage partner is nonetheless linked to her economic as well as moral valuation. She becomes, in essence, part and parcel of Leonato's estate, her status as sole heir proof that she is worth acquiring.

While Hero's consent is ostensibly necessary to the completion of the proposed matrimonial exchange, such consent does not, I would argue, negate her object status. Indeed, it becomes readily apparent that consent proves pro forma within the early modern world of the play. When Leonato is erroneously informed that Don Pedro means to woo his daughter, this father instructs,

"Daughter, remember what I told you. If the Prince do solicit you in that kind, you know your answer" (2.1.55-56). Once Hero has been judged worthy in both a moral and an economic sense, a negotiated transaction between buyer and seller commences; her consent is understood. Writing about sexual and family politics, Harry Berger, Jr., observed, "They are not only prizes of war, but also commodities in the marriage market. Daughters are ducats."[26] Hero becomes, in essence, the precious fruit Claudio happens upon within the marketplace, one which through a process of bartering he hopes to obtain.

The problem, of course, is that like the fruit that Claudio will later reject, women within the play prove an unknown, and thus dangerous commodity. Perhaps nowhere is this uncertainty better expressed than in Benedick's early assessment that all women are by nature dangerous. Though beautiful on the outside, their trustworthiness ultimately proves unknowable. As he concludes,

> That a woman conceived me, I thank her. That she brought me up, I likewise give her most humble thanks. But that I will have a recheat winded in my forehead, or hang my bugle in an invisible baldric, all women shall pardon me. Because I will not do them the wrong to mistrust any, I will do myself the right to trust none. And the fine is—for the which I may go the finer—I will live a bachelor. (1.1.195-201)

That Benedick's mistrust focuses on fear of women's sexual fidelity proves interesting in light of Claudio's own later refusal to receive the defamed Hero. Yet, as has been well established, the fear of cuckoldry was a cultural one in early modern England. Benedick's irrational "rationality" sounds a bit like the physician's advice given to early modern consumers regarding the consumption of raw fruit. It dictates that this reluctant lover avoid women altogether rather than confront the dangers of the unknown.

Interestingly enough, even before the infamous altar scene, Claudio will likewise express Benedick's poisonous concern over a woman's fidelity. Although, he knows of Don Pedro's plan to woo on his friend's behalf, he yields easily to Don John's suggestion that the Prince means to claim Hero for himself. As Claudio bitterly declares,

> Let every eye negotiate for itself,
> And trust no agent; for beauty is a witch
> Against whose charms faith melteth into blood.
> This is an accident of hourly proof,
> Which I mistrusted not. Farewell, therefore, Hero.
> (2.1.156-60)

While it is Don Pedro who purportedly betrays his friend in wooing Claudio's intended for himself, this wounded would-be lover instead attacks Hero. Not that Claudio has any reason to mistrust the woman he only too recently called a "modest young lady" (1.1.133). It is, however, Don Pedro who becomes the victim of Hero's ensnaring sexuality. If men stray, according to Claudio's skewed logic, surely women are to blame. However alluring they may be, they ultimately prove a most dangerous commodity.

It is, of course, at the altar that we confront perhaps the fullest expression of the early modern commoditization of women as well as its most devastating consequences. When asked by the friar whether he will complete the bargain negotiated during Leonato's masquerade, Claudio angrily rejects Hero, insisting,

> There, Leonato, take her back again.
> Give not this rotten orange to your friend.
> She's but the sign and semblance of her honour.
> Behold how like a maid she blushes here!
> O, what authority and show of truth
> Can cunning sin cover itself withal! (4.1.29-34)

Interestingly enough, Claudio's charge of "cunning sin" is delivered through the language of commodity exchange. Hero is the unblemished orange found to be rotten following the initial point of sale. Although she appears pristine and beautiful on the outside, such an exterior merely masks a corrupt interior. Even the setting of this encounter possesses a marketplace feel. Although the attempted exchange takes place at the church door, it is likewise a highly public setting, one where this as well as other commodity exchanges occur. Needless to say, Leonato has been reduced to the role of dishonest vendor, hawking damaged goods to a buyer outraged not only by the poor quality of the merchandise, but the seller's apparently overt deception as well.

