

# Shakespeare's Heroines and the Constancy of Love

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Resentment, whose patron saint must be Iago, has many allies. Envy, jealousy, contempt, hatred, malice, cynicism: all are negative emotions and they plague Shakespeare's protagonists. Opposed to the multiple and varied forces of negativity, however, stands the unchanging force of love. Iago says to Roderigo, "I am not what I am." Florizel says to Perdita, "What I was, I am." Constancy to love is an ethical principle to which Shakespeare remains remarkably faithful in his plays. If the protagonist stays true to love, as Florizel remains true to Perdita, he wins the fight against the many faces of negativity.

The tragedies tell the story of the hero's failure to remain true to love. Brutus ignores Portia's pleas, Hamlet rejects Ophelia, Othello accuses Desdemona, Lear disowns Cordelia, Macbeth murders his king, and Coriolanus would burn all of Rome. Shakespeare leaves us in no doubt about the consequences of the tragic hero's decision. He might have been saved, but in the end he fails both himself and those closest to him.

No image is more revealing of the hero's predicament than Hamlet in Ophelia's grave. Hamlet's proclamation of love is, in this context, utterly hollow. As he shrieks his love to the world, his actions demonstrate that death, not love, is on his mind. For he and Laertes are locked in a death struggle. Laertes has already declared his allegiance to death:

To hell, allegiance! Vows, to the blackest devil!  
Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!  
I dare damnation. (4.5.134-6)[\[1\]](#)

Allegorically, Laertes personifies revenge, and his sudden reappearance in the fourth act indicates the inversion taking place in Hamlet's soul. Love dies and the path is cleared for revenge to range unchecked. "Laertes shall be king!" the people cry (4.5.109). It is an illogical statement until we realize that Laertes represents the kingship of Hamlet's soul. In

the graveyard, we see the ethical consequences of this insurrection. Hamlet's avowal is to death. As John Vyvyan beautifully puts it, "A soul that makes itself the grave of love inevitably becomes the womb of hate."<sup>[2]</sup> And the same may be said of Othello when he kneels with Iago:

Yield up, O love, thy crown and hearted throne  
To tyrannous hate! (3.3.462-3)

In the tragedies the hero is swept up by the forces of resentment and the consequence is death.<sup>[3]</sup> Portia, Ophelia, and Desdemona die and the protagonist's doom cannot be stopped. Allegorically, the heroine's death represents the extinguishing of love in the protagonist's soul.

Yet it might not have ended this way. The pattern need not have been one of doom to dusty death. Shakespeare wrote life-giving as well as death-dealing plays. The comedies depict a similar struggle with the forces of negativity. Here, too, the protagonist is tested and found wanting. It is clear that the story might take the same path as tragedy. But there is a crucial difference. The heroine does not die. She may die a symbolic death, which is Shakespeare's way of indicating the fragility of the hero's allegiance to love. The forces of negativity are strong and the threat to the protagonist's soul constant. But in the end love prevails and resentment is overcome.

This fundamental conflict between love and resentment may, I believe, be found in all the plays. Here, I shall try to demonstrate how Shakespeare elaborates the conflict in a single comedy.

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, we see a young man searching for love. He sees the beautiful Hero and falls in love. It is not the first time Claudio noticed the girl. But to this point his mind had been occupied by war:

I looked upon her with a soldier's eye,  
That liked, but had a rougher task in hand  
Than to drive liking to the name of love. (1.1.286-88)

The references to war may seem insignificant but they are not. In the tragedies, war is omnipresent. Brutus's assassination of Caesar unleashes civil war, Hamlet's Denmark is menaced by Fortinbras, Othello is called to fight the Turks, Macbeth's violence is born in Scotland's bloody civil war, Lear's ill-conceived love test divides the nation, and Coriolanus's unmatched contempt is a product of Rome's fanatical military culture. In each of these cases, war has a symbolic as well as literal meaning. It portends the approaching battle within the protagonist. The witches propose to meet Macbeth "when the battle's lost and won" (1.1.4). Their meaning, of course, is that though Macbeth wins the physical battle, he loses the battle for his soul. It is a cardinal rule with Shakespeare that when the forces of

war are in the ascendance, love cannot flourish. War is the memorizing of Golgotha, a monument to the graveyard. Shakespeare never hesitates to draw on this imagery of the duel between love and war. When Claudio declares his allegiance to love at the beginning of the play, we are meant to applaud it. The hero is inexperienced and hesitant, but he is at least heading in the right direction. The shift from prose to verse underscores the seriousness of the change within Claudio:

