

10.2478/ewcp-2026-0007

Masks and Marriage: Gender Roles in *Much Ado About Nothing*

BANU ÖĞÜNCÜ
Aksaray University, Turkey

Abstract

Much Ado About Nothing, a mature romantic comedy by William Shakespeare, focuses on couples. The presented couples – Beatrice and Benedick, as well as Hero and Claudio – portray gender roles, since the main plotline depends on the false accusation of Hero's chastity. The play introduces Hero as the obedient daughter who meets the expectations of the patriarchal society as an exemplary female. Quite contrary to the portrayal of Hero, Beatrice poses as the shrewd female that needs to be tamed. Such stereotypical roles attributed to Hero and Beatrice are strengthened through the use of masks. While the resort to masks appears in the play as an element of comedy, it gains further significance in the discussion of gender roles. Therefore, this study intends to associate the function of masks with the representation of gender roles in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Furthermore, the specific choice of the veil in Kenneth Branagh's film adaptation, instead of the more traditional use of the mask, complicates Hero's and Beatrice's gender roles. The use of the veil supports the constructed identities of both female characters based on the expectations of their patriarchal society. Hence, the taming process of not only Beatrice but also Hero will be discussed in line with stereotypical gender roles in a patriarchal society.

Keywords: *Much Ado About Nothing*, Shakespeare, patriarchy, mask, gender identities, marriage, performance of femininity, Kenneth Branagh

Introduction

Considered one of William Shakespeare's romantic comedies, *Much Ado About Nothing* presents the core elements of a comedy through the couples of Beatrice and Benedick, and Hero and Claudio. Since the publication of the first folio, the play has preserved its popularity as it has been frequently revived by professional companies as well as amateur groups. The play, with its plotline focusing on couples, has evolved into a prototype of contemporary romantic comedies. As reflected in the relationship of Beatrice and Benedick, hate shifting into love has been quite popular as the main motif of contemporary romantic movies. The Arden Edition of the play states that, although "[n]ot a text which had previously attracted many film-makers, it received a boost in its recent fortunes with the 1993 version directed by Kenneth Branagh and starring Branagh and Emma Thompson" (913). Kenneth Branagh's adaptation that has made the text popular for the big screen can be considered a pioneer as it familiarized the text to the wider audience. The text of the play has been the subject of numerous scholarly studies ranging from discussions of the play as a comedy to the analysis of gender roles. This study, however, aims to focus on Hero's and Beatrice's assigned gender roles as presented through the use of masks in the written text as well as in Branagh's screen adaptation. To further dive into the gender roles in the play, the function of masks will be deciphered through a close reading of the text. Branagh's 1993 adaptation and his view on the use of mask will be discussed as a pivotal detail expanding the gender roles of the female characters practiced in the patriarchal society. Beyond complying with the elements of a Shakespearean comedy, disguise entailed through masks has the function of reflecting gender roles within the play. Hence, this study intends to reinterpret the gender roles through the use of masks in Shakespeare's play, with specific focus on Branagh's interpretation of masks and gender roles in his adaptation. The close reading of the play that will engage with masks with the intention of interpreting them as a part of the constructed gender identities of

Hero and Beatrice, will be followed by the interpretation of Branagh's use of the veil instead of a mask to initiate the discussion of gender roles.

Hero and Beatrice as Representations of a Patriarchal Society

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Beatrice, with her clever mind and witty tongue, challenges the subservient female role, while Hero, with her passive and obedient behaviour, represents the conventional woman of Shakespeare's era. Beatrice's perspective on marriage and men, which is often bold, parallels Hero's silence, which represents the latter's performance of the female roles of the time. Regardless of the differences in the gender perspectives of these two females, however, masks and marriage serve to alter their acceptance of a woman's role in society, with masks allowing gender identities to be blurred at times, and with marriage using masks to underscore the subordinate role of females in a patriarchal society. Furthermore, marriage is transformed into a performance of subdued femininity with the help of the mask, which is involved both in the wooing scene and in the final marriage ceremony. The marriage that takes place at the end the play, instead of providing a structured happy ending, leads both Hero and Beatrice to accept their part in their patriarchal society and become virtuous wives. The analysis of these two female characters which will dwell on when and how they express themselves will be provided in relation to the function of masks.

