Paragons of Virtue with Carnal Appetites: The Women in Othello, Much Ado About Nothing, and Antony and Cleopatra

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A theme that Shakespeare treat several times in his plays is the sexual mistrust of women and their subsequent testing and vindication. It appears that men “perceiving sexuality as power over women, fear its loss through female betrayal,” (VIII, 41). Specifically I am choosing to look at three plays, Othello, Much Ado About Nothing, and Antony and Cleopatra, in order to examine the different ways in which females in these plays, Desdemona, Hero, and Cleopatra, cope with the male insecurities that they are confronted with. In so doing, I hope to point out that Shakespeare’s reasoning in continually bringing up the gender struggle. Which is, in my definition, that he is actually arguing for male-female equality in love, marriage, and the marriage bed.

The male insecurities seem to stem from their fear of a feminine sexual prowess in each of the plays that I have chosen to analyze. In Desdemona’s own veiw, mens misperceptions of women are “horrible fancies,” projections of their own worst fears and feelings, (Iv.ii.26). This fear of failure perhaps comes from the male anxiety that if he doesn’t please her in bed he has failed her and then in “his suspicion that he has wronged her…he expects her revenge to take the form of sexual betrayal,” (IV, 591). In Othello, Othello is afraid that in marrying a younger women and also because of his “blackness” that his young wife will grow to despise him. Othello’s anxieties about marriage are then fully realized when he believes that he is being cuckolded. He has all along feared that “we can call these delicate creatures ours/ And not thei appetites,” (III.iii.270). Early in the play he commented on his attraction to Desdemona and how he was fighting it because he didn’t want to give in to his baser elements. Desdemona, on the other hand, is more than eager to enjoy her conjugal rights. Othello’s fear, then, seems to come from his worry that once she has enjoyed the marriage bed, Desdemona will use the act of sex against him, either to manipulate him or to cuckold him. When Iago then offers insinuations that
Desdemona is being unfaithful and proof in the handkerchief Othello immediately accepts what Iago is saying because of his previously held convictions about women.

These convictions are his downfall in that he adulates Desdemona as beautiful and pure, holding her up to the romantic ideals of love, and then he cannot combine this ideal with the physical nature of sex. For a woman to have sex is for her to be a prostitute like Bianca. Othello’s fantasy of Desdemona puts her on a pedestal of beauty, purity and chastity, but when he is actually married to her the pedestal disappears to be replaced with a bed. When the image is shattered, Othello doesn’t know what to believe about Desdemona which seems to be why he so easily falls victim to Iago’s lies, since they do, at least, tell him what to believe.

In Claudio’s case, the fear of making a wrong step in getting married is even more pronounced. He can’t even propose himself, but first must get support from Benedick and Don Pedro. Claudio even has Don Pedro do the actual courting of Hero. Claudio was so cautious about committing himself to marriage and giving up his masculine companionships that he seemed almost eager to grasp on to the idea that Hero was unchaste. I believe that Claudio’s insecurity stems, like Othello’s, from his inability to equate sexual relationships with romantic love. Janice Hays makes the point that “It thus appears that Claudio is tryign to defend himself against a sudden surge of sexuality by being very careful to do the right thing, to be certain that the proposed marriage is a safe one,” (V, 112).

Claudio views Hero as pure and chaste and appears to be marrying her mainly for the advantages that it will bring him. He regards her as a possession that he is buying from her father, and along with her he will receive all of Leonato’s lands and possessions. It seems to me that this marriage is one of convenience, set up and arranged by Claudio’s superiors. Hero is a possession to be traded and once the proposal has been accepted, in effect, she already belongs to Claudio. Thus, when he believes that she has betrayed him he flies into a rage, feeling that his manhood has been insulted. In the wedding scene when
he holds her up to public shame he uses the language of romantic love to accuse her. The terms of romantic love, however, include a “revulsion against sexuality” and so by saying how he loved her Claudio simply provides more evidence of his own fear and abhorrence of such carnality,” (III, 63).

For Claudio then it has been confirmed that even though the female may appear beautiful and virtuous, she will always prove to be a whore and seek out other men to satisfy her supposedly insatiable sexual desires. “The ease indeed, the alacrity, with which Leonato, Claudio, and the Prince seize on Hero’s guilt conforms what they already suspect and what they seem happy to suspect,” (I, 123). Proving women as whores simply validates the men’s sense of superiority to them.

Hearkening back to Othello’s view on women shows that this conventional wisdom that women will all betray you is pervasive. Othello also first idealizes Desdemona as pure, as Claudio does with Hero, but then cannot accept the possibility of her having a carnal nature. Othello expects Desdemona to betray him and when Iago says she has, Othello is more than ready, almost eager even, to accept it. Thus, Othello and Claudio seem to think alike in their views on women. However as Gayle Green points out, “whether adulating them as goddesses or reviling them as whores, their generalizations tell us more about themselves, then about the women they are describing,” (IV, 588). And this is true in that when the men express their views on women they are displaying more about their own fears and inadequacies then about the actuality of the woman.

