‘What a Hero Hadst Thou Been:’ Shakespeare’s Herculean ‘Hero’

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This essay reconsiders Hero’s role in *Much Ado About Nothing* through the mythic lens of Hercules and Omphale, arguing that Shakespeare transforms the classical paradigm of heroism from masculine conquest to feminine endurance. While feminist critics have often dismissed Hero as passive and submissive, her apparent silence and death instead echo the labours of Hercules, particularly his feminized servitude under Omphale and his death and resurrection. Drawing on intertextual parallels with *Alcestis* and the myth of Hercules’ death, I show that Hero, rather than Benedick or Don Pedro, completes the true ‘Herculean labour’ of reconciliation by restoring love between herself and Claudio and between Beatrice and Benedick. Her endurance, humility, and self-revelation at the play’s end redefine the nature of heroism and virtue within Shakespearean comedy. Through this reconfiguration, *Much Ado About Nothing* becomes a study of gender inversion and the redemptive power of patience: Hero’s symbolic labours reveal that moral and emotional constancy, not martial strength, constitutes the highest form of heroism. In transforming Hercules into Hero, Shakespeare reimagines classical myth as a vehicle for feminist and ethical renewal.

Keywords: Shakespeare; Hercules; Omphale; feminism; masculinity; gender

Introduction

Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing* has reached a sense of timelessness. Ever since its initial premiere in 1600, the play has been adapted countless times throughout the centuries. The relationship between Beatrice and Benedick is especially noteworthy, as it later became an archetypal trope defined by romance authors as a ‘love-hate’ relationship.[1] In fact, modern literary critics often argue that their relationship is so well-developed and so influential that it manages to overshadow the other major plotline, namely Claudio’s wooing of Hero.[2] Feminist critics often view Hero in a negative light, as unlike her rebellious cousin Beatrice, she is portrayed as a much more conventional female character that meets the expectations of a

patriarchal society. Nadine Page points out that Hero's complete obedience to her father's wishes in marriage, her modest and restrained speech, and her acceptance of Claudio's severe public repudiation are consistent with Elizabethan societal expectations of female chastity, passivity, and subservience.[3] This sentiment is echoed decades later by Michael D. Friedman, who describes Hero as a silent and obedient figure, and contends that these traits position her as the 'ideal' wife in Elizabethan society.[4] Similarly, Harry Berger states that Hero's male-dominated submissiveness reinforces the idea of patriarchal control.

Although Hero is seemingly a passive figure, her role in the play is much more important than meets the eye. Rachel Reiff argues that Hero is the first to notice Beatrice's feelings for Benedick because she is able to identify 'Signoir Mountano' as 'Signoir Benedick of Padua', and her short speech showcases her consideration for her cousin.[5] Reiff hints at the idea that Hero's silence is a thematic sacrifice, as although she is absent from the stage for the large part of the play, she is the most 'noted' or talked about character, thus making up for the 'nothing-noting' pun in the play's title.[6] Berger points out that Hero shows a 'surge of spirit' during the masked ball scene with Don Pedro, therefore she doesn't completely obey her father's wishes and is ready to become an independent woman.[7]

However, previous scholars arguing for Hero's agency as an independent woman have all failed to acknowledge the 'Hero-hero' pun in her name. Although some scholars have pointed out her name is possibly a reference to Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* and perhaps even Ovid's *Heroides*,[8] Shakespeare makes it clear that he is punning Hero's name with the noun 'hero:' 'One Hero died defiled, but I do live' (5.1.65);[9] 'O Hero, what a Hero hadst thou been' (4.1.105). I would like to suggest that Hero's passivism is Shakespeare's attempt to redefine masculinity and traditional notions of heroism. The key term here is Hercules, as he is the archetypal hero.

Obviously, Hercules is a man in classic Hellenistic mythology, not a woman. Yet, in the myth of Omphale, Hercules assumed the gender role of a woman. Hercules, who took punishment for killing his friend Iphitus in a fit of rage, was ordered by the Oracle of Delphi to be sold into slavery for a year. He was bought by Queen Omphale of Lydia, who amused herself by reversing their traditional gender roles. She dressed Hercules in female clothing, made him perform domestic tasks like spinning wool.