Hero's silence indicates a role assigned by the patriarchal society in which she lives. Her state of silence, in fact, is significant in understanding the constructed gender roles of Hero and Beatrice. As opposed to her cousin Beatrice, who dominates the play, starting with her conversation with the messenger in act 1, scene 1, Hero, despite her presence on the stage throughout the first scene, speaks only one line. Raychel Reiff hypothesizes two things about Hero based on the single line she utters during the first scene, arguing that both are, in fact, related to Beatrice: "Quiet Hero's love for and

understanding of Beatrice” (140). Hero avoids revealing any information about herself, as well as speaking to other characters with regard to her comments. Hero only utters words related to Beatrice, such as her line at the end of act 2, scene 2: “I will do any modest office, my lord, to help my cousin to a good husband” (2.1.922). Hero almost becomes a spokesperson who reveals Beatrice’s genuine feelings, especially when she gets involved in the plan of making Beatrice and Benedick fall in love. But in the most important scenes, Hero prefers to remain silent, as exemplified in act 1, scene 1, when Leonato and Don Pedro crack unpleasant jokes about Hero’s paternity, jokes which are repeated in act 4, scene 6, when Claudio disgraces Hero’s honour. Harry Berger compares Hero’s attitude with Beatrice’s and argues that “Hero’s silence is the correlative of Beatrice’s witty noise” (304). Silent Hero appears as a counterpart of talkative Beatrice, and this is obvious especially in the presence of women, as can be noticed in act 3, scene 1, in Hero’s conversation with Ursula. In this scene, playing the role of Cupid, Hero convinces Beatrice about Benedick’s feelings for her. Consequently, Hero, as the silent and obedient female, performs a gender role expected from her by the patriarchal society. In this way, Hero stands as the opposite of Beatrice, who is talkative and rebellious. Although conceived in binary oppositions, both female characters show parallelism, given the fact that both Hero and Beatrice embody an image constructed by a patriarchal society. Thus, both female characters are tamed in the end in order to become proper wives. Beatrice’s reckless attitude and her witty language suggest her resistance to marriage that she constantly expresses verbally in the play. An example of this is Beatrice’s conversation with her uncle: “Would it not grieve a woman to be overmastered with a piece of valiant dust? To make an account of her life to clod of wayward marl?” (2.1.52-54). Yet, this perception remains only in her witty language, similar to Hero’s silence, and continues until the last scene of the play when she is masked and silenced. In fact, silencing Beatrice is illustrated explicitly through Benedick’s kiss. After Leonato hands Beatrice to Benedick, she does not speak up again for the rest of the play. This

indicates the impact of the second wedding scene and the suppression of her disguise behind her language.

By employing silence and the ways to silence, marriage reinforces, in the end, the notions prevalent in a patriarchal society. Madelon Sprengnether comments on the marriages that occur at the end of Shakespeare's comedies and argues that marriage is perceived as the mediator that stabilizes the patriarchal order. Although this is a highly complicated performance and representation issue, regardless of Beatrice's and Hero's resistance, both heroines are degraded – according to Sprengnether's interpretation of marriage – into supporters of the institution of marriage, despite their individual attitudes. Consequently, the end, as well as the marriage itself, reinforces the patriarchal order. As a highly significant part of the last scene of the play, marriage justifies Hero's disguise. Earlier in the same scene, Leonato instructs the women to be masked: "Well, daughter, and you gentlewomen all,/ Withdraw into a chamber by yourselves,/ And when I send for you, come hither masked" (5.4.10-12). The text, underlining their changed identity, gives the stage direction as "the women masked" alongside the list of the characters that enter the stage in act 6, scene 2, after Benedick's lines. The covering of their faces, which also means disguising their identities, is related to the trick they play on Claudio. In order to convince Claudio that he must pay the price of his defamation of Hero by marrying her supposed cousin, Hero needs to be present at the scene in disguise. Nevertheless, Shakespeare preferred to have Hero, Beatrice, and Margaret wearing masks; however, the directors, in their adaptations, are still in charge, and some choose to mask only Hero and Beatrice, leaving Ursula and Margaret out, as it is stated in the Arden Edition notes to the text. Beyond the practical reason of hiding Hero to fool Claudio in this scene, masking the females in the wedding scene has a metaphorical importance, suggesting their being prepared for a patriarchal order.