Claudio's public shaming is intended to restore, if at all possible, a reputation damaged through association. Although Hero is the shamed one, Claudio has been duped: his apparent inability to discern a pure woman from a virtual wanton, publicly exposed. He declares,

> You seem to me as Dian in her orb,
> As chaste as is the bud ere it be blown.
> But you are more intemperate in your blood
> Than Venus or those pampered animals
> That rage in savage sensuality. (4.1.55-59)

As Fernie has observed, "The woman exchanged between father and groom should be ripe and wholesome, whereas Hero is a . . . corrupt thing dishonouring [her] possessor."[27] This guilt by association is, of course, the reason why Leonato will likewise cruelly reject his own daughter, exclaiming,

> Why had I not with charitable hand
> Took up a beggar's issue at my gates,
> Who smirchèd thus and mired with infamy,
> I might have said "No part of it is mine,
> This shame derives itself from unknown loins." (4.1.130-34)

Hero's shame is a father's shame; it is that of a would-be husband, and even of the matchmaker who seals the deal. Shame is, in fact, collective, touching all who negotiated this marital alliance. It matters not that Hero is a victim of slander at the hands of a scheming bastard. In the early modern world of the play, this spoiled commodity ultimately taints all involved in the failed exchange.

From an early modern perspective, marriage functioned as a moral preservative against the inherent dangers of the flesh. Marriage in this early modern text likewise proves the solution to the collective shame that threatens the well-being of Messina. The problem, of course, proves how to reconstitute the unsullied Hero, to "render her again" (4.1.27) as the pristine figure Claudio once found too irresistible to pass by. The friar's solution, however disconcerting, functions as a means by which to restore Hero to her unblemished state. She must, in essence, "die" to be "reborn" as the unsullied Hero worthy of a father's and a husband's love. And, if her "rebirth" serves to reconstitute a flesh spoiled through public shaming, then marriage functions as a moral preservative, to make safe that made whole again.

Notes

1. William Shakespeare, *Much Ado about Nothing,* in *The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition,* ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 1389-1443. All in-text citations refer to this edition.

2. For example, Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Press Review, 1975), 157-210.

3. Gervase Markham, *The English Housewife*, ed. Michael R. Best (1615; Kingston, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1986), 81.

4. Michael R. Best, introduction to *The English Housewife,* by Gervase Markham (1615; Kingston, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1986), xxxvii.

5. Markham, *The English Housewife*, 121.

6. Best, introduction to *The English Housewife*, xxxvii.

7. Ken Albala, *The Banquet: Dining in the Great Courts of Late Renaissance Europe* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 83.

8. Joan Fitzpatrick, *Food in Shakespeare: Early Modern Dietaries and the Plays* (Hants, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 4.

9. Thomas Elyot, *The Castell of Health, Corrected, and in Some Places Augmented by the First Author Thereof* (London, 1595), 60. Quoted in Fitzpatrick, *Food in Shakespeare.*

10. Thomas Venner, *Via Recta Ad Vitam Longam* (1650), cited in Best, xxxv-vi.

11. Albala, *The Banquet*, 82-83.

12. Ibid., 83.

13. B. J. Sokol and Mary Sokol, *Shakespeare, Law, and Marriage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 30.

14. Keith Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 60-61.

15. Amy Louise Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 1993), 95.

16. Juan Luis Vives, *Education of a Christian Woman*, ed. and trans. by Charles Fantazzi (1524; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 64-65.

17. Laura Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 129.

18. Craig Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation: The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 1998), 149.

19. Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England 1500-1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 5.

20. Ewan Fernie, *Shame in Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 2002), 10.

21. Ibid., 16.

22. Ibid., 86.

23. S. P. Cerasano, "Half a Dozen Dangerous Words," in *Gloriana's Face: Women, Public and Private in the English Renaissance*, ed. S. P. Cerasano (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 37.

24. Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation*, 158.

25. Thomas Wilson, *The Art of Rhetorique*, ed. Thomas J. Derrick (1560; New York: Garland Press, 1982), 255.

26. Harry Berger, Jr., "Against the Sink-a-Pace: Sexual and Family Politics *in Much Ado about Nothing*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 33 (1982): 302-13.

27. Fernie, *Shame in Shakespeare*, 86.