In what follows, I will in my essay delve into Shakespeare's mythical allusions to Hercules and Omphale in *Much Ado About Nothing* and illustrate how the allusion sets the stage for Hero's transformation into Hercules. I will then demonstrate Hero's unconventional heroism and why and how she is Hercules transformed. At stake in reading Hero as a Herculean figure is nothing less than a revaluation of gender and heroism in Shakespearean comedy. The Hercules whom Elizabethan audiences inherited was already fractured between the poles of brute strength and comic servitude: the lion-slayer who, in his year of bondage to Queen Omphale, exchanged his club for a distaff. This paradox of the masculine hero performing feminine labour provides the mythic ground for Shakespeare's exploration of how virtue, endurance, and agency can take forms unrecognized by patriarchal ideals. To read Hero as Hercules is therefore to see her 'silence' not as submission but as an emotional trial comparable to Hercules' own labours.

'Manhood is Melted into Curtsies:' Omphale and the Feminine Hercules

Many modern feminist critics of Shakespeare tend to see elements of misogyny in his portrayals of women's relationship with their husbands.[10] This view is often exemplified by Katherine's closing speech in The Taming of the Shrew, where, despite her avowal of submission as a dutiful wife, she still manages to command the stage. Yet, Shakespeare clearly condemns

traditional notions of masculine heroism in his plays. In *Taming of The Shrew*, the absurd hypermasculine figure Petruchio is being compared with 'Alcides (Hercules)', and his feat of taming or conquering Kate is compared with Hercules' labours. Boose interprets Petruchio's ritualized public humiliation of Kate during the wedding scene as the mimicking and exaggeration of traditional patriarchal ceremonies.[11] His antics (arriving late, wearing absurd clothes, violently kissing Kate) transform the marriage into a parodic performance, which ultimately mocks the institution itself.[12]

Shakespeare' *Othello* is very much an exemplification of Hercules' dilemma: the hero is able to make peace through violence, yet he is unapt to lead his people in a time of peace. Othello is a quintessential warrior, a man whose identity is forged in the violence and honor of the battlefield. In a time of peace, the very traits that made him a successful general—decisiveness, suspicion, absolute loyalty—become liabilities in the peaceful and political spheres. A.C. Bradley famously puts it, '[Othello is] trustful, open, passionate', but 'not introspective'.[13] In this reading, Othello is like other classical or Renaissance figures (e.g., Coriolanus or Hercules) whose martial virtues become tragic flaws in a time of peace. Scholars liken Othello to a Herculean figure whose glory belongs to an earlier age of mythic conquest.[14] In peacetime, his strength becomes madness. This is echoed by the famous line 'Othello's occupation's gone!' (3.3.357), which marks not just the end of his literal occupation as the Venetian general, but the collapse of his heroic ethos. In *Macbeth*, manly action is associated with aggressiveness, as Lady Macbeth characterizes violent regicide as an exemplification of heroic manhood: 'When you durst do it, then you were a man; / And to be more than what you were, you would / Be so much more the man' (1.7.56-58).

Shakespeare's criticism of the hypermasculine and the Herculean is very much apparent in the text of *Much Ado About Nothing* as well. In the play, Borachio speaks of a shaven Hercules: 'the shaven Hercules in the smirched worm-eaten / tapestry, where his codpiece seems as massy as his / club' (3.3.136-38). Otto Kurz, in his essay *Shakespeare and the Shaven Hercules*, examines the reference to the 'shaven Hercules' that has troubled Shakespeare scholars for years. He critiques previous interpretations, which suggested Shakespeare either confused Hercules with Samson, or perhaps Shakespeare meant 'bald' rather than 'shaven'.[15] Kurz argues that Shakespeare was likely referring to a tapestry featuring a shaved Hercules dressed in 16th-century fashion (rather in nudity and with a beard as traditionally depicted), which aligns with the artistic practice of dressing up biblical and mythological figures anachronistically in contemporary clothing during Shakespeare's times.[16] He was able to identify the tapestry that Shakespeare was referring to, which is a Franco-Flemish tapestry from the early 16th century, known as the *Death of Hercules* tapestry in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This, he suggests, demonstrates Shakespeare's awareness of artistic trends of his time as well as his historical distance from the classical age.[17]