The use of the mask, in the play, has already been presented before the second wedding scene related to gender issues. When the mask first appears in the play, its usage signals its importance in

depicting the performance of women as unconventional. The use of the mask in the last scene of the play justifies the construction of the masked dance scene in act 2, scene 1. This scene marks Don Pedro's wooing of Hero on behalf of Claudio. Act 2, scene 1 opens with Beatrice's discussion about the perfect man to marry but also sets up the themes of the play, as well as Beatrice's and Benedick's plot. The masquerade occurs right in the middle of the scene and introduces gender relations in the patriarchal society, with the advantage of the disguise enabling the female characters to renounce the obedient and silent traditional female roles. The stage directions do not provide any information regarding masking when Leonato, Antonio, Beatrice, and Hero enter the stage. Not wearing a mask enables Beatrice to be bold about her perception of gender roles and to practice her witty language. Until the interference of Don Pedro, Claudio, and Benedick, the foursome becomes involved in a conversation that points to the assumed roles which are ascribed to Beatrice and Hero. While Beatrice takes advantage of her witty language to defend herself, Hero again remains silent. For instance, Beatrice rejects bearded men but also humiliates the ones that do not have a beard. As she always tends to play games with words, she uses them to mock herself too as she discusses the beard and its significance. Regarding the beard issue, she concludes that "[h]e that hath a beard is more than a youth, and he that hath no beard is less than a man; and he that is less than a man, I am not for him . . ." (2.1.30-34). Her justification clearly shows us that she has fixed ideas about performative gender roles.

As Beatrice evaluates Benedick on his performances of masculinity, it is obvious that she expects him to meet the norms of masculinity. The beard, moreover, becomes the symbol of masculinity she looks for in a man, which eventually gives the impression that, despite her wit, deep down, she is willing to acquiesce to the patriarchal order. In the next line, Beatrice brings up the idea of hell and her acceptance of the belief that spinsters are doomed to lead the apes in hell. At the same time, she hints that society insists on marriage and on staying in the patriarchal order

without developing feminine power, which could be a threat to a patriarchal society.

Rather than any explicit stage direction, it is the entrance of Don Pedro and his fellow soldiers that signals the beginning of the masquerade. After Leonato's last line, the stage direction tells that "Antonio steps aside, and masks" (2.1.75). It also alludes to the mask in relation to Don Pedro, Claudio, and Benedick; yet the ambiguity regarding the use of masks affects the reading of the scene and of who is masked and who knows whose identity. This confusion regarding the Elizabethan practice of disguise on stage is explained by Peter Hyland in the following terms:

Disguise is largely a matter of what the spectator sees . . . These are all matters specifically located in the performance, not in the script performed. The printed text, which in the case of the vast majority of plays under discussion is all that remains as an indication of both the original script and the original performance, is very often quite unhelpful, usually giving only the briefest of indications. (30)

