"Kill Claudio": A Laugh Almost Killed by the Critics

Philip Weller

In a 1990 article for *Theatre Survey*, Kathleen Carroll has shown in persuasive detail how theatrical managers Henry Irving and Augustin Daly, for their various American tours, presented *Much Ado About Nothing* in ways that each "perceived would be compatible with the expectations of 1890 theatregoers."[1] One of Carroll's conclusions is that "the historical tradition of staging *Much Ado* as a comedy implies that stage directors have ignored the underlying complexity of Beatrice's character." Carroll goes on to point out that the *Reader's Encyclopedia of Shakespeare* identifies Gielgud's 1952 production as the first of the modern era, one which established a precedent for all that followed, and one which turned away from the nineteenth-century's "comic interpretation." In her discussion of this production, Carroll mentions one particular moment as a marker of the new direction taken by Gielgud's production. That is the moment when Beatrice says "Kill Claudio" (4.1.289)[2] and Gielgud, as Benedick, reacted in such a way that he "eliminated the usual laugh."

In my view, eliminating the usual laugh at this point in *Much Ado About Nothing* is like eliminating the usual baby in a painting of the Madonna. That laugh is a precious artifact in our understanding of the play precisely because it is "usual." Being "usual," the laugh is a fact, in the sense that we think of a "scientific fact." That is, the laugh of one performance could be monitored by reliable instruments; the results of this monitoring could be reduced to numbers indicating duration, pitch, loudness, etc.; and one such set of results could be reliably compared to the results from succeeding performances by the same actors, and to the results from different performances in different parts of the world. In short, it is an artifact of literature which can be apprehended without the mediation of language.

Such a fact challenges the tap-root of the deconstructionist project which is so influential in the current climate of criticism. That tap-root is the idea that—to put it shortly—literature always means different things to different people, or—to quote a bit of the jargon—that "the play of differences supposes, in effect, syntheses and referrals that forbid at any moment, or in any sense, that a simple element be *present* in and of itself, referring only to itself. . . . There are

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only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces."[3] Such statements about the nature of language are the parents of Robert Crosman's assertion that "a poem really means whatever any reader seriously believes it to mean."[4] This vein of theorizing can do nothing to explain that "usual laugh." Criticism which assumes that meaning is always elusive and individual simply doesn't envision the possibility of a group of people—much less many different groups of people—all reacting the same way at the same time.

Yet we go to drama for just such laughs (as well as other pleasures), and only after we come away from drama do we engage in discourses—deconstructionist or otherwise—about the meaning of what we have seen. Actually, if the play or movie has been really worthwhile, we don't immediately discuss the meaning of it at all, but rather celebrate its highlights, calling to each other with phrases such as "I liked the time that," or "Do you remember when?" Much current criticism, however, having forgotten this sort of experience, takes "meaning" to be only that which is the product of hermeneutic intellection.

But that laugh is one of the great pleasures of the play, and has been widely noted, and is worth our attention. I believe, with David Bleich and Norman Holland, that there are certain fundamental psychological processes that lead most of us to respond to literature in similar ways, even if we draw very different conclusions about the meaning of what we have responded to.[5] In short, I believe that the "usual laugh" can be investigated fruitfully as the result of the audience's emotional response to the structure of the play.

As a bit player in an amateur production of *Much Ado*, I heard that laugh every night for twelve nights, and when it is heard in the context of the response to the whole play, it becomes even more interesting. Compared to the laugh on "Kill Claudio," the other laughs in the play are comparatively easy to account for. Benedick and Beatrice are funny because they make jokes about each other. Dogberry get laughs because he is an ass and doesn't know it, and the more he shows it, the more the audience laughs. Such sources of laughter are as old as Aristophanes and as new (or tired) as the latest sit-com hit on television.

The laugh on "Kill Claudio" is different. For our production, it didn't appear that the source of the laugh lay in any singularity in the way it was played. It wasn't played for laughs, but it got the biggest laugh of the evening. Our Beatrice's delivery of the two words was sudden and passionate; Benedick's answering "Ha!" was an expression of pure surprise, without any suggestion of cowardice or chagrin. In short, it was played in a manner which I think of as straightforward, as I have seen it played in professional productions, where the audience has also responded with loud laughter.