Andrew B. Crichton builds upon Otto Kurz's discovery of the tapestry depicting a beardless Hercules but moves beyond it, analyzing how Shakespeare uses the imagery of beards and Hercules to develop themes of masculinity and transformation.[18] The aftermath of this transformation is Benedick. His metamorphosis in *Much Ado About Nothing* mirrors the myth of Hercules, particularly through the symbolic act of shaving his beard: 'Indeed he looks younger than he did, by the loss of a beard' (3.2.45-46). The act of shaving represents his shift from a boastful bachelor to a matured man embracing his love for Beatrice.[19]

For Beatrice, the act of shaving is a sign of youthfulness and femininity. When Lenato asks Beatrice if she wants a husband with no beard, Beatrice replies: 'What should I do with him? Dress him in my / apparel and make him my waiting gentlewoman?' (2.1.34-35). Like Omphale, Beatrice here emasculates her own Hercules. Benedick also invokes the myth of Omphale in his insulting speech towards Beatrice: 'She would have / made Hercules have turned spit, yea, and have cleft / his club to make the fire, too. Come, talk not of her. / You shall find her the infernal Ate in good apparel' (2.1.249-53). McEachern explains that Benedick's reference to Hercules having 'turned a spit' alludes to what was considered the most effeminate and menial kitchen labour in the Elizabethan period—turning the roasting spit over the fire.[20] He adds that Hercules' club was a massive and a phallic one, and that splitting it into firewood would have been both physically and symbolically emasculating. McEachern states that 'the misogyny of Benedick's caricatures increases as he elaborates them'.[21] Robert K. Root concurs with this interpretation of 'turned a spit' and suggests that the image refers to Hercules performing women's work while serving Queen Omphale.[22]

Through this mythic framework, Shakespeare not only feminizes Hercules but also redefines the feminine as a space of agency. In the myth, Omphale's control over Hercules destabilizes and subverts the binary opposition between master and servant, conqueror and captive, femininity and masculinity. In the play, Beatrice occupies this same paradoxical position. Her sharp wit and assertive voice invert the expected submission of women in Elizabethan drama. She, too, undergoes a transformation when confronted with Hero's disgrace: 'O, that I were a man' (4.1.317). This is especially noteworthy because in the myth of Omphale and Hercules, not only does Hercules dress up as a woman and perform tasks traditionally

associated with femininity, but the queen herself would also wear Hercules' lion pelt and swing his club to mock Hercules.

This is followed by Benedick's remark 'But manhood is melted into curtsies' (4.1.333). Critchon argues that Derrida's philosophy is helpful in understanding the metaphors at play here since Derrida argues that any form of dichotomy (such as gender) is inherent impure, they are only a 'series of substitution'.[23] Deconstructionist as he might be, there is undoubtedly a notion of meta-theatricality here since female characters are played by men during the Elizabethan period; thus, 'that I were a man' and 'manhood is melted into curtsies' are both self-referential.

Indeed, Shakespeare carefully 'deconstructs' traditional understanding of masculinity and femininity in the text of *Much Ado About Nothing* by alluding to the myth of Hercules and Omphale. However, the real Herculean Hero in the play is still veiled and hidden, like the elephant in the room, waiting to be addressed.

The Hero's Labour

In 'Dying to Live in Much Ado About Nothing', Jonathan Bate observes the pun in Hero's name as an allusion to Ovid's *Heroides*, noting that she symbolically 'dies' like many of Ovid's tragic heroines.[24] Showerman, by contrast, contends that Hero's prototype is Bandello's Fenicia.[25] Although Showerman concedes that her name bears thematic relevance to the play, he rejects any association between Hero's identity and Ovidian heroism. Yet both critics overlook a crucial point: Hero is the one who actually accomplishes the 'Herculean labour' in the play.