But now I am returned and that war thoughts  
Have left their places vacant, in their rooms  
Come thronging soft and delicate desires,  
All prompting me how fair young Hero is,  
Saying, I liked her ere I went to wars. (1.1.289-93)

For guidance, Claudio turns to his companion, the prince Don Pedro. Who better to teach him how to love? "My liege," he says, "Your Highness now may do me good." The prince replies,

My love is thine to teach. Teach it but how,  
And thou shalt see how apt it is to learn  
Any hard lesson that may do thee good. (1.1.279-81)

"My love is thine to teach" seems to mean, "I am at your disposal, tell me how I can help." But I think Shakespeare is drawing on Plato's philosophy of love, as distilled through Marsilio Ficino and Baldassare Castiglione,[\[4\]](#) and means, quite literally, that the prince's love has the same transcendent source as Claudio's: "My love is also your love, teach yourself how to love this girl." The prince is telling Claudio to look inside himself. The hero has to find that which already exists within him, if only he can discover it.

But Claudio is unsure of himself. He has only vague ideas about what love is, ideas that he has gotten from books and romantic tales. The prince warns him against these distractions:

Thou wilt be like a lover presently  
And tire the hearer with a book of words. (1.1.294-95)

It is not books that Claudio should be looking to but the woman herself. That is why the prince makes the decision to break with her father and bring Hero directly to Claudio. If Claudio is to learn how to love, he must focus on the woman, not the poetry.

Now the hero's first test occurs. The prince woos Hero, winning both her consent and her father's. But Claudio succumbs to Don John's malice. He believes he's been betrayed by the prince, who has stolen Hero from him. He swears never to trust love and declares beauty to be a witch. "Farewell therefore Hero!" (2.1.176). In a fit of petulance, the hero abandons love. Beatrice identifies Claudio's diseased state of mind:

The Count is neither sad, nor sick, nor merry, nor well; but civil count, civil as an orange, and something of that jealous complexion. (2.1.279-81)

The prince intervenes to dispel the looming spectre of resentment:

Here, Claudio, I have wooed in thy name, and fair Hero is won. I have broke with her father and his good will obtained. Name the day of marriage, and God give thee joy! (2.1.284-87)

Claudio and Hero are betrothed. Resentment is, for the time being, banished. Love is once again in the ascendance.

The prince now turns his attention to the second pair of lovers, Beatrice and Benedick. He successfully uncovers their love for one another, enabling them to drop the scornful façade they have created for themselves. It seems his work is done and, more or less in the middle of the play, he prepares to leave Messina. He says to Claudio:

I do but stay till your marriage be consummate, and then go I toward Aragon. (3.2.1-2)

But love will be tested again. As is typical in Shakespeare, the final assault occurs in the third act. Again it comes from the prince's false brother. Don John infected Claudio's ear in the first act, and we saw how vulnerable to resentment Claudio was. This first conflict warns us that the protagonist is weak and we are unsurprised when he fails his second test. Claudio is told that Hero is unfaithful. He witnesses an assignation that suggests the story might be true. What does he do? He shames Hero publicly on her wedding day.

O Hero, what a Hero hadst thou been,  
If half thy outward graces had been placed  
About thy thoughts and counsels of thy heart!  
But fare thee well, most foul, most fair! Farewell,  
Thou pure impiety and impious purity!  
For thee I'll lock up all the gates of love,  
And on my eyelids shall conjecture hang,  
To turn all beauty into thoughts of harm,  
And never shall it more be gracious. (4.1.100-108)

The words might have been uttered by Hamlet or Othello. The scene is the equivalent of the nunnery and bordello scenes from the tragedies. Allegorically, we witness the casting out of love from the protagonist's soul. Of course, nothing Claudio says of Hero is true, no more than Hamlet's slander of Ophelia was true, or Othello's of Desdemona. As so often in Shakespeare, the speaker is deceiving himself. What he thinks applies to the woman he reviles, applies with far greater accuracy to himself. It is Claudio, not Hero, who is polluting love. And it is Claudio, not Hero, who is guilty of confusing foul and fair, purity and

impurity, piety and impiety.

Love, however, can be reawakened. But first remorse and sorrow must visit Claudio. The friar proposes it be given out, falsely, that Hero has died. Claudio will hear how he has killed her with his slander and the trial of his redemption will begin.