The notes in the Arden Shakespeare also explain that, although most productions mask both sexes, Renaissance convention required only men to be masked (2.1.78). Nonetheless, Janette Dillon assuredly argues that "[b]oth men and women are masked here . . ." (65). However, Dillon's suggestion regarding the use of masks opens up a discussion on the suspicion of who knows whose identity. She argues that "Ursula knows Antonio, she claims, 'by the wagging of your head' (2.1.115), and is not remotely taken in by his claim to be performing Antonio's mannerisms; Beatrice's mockery of Benedick demonstrates that she sees through his mask, but he cannot be certain that she does . . ." (65). Beyond Dillon's discussion of whether they can differentiate identities through the masks, it is more important to pay attention to how the mask changes Hero's behaviour and feminine attitude as she speaks at last. Although Hero is on the stage as much as Beatrice up until the dance scene, she only utters two short lines; the first line is about Beatrice, and the second one is about Don John. As soon as she

puts on the mask, according to the stage direction, Hero accepts Don Pedro's dance request with a condition: "So you walk softly, and look sweetly, and say nothing, I am yours for the walk . . ." (2.1.77-78). Hero, who is "quiet and demure" (Reiff 139), silences Don Pedro, who is the dominant head of the male soldier group. Next, Hero challenges Don Pedro's male authority by stating "I may say so, when I please" (2.1.81). The conversation between Hero and Don Pedro shocks the readers and/or the audience due to Hero's behaviour so far. Reiff also refers to this scene in order to justify her argument that Hero is more than an obedient female stereotype: ". . . silent Hero proves that she is not a doormat when she speaks to Don Pedro at the masked ball" (141). This scene is also one of a kind in proving Hero's disguise as the proper female and daughter performed when she is accompanied by other characters. She performs a more independent, realistic, and witty feminine role when she is in her personal sphere compared to when she is alone with Don Pedro, as the mask she wears restricts the intervention of patriarchy. This change in Hero's attitude is explained by Meg Twycross and Sarah Carpenter in relation to the role of her mask: "Masking encourages people to abdicate moral responsibility; they use the protection of anonymity to deny not only to others but to themselves the inner truth of guilt. Masks are therefore a deception not only for the spectators, but for the wearers themselves" (306). Hero directs her lines as if trying to shift our attention to her role as a daughter, and opposing the femininity she is expected to perform as defined by society, that is of a silent, sweet and mild young woman.

The mask holds a key position in this masquerade scene to assist the audience in understanding the shifting roles of gender, as well as the repeated anxiety of guessing the identity of the other person. If it is assumed that the disguise the mask provides gives Hero the courage to speak out, then Beatrice's attempt to find out Benedick's real identity can be read as necessary for her if she is to continue to play the witty Beatrice. Yet coming to a decision on the role the mask plays is highly difficult, most probably until the second mask scene, as the masked characters are only present for a

very short time in a limited conversation. In fact, the actual wooing scene of Hero is not even performed on the stage, in parallel to not presenting the marriage ceremony to be completed in the end, since the ceremony is interrupted by Benedick as he proposes to dance. To woo Hero, Don Pedro draws her aside with the words "Speak low, if you speak love" (2.1.79), leaving the reader/audience with the assumption of wooing. Still, based on Hero's limited lines with Don Pedro, we can assume that she would probably be playing a different role than the Hero to whom we are introduced in the first act. Hence, beyond the infidelity and accusation on her honour, it is necessary for Hero to be masked again so as to be taken back to the silent and obedient Hero by means of some sort of ritual.

In addition to the controversy over who is masked, who is not and when, there are no stage directions on the removal of masks. After the dance scene, Borachio's line "And that is Claudio; I know him by his bearing" (2.1.145) gives the sense that they are still masked. However, after Benedick's entrance, it can be assumed that they are all unmasked. Although Hero enters the stage with Don Pedro and Leonato, she does not speak until the end of the first scene of act 2 in which she only talks about her cousin Beatrice, as Hero did in the first scene of the play. Beatrice also continues to use the same witty language. Instead of relying on any action, Beatrice's reliance on her sharp wit and Hero's retreat into the sanctuary of silence hint at their return to their previously chosen roles.