Not only did our Beatrice and Benedick not play the scene for laughs, the surrounding circumstances were markedly different from those of the other lines which got big laughs. For example, both Dogberry's "Oh that I had been writ down an ass!" (4.2.86) and Benedick's "No, the world must be peopled" (2.3.242) came as climaxes of long speeches delivered with accelerating comic exaggeration. In contrast, "Kill Claudio" was a surprise to the audience as well as to Benedick. In our production, Benedick and Beatrice, witty from habit but subdued and rather hesitant after Claudio had shamed his intended bride at the altar, slowly came to confess their love for one another. Beatrice did not maneuver Benedick into his declaration of love in order to acquire a champion for Hero; it was simply that she gradually became absorbed in the matter of her own love, and Hero's problem seemed to have slipped her mind until that moment when Benedick—for the moment reduced by love to a state of slightly awkward seriousness—fell to one knee and said "Come, bid me do any thing for thee." At that instant Beatrice remembered Hero, and then came "Kill Claudio," Benedick's surprise, and the audience's burst of laughter.

This phenomenon brings to mind something John Russell Brown wrote about this particular moment of this particular play:

> Almost any production of *Much Ado About Nothing* will furnish reviews commenting upon the speaking of Beatrice's words 'Kill Claudio,' and they will often be contradictory. Read together . . . they show how precarious the comic and sentimental issues are at just this point in the play; how, in performance, these two words can trigger off great and opposing reactions, sometimes causing laughter, sometimes concern.[6]

I had heard the laughter, but what kind of performance of the scene would produce the concern? For an answer to this question I turned to reviews of other productions. The reviews confirm what Brown writes, but with one very important qualification. Read together, they give the impression that the *natural* reaction to "Kill Claudio" is not concern, but laughter, and that in productions where the laughter doesn't come, it's because special pains have been taken to avoid it.

As a matter of fact, ever since that 1952 production by Gielgud mentioned earlier, suppression of the laughter seems to be generally regarded as the right thing to do. As Arthur Sprague says, "to play the passage without raising a laugh has become an exercise in technique: the actors are given marks for it almost as if they are riders trying to achieve a 'clear round' in a jumping

competition."[7] Sprague also notes that the laugh comes even in performances featuring the most distinguished personnel, as in—among others—an earlier production with John Gielgud and Peggy Ashcroft or in the 1968 Royal Shakespeare production at Stratford, directed by Trevor Nunn. However, the most skillful performers are also the most adept at finding ways to suppress the laugh, as Gielgud did later, and as Nunn did in the 1969 revival at the Aldwych. In both cases heavy use was made of long pauses and quiet delivery, but it was Nunn who took the greatest care to make the exchange unmistakably serious:

> At the Aldwych, after the early exchanges had been played quickly and fervently, the actors, moving downstage, played the central passage kneeling before the altar. 'Bid me do anything for thee' was spoken very quietly; 'Kill Claudio!' followed swiftly; and there was a long pause before Benedick's reply: too long, no doubt, but it smothered any laughter.[8]

In this, it is easy to recognize the origin of the treatment of the scene in the recent Kenneth Branaugh film version, which killed that particular laugh, along with many others. On the other hand, when the laugh is allowed, reviewers generally condemn it. They seem to believe that the laughter displaces or destroys another, more appropriate response. For instance, a *Shakespeare Quarterly* reviewer was outraged that in "one of the play's crucial moments, when reality crashes through the merry war of words, Beatrice's command to 'Kill Claudio' was totally lost when Filsinger [Benedick] played his next line for a belly laugh."[9] In a similar vein, though more gently, another reviewer for the same publication complained of a production at 1971 Stratford, Ontario, that although "the laughter died on Beatrice's next line . . . , the note of seriousness came too late to dispel the farcical quality that had been developed." The reviewer adds that if the laugh cannot be entirely eliminated, at least it ought to be "embarrassed and uneasy."[10] Almost twenty years later, a reviewer for the *London Times* expressed almost identical attitude about another production of *Much Ado*:

> In Lindsay Posner's straightforward production, the balance between the witmongers and the troublemakers is established well enough, but where the two moods interpenetrate, and comedy veers into high drama at Hero's supposed death, the audience has not been adequately prepared. For this reason, Beatrice's demand "Kill Claudio!" is met with merry laughter.