In the second act of *Much Ado About Nothing*, Don Pedro, who, after being rejected by Beatrice, claims that he will now take on one of Hercules's labours:

> I will, in the interim,

> undertake one of Hercules' labours, which is to bring
> Signor Benedick and the Lady Beatrice into a
> mountain of affection th'one to th'other. I
> would fain have it a match, and I doubt not but to
> fashion it, if you three will but minister such
> assistance as I will give you direction. (2.1.355-61)

This 'Hercules' labours' of Don Pedro is rather a Cupidean one, as it is a love's labour that would eventually pair up Beatrice with Benedick. The prince Don Pedro, along with Leonato and Claudio, stage a conversation where Benedick can overhear them talking about how Beatrice is desperately in love with him:

> PRINCE. Do so. Farewell.
> Come hither, Leonato. What was it you told me of
> today, that your niece Beatrice was in love with
> Signior Benedick?
> CLAUDIO. O, ay. *Aside to Prince.* Stalk on, stalk on; the
> fowl sits.—I did never think that lady would have
> loved any man.
> LEONATO. No, nor I neither, but most wonderful that
> she should so dote on Signior Benedick, whom she
> hath in all outward behaviors seemed ever to
> abhor.
> BENEDICK. *aside* Is 't possible? Sits the wind in that
> corner? (2.3.94-106)

Benedick is easily gulled and madly falls in love with Beatrice. And later in the succeeding act, Beatrice is deceived by Hero and Ursula when she overhears a conversation about Benedick's supposed love for Beatrice:

> HERO. Now, Ursula, when Beatrice doth come,
> As we do trace this alley up and down,
> Our talk must only be of Benedick.
> When I do name him, let it be thy part
> To praise him more than ever man did merit.
> My talk to thee must be how Benedick
> Is sick in love with Beatrice. Of this matter
> Is little Cupid's crafty arrow made,
> That only wounds by hearsay. Now begin,
> For look where Beatrice like a lapwing runs
> Close by the ground, to hear our conference.
>
> *Enter Beatrice, who hides in the bower.*
>
> URSULA. *aside to Hero* The pleasant'st angling is to see the fish
> Cut with her golden oars the silver stream
> And greedily devour the treacherous bait.
> So angle we for Beatrice, who even now
> Is couchèd in the woodbine coverture.
> Fear you not my part of the dialogue.
> HERO. *aside to Ursula* Then go we near her, that her ear lose nothing
> Of the false sweet bait that we lay for it. —

They walk near the bower. (3.1.16-34)

Here, Hero is taking on the same task as that of Don Pedro, which according to him is 'one of Hercules' labours' (2.1.356).

One may argue that Hero, like Claudio, Leonato, and Ursula, is simply 'minister(ing) such assistance' for Don Pedro's Hercules' labour. And yet, Hero is the one who actually completes Hercules' labour of matchmaking at the very end of the play. After Hero has wedded Claudio, Beatrice and Benedick's marriage seemed impossible as neither of the love-hate duo is willing to admit their love to each other: BENEDICK. 'Tis no such matter. Then you do not love me?' / BEATRICE. 'No, truly, but in friendly recompense' (5.4.86-87). Hero quickly realizes their situation and proceeds to steal a paper from Beatrice and shows it to the assembly, paving the way for their marriage:

> HERO. And here's another,
> Writ in my cousin's hand, stol'n from her pocket,
> Containing her affection unto Benedick. *She shows a paper*.
> BENEDICK. A miracle! Here's our own hands against
> our hearts. Come, I will have thee, but by this light
> I take thee for pity.
> BEATRICE. I would not deny you, but by this good day, I
> yield upon great persuasion, and partly to save your
> life, for I was told you were in a consumption.
> BENEDICK. Peace! I will stop your mouth. *They kiss*. (5.4.93-102)

Therefore, Hero is the one who undertook 'one of Hercules' labours' and, unlike Don Pedro, she actually completes the task successfully, thereby uniting Benedick with Beatrice.

But what is this 'Hercules' labour' alluding to? None of Hercules' famous twelve labours involves matchmaking or the unification of separated lovers. Robert K. Root argues that Shakespeare's invocations of Hercules' labours were always specific, hence it would be strange for Shakespeare to allude to Hercules in such a generic way.[26] Root here is severely underestimating Shakespeare's knowledge of the Greek classics. Claire McEachern and Johnathan Bate have both suggested that this labour of uniting lovers likely refers to one of Euripides' tragicomedies, *Alcestis.*[27]