The play presents marriage as an important social convention that has requirements which are exemplified by the mask. The marriage expected in the end has to be a proper match in terms of the social rank of the couples, and, more importantly, it should be in keeping with social conventions. If Beatrice's perspective is adopted, the expected marriage can be described as "the wedding mannerly-modest as a measure, full of state and ancients" (2.1.67-68). Beatrice shifts the attention to the traditional side of marriage. The mask in the final scene is established as decorous by disguising Hero and Beatrice into the female roles they should perform in their marriage. Leonato also makes sure that at

the wedding “all things answer [his] mind” (2.1.333-34), reminding one of the necessity of the proper ceremony. It becomes the duty of the females to convey such necessity. Hero, as a proper daughter “. . . thinks it wrong to rebel fathers and husbands” (306), as Berger claims. Patriarchy constructs the concept of marriage and the role of females within marriage for both Hero and Beatrice, but it partially becomes the females’ responsibility to ensure the proper unfolding not only of the ceremony, but also of the marriage. Furthermore, the marriage ceremony can only be held while the female characters are masked in order to point to the virtue they represent. The mask, representing female virtue, is a form of purification from their sins and flaws and a process of adapting to their role as wives within marriage, as expected by the patriarchal society. The way in which the Elizabethan audience perceived the mask in these particular scenes related to the gender roles can be traced to Hyland’s comment regarding Elizabethan expectations and understandings of disguise: “Thus a costume could generate an ironic relationship between its theatrical employment and what we might think of as its social prehistory, an ambiguous, disturbing and potentially subversive meaning” (35). This perception of the mask draws further attention to Branagh’s directorial choices in his adaptation of the play.

Branagh’s Adaptation: The Veil and Gender Roles

In his 1993 screen adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing*, Branagh reinterprets Shakespeare’s text for a contemporary audience. While bringing the text to the big screen, he retains the play’s emphasis on gender roles as revealed through the use of masks. However, Branagh makes a striking choice of the mask in the wedding scene, and this represents a significant distinction for 20th-century viewers. During the wedding scene, Branagh replaces the mask with a veil to disguise the identity of the women. This, beyond being a director’s choice, brings another meaning not only to the medium of the veil, but also to the function of marriage, by emphasizing the power of the marriage in enhancing patriarchal power. The white lace veil

that Branagh conceals his main female characters under fails in the primary aim of the disguise. The comparatively transparent texture of the veil acts mostly metaphorically by symbolizing their femininity and their entrance in another stage of womanhood as wives. Tamara Agha-Jaffar discusses the different practices and meanings of veiling by pointing out its significance in relation to gender roles. Agha-Jaffar proposes a different perspective on Branagh's choice of the veil during the ceremony. The most significant historical fact that Agha-Jaffar pays attention to is the veil's indication of women's sexual role. To explain her argument, she provides an example from ancient Mesopotamia where "a veiled woman was visibly identifiable as belonging to one man and under his sexual authority and protection . . ." (62). Although she states that "[the] veil defines space and boundaries" (65), depending on the religious perception of the veil, the space and boundaries that Agha-Jaffar refers to are shaped by the patriarchal society. The sexual function of the mask in the Elizabethan era was also discussed by Hailey Bachrach, who indicates that the mask was among the fashion objects of the period (9). Despite the hints to a possible relationship between Beatrice and Benedick prior to the actual plot, and, moreover, in spite of the endless verbal encounters between these two throughout the play, Benedick ends up asking Leonato for permission to marry Beatrice. Furthermore, Leonato performs his patriarchal power over Hero too. He brings Hero forward saying "I do give you her" (5.4.54), claiming her as his possession just as he gives his fortunes along with Hero "take of me my daughter, and with her my fortunes" (2.1.277-78). Instead of perceiving Hero as an individual and as a female, Leonato thinks of her in financial terms. Seeing Hero as an economic component, makes the disguise necessary in assigning Claudio as the new owner.