> Nervous laughter is understandable, but not the assumption that the play has gone back to telling jokes.[11]

But is it necessary to wage war against the laughter that seems to naturally accompany "Kill Claudio"? Is it possible, after all, that the audience is right, that the line is naturally, intentionally funny? I think so. I believe that this audience response can in fact give us a glimpse of "Free Shakespeare" as John Russell Brown described it—Shakespearean theater independent of the biases of directors who "are working all the time to make their own *answers* abundantly clear by underlining with all the contrivance of set, costume, lighting, sound and the drilling of actors."[12] The tampering to suppress the laugh betrays, I believe, a fundamental disrespect for laughter, and possibly for comedy.

Comedy and laughter go together, but critics and reviewers often seem to assume that if we're laughing, we can't be thinking. And if we're not thinking, we won't realize what a crucial point this is in the conflict between love and friendship, or between womanly independence and feminine submissiveness, or between whatever other "meanings" are perceived as significant by the critic or the director. Therefore, according to this kind of thinking, the laughter on "Kill Claudio" ought to be suppressed, or if allowed to remain, at least it ought to be "embarrassed" or "nervous"—that is, thoughtful—laughter.

Meanwhile, Shakespeare's comedy, if left alone to produce that laugh, performs a much less cerebral, and much more human function than forcing the audience to think about the "issues." "Kill Claudio" is the most powerful comic line of the play because it best performs humor's most important psychological task, which consists, according to Freud, in "lifting internal inhibitions and in making sources of pleasure fertile which have been rendered inaccessible by those inhibitions."[13]

Freud's analysis of the mechanism of humorous release, as set forth in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, is extremely helpful in accounting for what happens to the audience in this passage of the play. In particular Freud makes two points about jokes that can be directly applied to the case at hand. The first is that for a joke to be successful the "third person" or audience must be possessed of the inhibitions which the joke plays upon; therefore most jokes actually intensify those inhibitions before lifting them. Thus a joke which works by giving a momentary scope to the pleasures of hostility must first intensify the hostility, which requires from the audience an increase in psychic energy to maintain its inhibitions—that is, to keep the hostility in control.

The second point is that the psychic energy which would normally be occupied in maintaining inhibitions can find free discharge in laughter only if it is prevented from being used in another way. For example, if we feel that our

impulse to laughter betrays something mean-spirited in us, we will repress the laughter. Therefore the joke, as it allows the lid to come off a built-up hostility, must make the audience feel innocent by concealing or justifying that hostility. When that happens, the psychic energy necessary to keep the hostility inhibited is no longer required and is released in laughter.

Freud's own example of this sequence is a joke told at a convention of psychiatrists. It concerns two cannibals. The first one had just captured a psychiatrist and was planning on having the eminent doctor for dinner. He asked his friend, the second cannibal, "Have you ever tried to eat a psychiatrist?" "Eaten One," the second replied, "have you ever tried to clean one?"

Freud explains that our hostilities toward psychiatrists, who pull our dirty secrets out of us, are first intensified by suggesting that they might be eaten—biting is, as anyone who has raised children knows, a primitive form of aggression. But as our hostilities are aroused so are our inhibitions—we are adults and don't bite. The punch line makes us innocent by justification—that is, by suggesting that it's really the psychiatrists who are dirty, not us. In addition, the whole joke makes us innocent by concealment—it is a joke, introduced by "Did you hear the one about the two cannibals?" Therefore it is about fictitious persons who bite, not us. And the punch line is surprising, giving reassurance that it is someone else who thinks our shrinks are dirty old men who ought to be bitten, not us.

Our psychic energy in this case can be compared to a rubber ball which is squeezed, then suddenly released and so springs up into the air. First comes an increase of our inhibitions; second comes release and laughter.

This sequence is important to remember because, within the context of the entire play, "Kill Claudio," although it is not a joke, works like the punch line of a joke to produce laughter. First, the inhibitions of our hostilities are intensified by the character of Claudio and by his treatment of Hero. He arouses anger to which we may not give vent at any moment before "Kill Claudio." Second, the words "Kill Claudio" give the fullest possible release from the inhibition of our hostility, while other circumstances of the play provide the most complete possible innocence.