Euripides' *Alcestis* is set in Thessaly, at the palace of King Admetus, who has been granted a special favor by the god Apollo. In return for the king's hospitality during his divine punishment, Apollo convinces the Fates to allow Admetus to avoid his destined death—if someone else will die in his place. His wife, Alcestis, agrees to take his place, willingly offering her life so that he may live. She dies soon after, leaving Admetus overcome with grief and guilt. The house falls into mourning. Soon, Hercules arrives at the palace and, unaware of Alcestis's death, gets drunk and irritates the servants. Admetus, upholding the sacred code of hospitality, chooses not to burden his guest with the truth and hosts Hercules as if nothing has happened. When Hercules later learns what has occurred, he is deeply embarrassed by his behaviors. In response, he vows to repay his host by descending to Alcestis's tomb and wrestles with Death (Thanatos) to bring back Alcestis. Hercules triumphs and returns with a veiled woman who cannot speak for three days. He offers her to Admetus, who initially refuses, declaring that he cannot accept another woman so soon after Alcestis's death. Only when Hercules reveals the truth—that the woman is Alcestis restored to life—does Admetus rejoice.

McEachern notices the play's parallel with the Claudio-Hero plot—both heroines return from death, and are veiled after their ultimate resurrection.[28] He writes in his introduction to the Arden edition of *Much Ado About Nothing* that:

> …like Admetus, Claudio must accept his second bride without seeing her face, a stipulation that reverses the terms of his initial error (in which he identified a woman by outward signs rather than inner conviction), and forces him to have faith where once he lacked it. Hero's mock funeral, in turn, recalls and prefigures other of Shakespeare's mock deaths, such as Juliet's or Helena's or Hermione's, in which heroines undergo a trial passage to the underworld. Euripides' Alcestis is also structurally similar to Much Ado in its use of comic scenes (those of Hercules' drunken festivities during the heroine's funeral) to counterpoint the apparent tragedy and hint at the comic ending to come.[29]

Showerman is able to identify Shakespeare' source material as the Latin translation of *Alcestis* by the Scottish Latinist George Buchanan, who published the text in 1557 in Paris.[30] The text was published again in 1567, this time in a collection of Greek dramas.

Bate's analysis of Euripides' tragicomedy's influence on *Much Ado About Nothing* is for the large part on point. Like Hercules, Claudio and Don Pedro must first carry out the mourning rites at Hero's tomb. Both Hero and Queen Alcestis appear veiled when presented to Claudio and Admetus during the final scene. The two men, humbled and remorseful for having been so quick to relinquish their wives, are bound by honor to accept the veiled women in marriage without knowing their true identities. Only when the veils are lifted do they realize that the women they are receiving are the same ones they had wronged.

Hercules' unexpected arrival at Thessaly is a classic example of *deus ex machina*. However, if Bate's analysis is correct, then Hercules's *deus ex machina* is certainly absent from

Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing.* Showerman suggests that Benedick fills the role of Hercules since his transformation from an unserious man into a heroic figure parallels with that of the drunken and somewhat annoying figure of Euripides' Hercules who later vows to take back Alcestis.[31] It is Benedick who takes on the Herculean labour of confronting death by challenging a duel with Claudio, who is responsible for spreading the slander against Hero and causing her apparent death. This Heroic image of Benedick is further developed when Beatrice, through her taunting demand that he avenges Hero's disgrace, alludes to the courage and valor traditionally associated with Hercules:

> But manhood is melted into curtsies, valour into
> compliment, and men are only turned into tongue,
> and trim ones, too. He is now as valiant as Hercules
> that only tells a lie and swears it. I cannot be a man
> with wishing, therefore I will die a woman with
> grieving (4.1.333-38)

However, Showerman's argument is unconvincing since he now suggests Claudio here fills the role of Thanatos instead of Admetus. Indeed, Don John is the main culprit behind Hero's slanders, not Claudio. If we were to follow Showerman's analysis, then Don John would almost certainly fill the role of Thanatos. It is also not Benedick who restores Hero back to life, but Hero herself.

The argument that I am advancing is that because the Herculean *deus ex machina* is absent from *Much Ado About Nothing*, Hero herself becomes a stand-in or supplement for Hercules. In Euripides' *Alcestis*, it is Hercules who unmasks the resurrected Alcestis:

> HERACLES Put forth your hand and take this woman.

ADMETUS (turning aside his head) It is held out.