Reading the veil from Agha-Jaffar's perspective makes the marriage successful for the purpose it serves. More importantly, this makes the understanding of the success of the marriage more explicit compared to the first ceremony. The veil, evidently, signifies Hero's and Beatrice's acquiescence to male authority.

Though the text does not reveal what has happened between Beatrice and Benedick in the past, the success of the marriage can still be declared, in terms of the consummation of the ceremony and of the connotation of the veil. Similarly, regardless of how she is accused of infidelity, Hero is still willing to accept Claudio's authority. Claudio, on the other hand, also unconditionally agrees to marry this supposed cousin even "were she an Ethiop" (5.4.38), and he immediately claims possession of her, "why then she's mine" (5.4.55), which gives him the right to remove the veil from Hero's face. Leonato rejects this, again, to keep Hero's real identity secret until the end of the ceremony: "No, that you shall not till you take her hand/ Before this friar and swear to marry her" (5.4.56-57). This shows how crucial the disguise is for Hero, who must suppress her identity as a female to become Claudio's possession. From Claudio's perspective, the second marriage ceremony is more proper as it ensures the consummation of the marriage. Lisa Hopkins explains this as:

[Claudio] accepts his penance readily, and makes no objection to taking Leonato's supposed niece. . . . Perhaps Claudio's previously evidenced craving for male approval for his marital choice actually works in his favour here: he may well be happier accepting the bride given him by his elders than with the one he chose by himself. (74)

Claudio has a very strong sense of honour and duty that surpasses the love of the opposite sex. We learn this when he states the first time he sees Hero:

When you went onward on this ended action
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.
But now I am returned, and that war-thoughts
Have left their places vacant, in their rooms
Come thronging soft and delicate desires. (1.1.278-284)

In these lines, Claudio clearly presents his motivation for marriage, which he considers an item in his list that he should accomplish. Therefore, beyond falling in love, he accepts the prospect of marriage because it is a responsibility that needs to be fulfilled. This eventually leads to the necessity of marrying a disguised female, who wears a mask in order to embody the expected femininity of the bride. Moreover, this also indicates the coherence of Hero's and Claudio's coupling as satisfying Berger's explanation of the purpose of marriage: "The world must be peopled, and it is disconcerting to be told that marriage is virtue's repentance rather than its reward" (306).

As expanded in the discussion of the second wedding scene so far, if the veil is interpreted as "distinguish[ing] between respectable women and prostitutes" (Agha-Jaffar 62), Hero's innocence is also underlined through her disguise with a veil that symbolizes her virginity. The veil, or the mask as referred to in the text, purifies Hero. As Hero states "And surely as I live, I am a maid" (5.4.64), the undisguised moment denies Hero's death, as well as her infidelity. Yet, to compare the use of the mask and the veil, the concept of innocence comes into prominence – especially with the colour white in the movie adaptation. Dillon's generalization of Shakespeare's use of the mask suggests a slightly different interpretation of the last scene, when referring to the veil as opposed to the mask: "As always in the early Shakespeare, formal mask is a cover for deceit, and that deceit carries with it is a significant threat to life or happiness" (65). Dillon's statement explains the role of the mask in relation to the plot between Hero and Claudio. However, the disguise in the last scene does not work by covering the deceit but rather by preserving Hero's innocence. In this respect, Branagh's preference of the veil points out that the idea of purity and virginity are more explicit rather than the mask as employed within the Elizabethan context, as Dillon suggests in her article. Bachrach also introduces a connection between women and sexuality regarding the use of masks during Elizabethan era (11) as more appropriate to Branagh's choice.