Which brings me to the perceptions of the final male to be analyzed. Antony, it seems, can also not accept Cleopatra’s carnality. He, like the other men, becomes very jealous at even the thought of another man possessing her sexually. However, one thing that Antony has to deal with that Claudio and Othello don’t is that his lover is a Queen, and thus his social equal. This combined with the knowledge that she is as experienced in the bedchamber as he, makes Antony fear her power over him all the more. Antony’s anxieties about himself, then, seem to flow from his fear that Cleopatra is making him into a
slave of passion and he is disgracing his honor and previous victories in the manly acts of war. Indeed this can be seen even in the first scene when the soldiers introduce the audience to Antony and Cleopatra, offering their own opinion that though Antony was the greatest of men he has fallen and become something abhorrent. William Rosen wrote that Philo, the soldier, finds Antony so repellent because he cannot understand Antony’s “abnegation of military discipline, and escape from duty and honor to a private world,” (IX, 166). In any case, in his disgust Philo introduces Antony with the lines, “Take but good note, and you shall see in him,/  The triple pillar of the world transform’d/  Into a strumpet’s fool,” (I.i.10-12).

The play Antony and Cleopatra, mainly contend with the battle between the public political world and the private romantic world. This battle is nowhere more apparent in Antony himself and his actions are dictated by what force is acting on him strongest at the time. For his political power he married Octavia, but almost immediately afterwards decides to satisfy his private desires and return to Cleopatra.

Antony is torn between the two worlds and in the end he chooses Cleopatra and love, even though he still cannot accept her as his political equal. This is evident in his rage over Cleopatra permitting the ambassador of Caesar to kiss her hand. His anger comes from his insecurity that she does have the power as Queen to switch sides at any point and ally herself with Caesar against him. When you come right down to it though, Antony’s main fear seems to be that Cleopatra does not love him as much as he loves her. He loves then, at the end, the romanticized woman, but is intimidated by the power of the Queen combined with the sexual power that she holds over him. This fear of sexual entrapment and also debilitation are evident when Antony says, “These strong Egyptian fetter I must break/ Or lose myself in dotage,” (I.ii.11-118). This also goes back to the soldier’s comments on Antony, it proves that he himself fears the loss of his masculine honor as well.
Which is basically how it goes with Claudio and Othello—they love the romanticized woman but fear the actuality of sexual intercourse with said paragon. This also brings me back to my main point, which is to show that Shakespeare was maybe hinting that the male and female relationships should be equalized. This theory can be seen in how the male’s anxieties are countered by the female’s actual faithfulness. Thus, it appears to me that Shakespeare’s goal in at least these three plays was to show that the male had no real cause for alarm and should have been able to accept his wife and enjoy her equal companionship in everything. Irene Dash also theorizes that Shakespeare shows how “men refuse to relinquish power…they are still afraid of living with an equal. [Shakespeare] reasons for a sexual equality that will free both men and women to enjoy the full value of life,” (II, 5).

In Othello especially, Desdemona seems to desire this intimacy on all levels. Once she has her elopement validated by the government, she refuses to be parted from her new husband. Moreover, she cannot conceive of ever betraying Othello as she discusses with Emilia. Finally, it is in her death that her faithful nature can be seen clearly. Through her life and even in her death, Desdemona makes excuses for Othello’s violent treatment of her. “She is so innocent, that not only can she not believe herself suspected, but she cannot conceive the existence of guilt in others,” (VI, 178).

It is Emilia in the end that exonerates her mistress from all crime. Though Desdemona may seem weak in this regard, the only reason for her weakness in marriage is because Othello never allows her to be his equal. Since he never accepts her as both his pure wife and his sexual partner she cannot gain any ground on which to hold enough power over him to convince him of her innocence. The only real power that she does hold over him is her unbreakable love. When Othello realizes the crime he has committed he looks at her and proclaims that when he dies and ascends to Heaven, one look from her will send him straight to Hell. Not because she will be accusatory but because she will hold such forgiveness and love in her expression that his crime will seem all the more enormous. It does seem, especially in this play,
that Shakespeare questions why “women are always agents of giving and sacrifice and men the receivers. Is it too much to hope that a male could sacrifice himself for a woman?” (V, 114).