HERACLES As if you were cutting off a Gorgon's head!

Do you hold her?

ADMETUS Yes.

HERACLES Then keep her. You shall not deny that the son of Zeus is a grateful guest. (Takes off the veil and shows ALCESTIS.) Look at her, and see if she is not like your wife. And may joy put an end to all your sorrow!

ADMETUS (drops her hand and starts back) O Gods! What am I to say? Unhoped-for wonder! Do I really look upon my wife? Or I am snared in the mockery of a God?[32]

In *Much Ado About Nothing,* however, it is Hero herself who lifts up her own veil:

CLAUDIO. *to Hero*

Give me your hand before this holy friar.

They take hands.

I am your husband, if you like of me.

HERO. And when I lived, I was your other wife,

And when you loved, you were my other husband.

She unmasks.

CLAUDIO. Another Hero!

HERO. Nothing certainer.

One Hero died defiled, but I do live,

And surely as I live, I am a maid. (5.4.59-66)

Like Euripides' Hercules, Hero is the one who reveals the true identity of the veiled woman, that of course being herself. It is also Hero who completes both the 'labour' of matchmaking (Benedick-Beatrice) and the reunification of separated lovers (Claudio-Hero), not Benedick. She 'resurrects' herself and lifts up her own veil. Therefore, Hero completes Hercules' labour and becomes a Herculean hero.

Hero's Death and Resurrection

Hero's 'death' invokes yet another myth of Hercules, which is the Death of Hercules. I have previously stated that Shakespeare alludes to the myth of Omphale through Benedick: 'She would have / made Hercules have turned spit, yea, and have cleft / his club to make the fire, too. Come, talk not of her. / You shall find her the infernal Ate in good apparel'. Critics have pointed out that 'turned a spit' is also an allusion to the myth known as the Death of Hercules. Showerman, for instance, points out that the 'turned spit' may be a reference to Hercules' funeral pyre.[33] However, Showerman simply mentions the allusion in passing and does not build on the observation any further. The myth, I argue, plays a much more important role in the play than Showerman gives credit for. Moreover, the version of Benedick's speech which Showerman quotes has 'eternal Ate' instead of 'infernal Ate'.[34] If the intended version of *Much Ado About Nothing* is 'infernal' instead of 'eternal' like that of the First Folio, then Shakespeare mostly likely does reference the myth of Hercules' death through Benedick. [35]

Like many Greek mythologies, Hercules' death has multiple versions. In a common reiteration of the myth, the centaur Nessus, deadly wounded by Hercules, takes revenge by tricking Deianira moments before his death into believing that his tunic, covered in his blood which was infected by Hydra poison, possessed a powerful love charm. Deianira took the blood-

stained tunic into her possession without informing her husband. When she heard the rumor that Hercules was returning home from his travels with Iole as his new lover, Deianira recalled Nessus' parting words and took out the tunic of Nessus from its hiding place. Unaware of its true nature, Hercules put on the tunic, and as soon as he did, the deadly and fiery poison of Hydra mixed with the blood of Nessus seeped into his body. Tormented by the intense agony caused by the Nessus shirt, Hercules was taken to the summit of Mount Oeta, where a pyre made of oak branches and wild olive trunks was built. Ultimately, thunderbolts reduced him to ashes along with the pyre.

It is of course Hero who symbolically dies in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Her death is also comparable with that of Hercules. Hercules' death is marked by deception and poison. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, we see an imbrication of the themes of poison and deception as words of deception are being transformed into metaphorical poison. Shakespeare uses the word 'poison' three times throughout the play to describe deceptive speech. First, Borachio to Don John: 'The poison of that lies in you to temper. Go / you to the Prince your brother; spare not to tell / him that he hath wronged his honor in marrying / the renowned Claudio' (2.3.21-24). Second, Hero to Ursula: 'How much an ill word may empoison liking' (3.1.91). Finally, Claudio to Don Pedro on the villain Borachio 'I have drunk poison whiles he uttered it' (5.1.256). Don John then fills the place of Nessus, who is of course marked by deceit and poison. The result of the poisonous ill words is the death of Hero. The jealous Claudio then becomes the metempsychosis of Deianira, as her insecurities are comparable with his own: during the masquerade party, Claudio was deceived by Don John that Don Pedro woos Hero for himself: 'Signior, you are very near my brother in his / love. He is enamored on Hero. I pray you dissuade / him from her' (2.1.161-63); and the night before the wedding, he is again tricked by Don John into believing that his Hero is

promiscuous, and that disloyalty is a ‘word is too good to paint out her / wickedness. I could say she were worse. Think you / of a worse title, and I will fit her to it’ (3.2.102-04). We can see that both Deianira and Claudio are deeply insecure about their romantic relationships. Deianira fears losing Heracles to Iole, just as Claudio doubts Hero’s loyalty after being deceived into believing she has been unfaithful.