By all means, Branagh's substitution of the veil for the mask transmits the idea of the innocence and virginity of Hero and Beatrice, as well as their willingness to enter the institution of male authority. Although in his article "The Marriage of Shakespeare and Hollywood" Samuel Crowl praises Branagh for being a forerunner of the reawakening of Shakespeare adaptations, he also claims that ". . . Branagh wants his film to create a utopian green world vision based on the powers of imagination and intelligence rather than on social status" (114). However, Crowl leaves out details that lead to important differences in interpretation in relation to the usage and meaning of the veil.

Compared to his choice of the veil in the second wedding scene, Branagh seems to prefer a traditional masquerade scene. In this scene, Branagh takes advantage of using the mask to establish the characters and the themes of the play. In his introduction to the Cambridge edition of the play, John F. Cox places great importance on the performance history of the play in. Moreover, he provides extensive notes for the stage directions for the masked dance scene in act 2, scene 1. As a common motif in Renaissance performances as compared to modern adaptations, the masquerade scene forms one of the most important scenes of the play visually, this being analysed in detail by Catherine Maud Shaw (17-18), based on stage representations, and thematically, by setting the marriages. For Barbara K. Lewalski, "its primary function with reference to theme is to involve almost all the characters in the problems of pretense, deception, and faulty apprehension" (238). For this scene, Branagh aims to create the atmosphere of a carnival in his adaptation. Nevertheless, gender differences, once again, influence the function of masks as preferred by Branagh. While the male characters wear a mask that covers their entire faces and stays fixed, the female characters use hand-held masks that partially cover their face. Thus, the masks used by the female characters stand more metaphorically rather than hiding their identities, and function as a symbol of their submission to patriarchal order. Eventually, Branagh takes advantage of the significance of the mask that is included in the text by Shakespeare to draw attention to the theme of gender roles.

The theme of gender roles resurfaces through marriage as equally significant both in the adaptation and in Shakespeare's text. The ending of the play leads the couples to a happy ending in the form of marriage. However, Claudio and Hero's marriage ceremony is interrupted by Benedick, who expresses his real feelings for Beatrice. Instead of continuing the ceremony, Benedick proposes to dance and have fun. Although Leonato insists that "We'll have dancing afterward" (5.4.118), Benedick wields his male authority in order to dominate Beatrice, who is independent and daringly rejects the idea by insisting "First, of my word! Therefore play, music!" (5.4.119). In her study *The Shakespearean Marriage: Merry Wives and Heavy Husbands*, Lisa Hopkins comments on the ambiguous ending of the play, suggesting that "[n]o children are presaged; no wedding is actually celebrated" (76). She also adds that "*Much Ado About Nothing* offers us perhaps Shakespeare's least qualified vision of mutuality and enrichment in marriage" (76). Still, the ending tends to be romanticized, as Branagh comes up with a group-dancing scene. More importantly, although some studies discuss Beatrice as "remain[ing] indomitable in marriage" (Friedman 350), it is hinted that both couples get married. This is related to the last masked scene of the play that sets the ultimate condition for a marriage. Hopkins mentions this stage of the marriage, stating that "the play itself offers the most nearly complete staging of an actual marriage ceremony to be found in the Shakespearean canon, although it also dramatizes the disturbing ease with which the wedding can slide into its other as first rite of burial and then of birth" (76). Berger establishes the relationship between the use of masks in the scene and "an actual marriage ceremony": "Marriage is a woman's vocation; it is her formal induction into the Men's Club; it is therefore her salvation; to be condemned into everlasting redemption is the fate she was born for" (312). Regardless of the images that Hero and Beatrice have embodied until the end of the play, Berger explains why both couples legally and sexually consummate the marriage, and the mask has prepared both females to assume the role of proper wives. Hero's chastity is ensured within the expectations of the patriarchal

society, and Beatrice is finally silenced by Benedick, turning into an obedient wife as well.