In the case of Claudio and Hero in Much Ado About Nothing, the reaction of Hero to Claudio’s accusations is basically the same as Desdemona’s. Hero offers some weak protests which make no impression and then faints. With the ploy of a fake death, instigated by the priest, the hope is to make Claudio realize his mistake and remember how much he loves Hero. Unfortunately this doesn’t happen. When Claudio hears of Hero’s death, he is basically uncaring and seems to consider it divine judgment on a sinner. Othello had basically the same reaction after Desdemona’s death when Emilia tells him he has done wrong. He argues that he has done justice. Claudio and Othello then, agree that the lustful women’s deaths were justice and they were righteous in their actions. It is only when given proof of the innocence of both Desdemona and Hero that the men repent what they have done. In Othello’s case he kills himself, but in Much Ado About Nothing, Claudio performs penance and agrees to marry Hero’s cousin without complaint or argument. It is when the true Hero unveils herself that she has the chance to ‘rub Claudio’s nose in it,’ as it were. And she does so with her comment about the falsity of her death being equal with the falsity of his love:

Hero: When I lived I was you other wife
And when you loved you were my other husband.
Claudio: Another Hero!
Hero: Nothing certainer.
      One Hero died defiled; but I do live
And surely as I live, I am a maid. (V.iv.60-64).

The contrast produced between “lived” and “loved” goes to show that his “love” was no more real than her “death.” This statement of Hero’s basically sums up the role of marriages of convenience in 16th Century society. Hero points out how arranged marriages lack a genuine attachment from both parties and an equality in all other things. If the chastity of the bride is so important, why aren’t the groom’s sexual activities taken into account as well? So when Claudio cries, “Another Hero!” he is right because
this new Hero will never again trust as easily as she did before. “Nothing is “certainer” to Hero than that although she was defiled by slander, her virtue has triumphed over all efforts—especially Claudio’s—to kill it.” (--------). Her emphatic assertion of her virginity pronounces Claudio’s former guilt. Finally the woman has a moment of advantage and she uses it. Thus Hero is stronger in her attitude towards Claudio than Desdemona ever was to Othello.

In these two plays Shakespeare has disproved the advisability of both elopement/marriage of love and an arranged marriage. In both cases the men could not rid themselves of their male insecurities about power loss and so the marriages are failures and the females suffer for it.

In Antony and Cleopatra, I would argue that once again the female suffers for the male’s inadequacies. Cleopatra simply wants Antony to accept the duality of her nature—woman and Queen. She is his equal in every sense, they are both experienced in the intricacies of politics and in the arts of lovemaking. However, Antony constantly questions her loyalty. When he finds her speaking with Caesar’s ambassador he flies into a rage and insults her viciously. In response to this Cleopatra who had simply been acting in her Queenly capacity immediately reverts to being “just a women…suppressing her political self,” out of love for Antony, (II, 236). The final time that Antony accuses her of being a whore she flees from his presence and fakes her own death. In going along with the other two plays, Antony should have been satisfied and even pleased that justice had been enacted, but he doesn’t. He is immediately remorseful with no proof to convince him that Cleopatra was faithful. Othello and Claudio both needed proof to convince them that they were wrong and of the female’s loyalty. Antony, on the other hand, seems to need no proof, which is indeed proof of his own love. He reacted to the possibility of Cleopatra’s disloyalty simply because he felt betrayed. But with her death he sees clearly that without Cleopatra his life means nothing. He has lost all honor as a soldier, which he feared, and now in losing
Cleopatra he has lost all. Thus, in Cleopatra’s death it seems that Antony finally accepts her in all her parts and desires to follow after her as a husband to the wedding bed.

When he bungles his suicide attempt and is informed that Cleopatra is not actually dead there are not even then any recriminations directed at her for her previous lie. Antony is content merely to die with her near and ask of her that “she remember him for what was noblest in him,” (VII, 165). In dying though, Antony leaves Cleopatra without male support, which she needed to keep control over the armies, as this was still considered a man’s realm. So it is that she suffers over Antony’s death because she has been bereft of his political power as well as his love. When Cleopatra cannot “play” Caesar as she did with other men she kills herself in order to follow the man who she loved and who loved her. It has been written that “Antony becomes the symbol of the height of her power, a reminder of past glories which she uses as a spur to drive her on to death,” (XIII, 150). Which is, I imagine, how Antony would have wanted it to end for Cleopatra, as he was so hung up on his own past glories, having her die with him as her past glory would be a fitting tribute.

In the end though, this relationship is also a failure like the others because the two could not make it work in life. Antony’s insecurities ruled him until his death and so only in death could the two transcend their problems and be one together.

In conclusion, by showing how none of these relationships work—a arranged marriage, love-match, and adulterous passion—Shakespeare seems, to me, to be commenting on the state of marriage in general in his century. With the examples given he has striven to show that due to the male’s anxieties about women and their sexual proclivities, marriages fail. This seems to be because of “the idelas themselves, that man’s woth is contained in his ‘honor’ and women’s in her ‘chastity,’” (IV, 588). It is only in the release of these ideals, I feel, that Shakespeare is offering and sort of hope for the future of marriage. And it can only come, he seems to be saying, when men accept the two facets of womankind—purity and
sensuality, and thus accept the women’s right to be herself and trust in her—can they enjoy a truly loving and equal relationship.