Claudio’s interior jealousy and insecurities finally materialize the next day during the wedding, as he accuses Hero of her actions, and much like Hercules, Hero actually ‘dies’ from Claudio’s (or Don John’s) poisonous ill words, as she agrees to the Friar’s advice of faking her death before truth comes to light, as this may turn slander into lament and pity, and she can thus ‘on this travail look for greater birth’ (4.1.224). Hercules also ‘resurrects’ after his death. As the flames engulfed the pyre, Hercules disappeared from the earth: he was taken to the heavens, where he reconciled with Hera and wed her daughter, Hebe, as his final and immortal wife. Hero, like Hercules, ‘revives’ before the end of the play: ‘One Hero died defiled, but I do live, / And surely as I live, I am a maid’ (5.4.65-66). But unlike Hercules, she still takes Claudio to be her lover. Thus, I conclude in the final analysis that Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing* is Hercules transformed. With her ‘resurrection’ near the end of the play, Hero’s virtue is restored, and against all odds her love’s labour is won.

Conclusion

Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing* reimagines the figure of Hercules not as a paragon of brute strength but as an emblem of endurance, transformation, and reconciliation. By embedding the myth of Omphale and the labours of Hercules within a comedy of deception and disguise, Shakespeare invites his audience to reconsider what constitutes true heroism. The

play's many masculine figures—Don Pedro, Claudio, Benedick—invoke Hercules only to fall short of his labours. Their valor dissolves into rhetoric, and their 'manhood is melted into curtsies'. Yet through this ironic inversion, Shakespeare exposes the instability of gendered ideals: the Herculean virtue of perseverance is relocated from the male hero to the female victim.

The myth of Omphale is crucial to the analysis because it dramatizes the inversion of gendered power and the transformation of shame into redemption. In the myth, Hercules' servitude and feminization under Omphale paradoxically become the means by which his heroism is purified and redefined. Likewise, Hero's humiliation, apparent death, and later restoration constitute her symbolic 'labours'. Through the lens of Omphale's myth, Hero's endurance and eventual triumph reveal Shakespeare's interest in a new kind of heroism—one measured not by conquest but by constancy, patience, and the capacity to reconcile.

Hero's apparent passivity, long dismissed by critics as emblematic of patriarchal control, thus becomes the very condition through which she enacts her transformation. Like Hercules in servitude to Omphale, she performs humility as a form of power. Her symbolic death and return mirror the arc of Hercules' apotheosis, and her silence—often misread as weakness—echoes the stoic endurance that classical tragedy associated with divine testing. In unveiling herself at the play's close, Hero completes both her own resurrection and the labour that unites Beatrice with Benedick. Through her quiet agency, she fulfills the Herculean task that all others fail to complete, transforming the masculine myth of labour into a feminine myth of restoration.

In re-casting Hero as the play's true 'Herculean hero', Shakespeare subverts the classical paradigm of heroic virtue and replaces it with one grounded in compassion, forgiveness, and renewal. Hero's endurance becomes an ethical counterpoint to the destructive jealousy and vanity of Claudio, anticipating later redemptive heroines such as Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*

and Imogen in *Cymbeline*. What emerges is not merely a redefinition of the heroic but a re-inscription of myth itself: true heroism is no longer in strength or conquest but in the capacity to restore harmony after ruination. To conclude, Shakespeare manages to transform the myth of Hercules into Hero, proving that in a world ruled by ‘noting’ and misunderstanding, the greatest labour is not conquest, but love itself.

Endnotes

[1] Shakespeare Theatre Company. *'The Descendants of Beatrice and Benedick: Much Ado's Influence through the Ages'.* Shakespeare Theatre Company, 12 Feb. 2015.