When he shall hear she died upon his words,  
Th'idea of her life shall sweetly creep  
Into his study of imagination,  
And every lovely organ of her life  
Shall come appareled in more precious habit,  
More moving-delicate and full of life,  
Into the eye and prospect of his soul,  
Than when she lived indeed. Then shall he mourn,  
If ever love had interest in his liver,  
And wish he had not so accused her,  
No, though he thought his accusation true. (4.1.223-33)

Claudio must recreate Hero in his imagination. Her truth and beauty may then shine through the slander. It is an important stage in the progress of Claudio's soul. Like Castiglione's courtier tasked with recreating the ideal image of his beloved, Claudio must purify Hero's image of the pollution wrought by his imperfect senses.

Meanwhile, in the other plot line, Benedick, who has found love, stands faithfully by it. He proves himself worthy of love in four ways: first, he refuses to abandon Hero; second, he suspects Don John's villainy; third, he counsels Leonato to accept the friar's plan; and fourth, he swears his love to Beatrice. In a test of love, she gives him a task. He must challenge Claudio to a duel. Benedick accepts the challenge and prepares to meet Claudio.

Looking at the scene allegorically as a test of the lover's worthiness, we can see that one lover passes while the other fails. Claudio rejects love. And in doing so he gives in to the forces of resentment represented by Don John. Claudio, however, is not the only one to fail. Both the prince and, even more shockingly, Hero's own father are swept up by the forces of resentment ("Let her die!" [4.1.154]). This makes Benedick's fidelity to love all the more impressive. Benedick, who was once so contemptuous of love, is the only member of the prince's party to remain true. The proposed duel between Benedick and Claudio is symbolic of this contrast. Benedick proves his fidelity to love by rejecting his allegiance to Claudio, a man who has proven himself unworthy of love.

Claudio's redemption occurs in the final act. Many find it unsatisfactory. Claudio shows no remorse when he hears of Hero's death, and it is only when he learns of Don John's treachery that he regrets his actions. Part of the problem, I think, lies in the compression of events. Shakespeare needed to draw his plot to a swift conclusion. We get in rapid

succession: (1) the discovery of Don John's treachery, (2) Claudio's repentance, (3) his redemption and (4) the rebirth of love and, therefore, of his bride Hero.

When Claudio learns that Hero is guiltless and he was deceived, he says to Leonato:

Choose your revenge yourself;  
Impose me to what penance your invention  
Can lay upon my sin. (5.1.267-9)

Claudio's penance is to make public Hero's innocence and to pay his respects to her tomb. The next morning, he must marry Hero's cousin. "And so," Leonato says, "dies my revenge" (5.1.287).

If we look at the play with an eye to its allegorical structure, the ending appears much more satisfying than if we were to focus solely on the hero's psychology. In focusing on the conflict between resentment and love, we are less apt to worry about Claudio's motivations. Instead, the death and rebirth of Hero may be understood as an allegory of the death and rebirth of love within the protagonist. Claudio must learn to love his bride and this means that he must not be distracted by what others say about her.<sup>[5]</sup> He must trust her utterly. This is certainly a theme with Shakespeare. ("*Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he has.*")

When Claudio is betrothed to Leonato's niece, she removes her mask. Claudio is stunned. "Another Hero!" he says. She replies,

Nothing certainer.  
One Hero died defiled, but I do live,  
And surely as I live, I am a maid. (5.4.62-4)

To which Leonato adds:

She died, my lord, but whiles her slander lived. (5.4.65)

Hero is killed by slander. It is a symbolic death, of course. What dies is something inside the protagonist, as is made clear by Leonato's line. As long as Claudio's slander lives, love will be dead to him. As long as resentment rules, love cannot flourish.

We can summarize Shakespeare's comic pattern as follows. The pattern divides into five distinct stages that are roughly equivalent to the five acts of the play.

*Act 1.* Claudio declares his love for Hero; Benedick and Beatrice, their scorn for one another.

*Act 2.* The prince wins Hero for Claudio and tricks Benedick and Beatrice into

recognizing the illusory nature of their scorn.

*Act 3.* Don John tricks Claudio into accepting the illusion of Hero's infidelity.

*Act 4.* Claudio publicly slanders Hero who is now dead to him: "I'll lock up all the gates of love." Benedick avows his love for Beatrice and swears to dissociate himself from hatred: "Kill Claudio!"

*Act 5.* The illusion of Hero's infidelity is lifted, vengeance averted, penance undergone, and love restored. Hero died "but whiles her slander lived." Now she lives to be Claudio's "other wife": "And when you loved, you were my other husband."