Conclusion

Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* aims to establish an acceptable female role by using Hero and Beatrice as binary oppositions in terms of their performance of femininity. Michael Friedman defines "the characteristics of the virtuous Elizabethan wife" as "chastity, obedience and silence" (361). A reading of the play in the absence of a questioning of the role of the mask would present Hero, even in the first scene of the play, as the perfect example of an Elizabethan wife. However, exemplifying the characteristics of "chastity, obedience and silence" is not merely the true nature of either Beatrice or Hero. With the help of the mask, as part of a process, both women are forced into gaining the qualities of the virtuous Elizabethan wife. The roles of the dutiful daughter and the challenging cousin need to vanish so that the patriarchal order should be reinforced in the end. Ultimately, Shakespeare masks his female characters as a preparatory step for their new role as Elizabethan wives. By ruling out the individuality of Hero and Beatrice, this new role as wives enables them to fit into the stereotypical understanding of women together with the possible performative roles they might adopt based on the expectations of the patriarchal society. Following an anthropological reading of the mask, Hyland also justifies the function of masking the female characters in the play as a form of social disguise (117) for Beatrice and Hero to perform expected gender roles. In his big screen adaptation of the play, Branagh also retains the emphasis on the gender roles through his choice of masks. Hence, Hero and Beatrice both in Shakespeare's text and in Branagh's adaptation are reflected as obedient females who conform to the expectations of the patriarchal society as indicated through the function of masks.

Works Cited

- Agha-Jaffar, Tamara. *Demeter and Persephone: Lessons from a Myth*. McFarland, 2002.
- Bachrach, Hailey. "'What Els Do Maskes, but Maskers Show': Masked Ladies in Shakespeare's Comedies." *Shakespeare*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2023, pp. 8-23.
- Berger, Harry. "Against the Sink-a-Pace: Sexual and Family Politics in *Much Ado About Nothing*." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 3, 1982, pp. 302-313.
- Cox, John F. Introduction. *Much Ado About Nothing*, edited by John f. Cox, Cambridge UP, 1998, pp. 1-85.
- Crowl, Samuel. "The Marriage of Shakespeare and Hollywood: Kenneth Branagh's *Much Ado About Nothing*." *Spectacular Shakespeare: Critical Theory and Popular Cinema*, edited by Courtney Lehmann and Lisa S. Starks, Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2002, pp. 110-123.
- Dillon, Janette. "From Revels to Revelation: Shakespeare and the Mask." *Shakespeare Survey*, vol. 60, 2007, pp. 58-71.
- Friedman, Michael D. "'Hush'd on purpose to grace harmony': Wives and Silence in *Much Ado about Nothing*." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 42, 1990, pp. 350-63.
- Hopkins, Lisa. *The Shakespearean Marriage: Merry Wives and Heavy Husbands*. St. Martin's Press, 1998.
- Hyland, Peter. *Disguise on the Early Modern English Stage*. Routledge, 2016.
- Lewalski, Barbara K. "Love, Appearance and Reality: Much Ado about Something." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1968, pp. 235-51.
- Much Ado About Nothing*. Directed by Kenneth Branagh, MGM, 1993.
- Reiff, Raychel Haugrud. "A Hero, Not a Zero: Taking a Look at Hero in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*." *Journal of the Wooden O Symposium*, vol. 4, 2004, pp. 132-142.

- Shakespeare, William. *Much Ado About Nothing. The Arden Shakespeare*, edited by Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson and David Scott Kastan, Thomson Learning, 2001, pp. 913-940.
- Shaw, Catherine Maud. "The Masque in Shakespeare." 1963. U of British Columbia, PhD dissertation. *Open Collections UBC*. <https://open.library.ubc.ca>.
- Sprengnether, Madelon. "Introduction. The Gendered Subject of Shakespearean Tragedy." *Shakespearean Tragedy and Gender*, edited by Shirley Nelson Garner and Madelon Sprengnether, Indiana UP, 1996, pp. 1-30.
- Twycross, Meg and Sarah Carpenter. *Masks and Masking in Medieval and Early Tudor England*. Routledge, 2017.