[2] Rachel Reiff, 'A Hero, Not a Zero: Taking a Look at Hero in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*', *Journal of the Wooden O Symposium* 4 (2004), 132.

[3] Nadine Page, 'The Public Repudiation of Hero', *PMLA* 50, no. 3 (September 1935): 739.

[4] Michael D. Friedman, '"'Hush'd on Purpose to Grace Harmony": Wives and Silence in *Much Ado about Nothing*', *Theatre Journal* 42, no. 3 (October 1990): 356.

[5] Reiff, 'A Hero, Not a Zero: Taking a Look at Hero in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*', 133.

[6] Reiff, 'A Hero, Not a Zero: Taking a Look at Hero in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*', 134.

[7] Harry Berger Jr., 'Against the Sink-a-Pace: Sexual and Family Politics in *Much Ado About Nothing*', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (1982): 303.

[8] Earl Showerman, 'Shakespeare's Many *Much Ado*'s: *Alcestis*, Hercules, and *Love's Labour's Wonne*', *Brief Chronicles* 1 (2009): 113.

[9] Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing* from The Folger Shakespeare:5.1.65; hereafter parenthetical citations of all Shakespearean plays are to this edition, by act, scene, and line numbers.

[10] Hugh M. Richmond, 'Gender in Performance'.

[11] Lynda E. Boose, 'Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman's Unruly Member', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 184.

[12] Boose, 'Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman's Unruly Member', 190.

[13] A.C. Bradely, *Shakespearean Tragedy*.

[14] Bradely, *Shakespearean Tragedy*.

[15] Otto Kurz, 'Shakespeare and the Shaven Hercules', *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 87, no. 508 (1945): 175.

[16] Kurz, 'Shakespeare and the Shaven Hercules', 175.

[17] Kurz, 'Shakespeare and the Shaven Hercules', 175.

[18] Andrew B. Crichton, 'Hercules Shaven: A Centering Mythic Metaphor in *Much Ado About Nothing*', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 16, no. 4 (1975): 619–26.

[19] Crichton, 'Hercules Shaven: A Centering Mythic Metaphor in Much Ado About Nothing', 619-20.

[20] McEachern, *Much Ado About Nothing*, 193.

[21] McEachern, *Much Ado About Nothing*, 193.

[22] Root, Classical Mythology, 73.

[23] Crichton, Hercules Shaven: A Centering Mythic Metaphor in *Much Ado About Nothing*', 622.

[24] Jonathan Bate, 'Dying to Live in *Much Ado about Nothing*', in *Shakespearean Criticism*, edited by Michael LaBlanc, vol. 78 (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Cengage, 2004), 82: 'This brings us to the very heart of the play. Silence is associated with death and Hero's name is also associated with death, for the classical Hero was an exemplary suicide victim in Ovid's *Heroides.* Death is the logic of the Hero-ine's exclusion from the first part of the play'.

[25] Showerman, 'Shakespeare's Many Much Ado's: *Alcestis*, Hercules, and *Love's Labour's Wonne*', 117.

[26] Robert K. Root, *Classical Mythology in Shakespeare* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1903).

[27] Bate, 'Dying to Live in *Much Ado about Nothing*', 79; Claire McEachern, ed. *Much Ado about Nothing*, (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2006), 21-2.

[28] Claire McEachern, ed. Much Ado about Nothing, (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2006), 21-2.

[29] Claire McEachern, ed. Much Ado about Nothing, (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2006), 21-2.

[30] Showerman, 'Shakespeare's Many Much Ado's: *Alcestis*, Hercules, and *Love's Labour's Wonne*', 113.

[31] Showerman, 'Shakespeare's Many Much Ado's: *Alcestis*, Hercules, and *Love's Labour's Wonne*', 112.

[32] Euripides, *Alcestis*, translated by Richard Aldington, 28.

[33] Showerman, 'Shakespeare's Many Much Ado's: *Alcestis*, Hercules, and *Love's Labour's Wonne*', 124.

[34] Showerman, 'Shakespeare's Many Much Ado's: *Alcestis*, Hercules, and *Love's Labour's Wonne*', 123.

[35] Shakespeare, *The First Folio*, 106.

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