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I realize the above remarks are rather schematic. I have tried to demonstrate Shakespeare's allegorical pattern in one comedy. I believe the pattern is worth investigating because it suggests Shakespeare's approach to a fundamental ethical problem. How do societies deal with the problem of resentment? Were resentment to remain unchecked, it would destroy the community. Where tragedy tells the story of resentment unchecked, comedy tells the story of the defeat of resentment by love. Many questions still need to be addressed. What are the historical conditions of romantic love? Is Shakespeare reproducing the "allegory of love" of the medieval poets?[6] And, if he is, what does he do differently from them? It would be foolhardy to attempt to answer these questions without further analysis of Shakespeare, but I hope I might be permitted some preliminary thoughts on the matter.

Shakespeare's early work is dominated by the romantic comedies. It appears that he was developing a fairly systematic picture of romantic love. Doubtless he was influenced by the allegorical method of the medieval poets. Love, however, is challenged by resentment, and in the tragedies of Shakespeare's middle period resentment triumphs. In the later tragedies, however, including *King Lear*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*, resentment comes very close to being defeated, and in certain plays from this period, including the tragicomedies *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well that Ends Well*, resentment, which looked like it was heading for another victory, is defeated. John Vyvyan argues that Shakespeare's final period, which is dominated by the romances, is a dialectical synthesis of the comedies and tragedies.[7] In the tragedies, Shakespeare explored the problem of resentment, which he then "solved" in the tragicomic experiments of the romances. I am sympathetic to Vyvyan's general view of the matter, but I also think that his analysis of what he calls "the Shakespearean ethic" could be sharpened by an application of originary thinking.

In the tragedies, we see the sacrifice of the "big man," whose usurpation of the centre must be punished. In the comedies and romances, the public scene of tragedy is abandoned for the more intimate sphere of romantic love. In *The Tempest*, for example, Prospero defers his

resentment by forgiving, rather than avenging himself on, his enemies and former persecutors. This act of forgiveness may strike us as unmotivated, until we realize that Prospero's defeat of resentment is represented allegorically by the romance of Miranda and Ferdinand. Tragedy is averted because the scandal of Prospero's exile, which could easily escalate into violent reprisal, takes a backseat to the "brave new world" represented by the pair of lovers. When during the play's final scene Prospero gestures towards the couple playing chess on the inner stage, the triumph of love over resentment is explicitly represented. The former rivals for the tragic centre gather around a new intimate centre, one that models the reciprocity of romantic love rather than violent conflict.

This opening of the scene to romantic love corresponds to an opening in the economic sphere. The early modern era was the first era to possess something resembling a free market, in which the moral equality of participants promotes the free exchange of goods and services between strangers who share no prior relationship to one another other than that of the human community itself. The asymmetry of ritual exchange gives way to the "centreless" exchange between peripheral selves. The freedom of the self stems not from the centre, accession to which leads to violence, but from the periphery, which is constituted by the reciprocity of multiple desiring selves. When Prospero breaks his staff and promises to forgo magic forever, he is abandoning the public scene and the frustrated desire that attends it. But the answer to frustrated desire is not resentment but love. Rather than being scandalized by the other's occupation of the centre, the self learns that the asymmetry between periphery and centre is an illusion, not because the centre doesn't exist, but because it is only one among many possible centres.

## Notes

[1] All references to Shakespeare are to David Bevington's *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 6th ed. (New York: Pearson Longman, 2009).

[2] John Vyvyan, *The Shakespearean Ethic* (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 2011), 44.

[3] I have explored the tragic hero's failure to control his resentment in *Shakespeare's Big Men: Tragedy and the Problem of Resentment* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016).

[4] See John Vyvyan, *Shakespeare and Platonic Beauty* (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 2013).

[5] René Girard, in *A Theater of Envy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), points out that Claudio is hampered by his extreme dependency on others, most notably, the prince, Don Pedro, who functions as a kind of celebrity to whom Claudio remains unhealthily attached. He cannot love Hero unless the prince endorses his choice. Hence the alacrity with which he believes the prince woos for himself. If the prince truly admires Hero (as Claudio secretly hopes), the prince will inevitably want her for himself. When it turns out that the prince wasn't really interested in Hero, Claudio's desire also wanes. Hence his



willingness to believe in her faithlessness. Without the endorsement of the prince, she can be no better than a common stale. W. H. Auden, in *Lectures on Shakespeare* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), makes a similar point when he notes that many of the characters are snobs who simply accept whatever the prince believes. Leonato, for example, is a snob because he believes the prince rather than his own daughter.

[6] See C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936).

[7] John Vyvyan, *The Shakespearean Ethic*.