Claudio arouses inhibited hostility because we feel we should like him but can't. He is immature, cruel, and complacent, but—unlike Don John—he cannot be simply dismissed from the play and our consciousness. He does not have that melodramatic quality which makes Don John so vivid and yet so abstract and expendable. Claudio is very human, and therefore very uncomfortable to watch. Most of us would probably like to have the superb, witty self-possession that Beatrice and Benedick display, and therefore we identify with them, but most of us also recognize that Claudio's weaknesses are more common and more like

ours. He is, in George Bernard Shaw's words, "a well-observed and consistent character," but "disagreeable."[14] Yet this disagreeable juvenile has another hold on us besides his unsettling humanity. He is also the young hero in whose happiness the comic plot consummates itself. By literary descent Claudio is the "*humanam genus* figure, the offender whose forgiveness climaxes the play."[15] Our sense of comic decorum tells us that Friar Francis' exit line, "Come lady, die to live: this wedding-day / Perhaps is but prolonged" (4.1.253-254) is as good as a promise.

In short, we develop against Claudio—especially as he disgraces Hero—a hostility held in suspension. Even among academic critics, there is abundant evidence of this ambiguous reaction to the character. Those who denounce him tend to be passionate and direct, in the spirit of Edmund Chambers, who dismissed him as a "worm."[16] On the other side, those who defend him tend to be explanatory and reasonable. They are likely to dwell on background material, such as Elizabethan society's assumptions about female frailty. Or they may emphasize the Elizabethans' unromantic conception of marriage.[17] The defenders of Claudio seem to be trying to rationalize the feeling we share that, despite everything, Claudio must eventually be reconciled to Hero and to us.

This particular blend of reactions which Claudio evokes—stronger in the theater than in the study—is maintained even after he has left the stage following his rejection of Hero. Leonato's speeches, though they are self-pitying, do arouse our sympathy, and that sympathy is turned into anger against Claudio. Thus even though it is Don John who is the technical villain, it is Claudio's hateful words that have poisoned Leonato's heart, and we feel that it is he who is mainly responsible for the old man's foolish and horrible wish that his daughter should die. So Claudio acts the part of the villain, but is not the villain, and none of the characters in the scene utters a word of reproach against him, because he has "the very bent of honor" (4.1.186). Claudio, like many adolescents, is an attractive youth with a bright future, but also callow and self-centered; we would like, in a loving way, to beat some sense into him. Or, to speak as Freud might, our hostility against Claudio is aroused, but also strongly inhibited. And that hostility can find no outlet until the moment of "Kill Claudio."

When that moment comes, it releases a tremendous energy because of the consummate skill Shakespeare uses to make the audience innocent of all guilt. First of all, there's the surprise. "Kill Claudio" would not produce a laugh if it were placed immediately after Claudio's exit because then we would be uncomfortably aware that we ourselves would like to kill him. Instead, the focus of the scene is subtly shifted so that while our anger against Claudio is maintained, it is pushed just barely past the limits of our conscious awareness before it is released. After Claudio leaves the stage, Leonato and Benedick talk

of his honesty, and then the Friar creates a shadowy picture of him mourning at Hero's tomb. Then, when Beatrice and Benedick are alone on stage, Claudio is not mentioned at all, but the image of his cruelty is kept alive indirectly by Beatrice's tears for Hero. Those tears are dried slowly; Beatrice is "sorry for my cousin" (4.1.272) even as she makes her declaration of love to Benedick. By this succession of increasingly indirect reminders of Claudio, our hostility against him is not dismissed, but it is eased just far enough beyond the borders of consciousness to help create that innocence necessary for laughter.

The innocence of surprise is not, however, the only means that Shakespeare has devised to insure our release from our inhibitions. There is also the psychic reassurance provided by the rhythm of the plot and by the characters of Benedick and Beatrice. To begin with, there's the simple fact that Benedick and Beatrice have the habit of hyperbole, and we're never allowed to forget it, even as they tell their love to one another. Witness the following exchange:

> *Beat.*. . . I confess nothing nor I deny nothing. I am sorry for my cousin.
>
> *Bene.* By my sword, Beatrice, thou lovest me.
>
> *Beat.* Do not swear and eat it.
>
> *Bene.* I will swear by it that you love me, and I will make him eat it that says I love you not.
>
> *Beat.* Will you not eat your word?
>
> *Bene.* With no sauce that can be devised to it. I protest I love thee. (4.1.271-280)

The dialogue moves from the simplicity of "I am sorry for my cousin" to the simplicity of "I protest I love thee," but in between there is an echo of one of Beatrice's first comments about Benedick: "I pray you how many hath he killed and eaten in these wars? But how many hath he killed? For indeed, I promised to eat all of his killing" (1.1.42-45).

Because of what we know about these two and their hyperbolic way of expressing themselves, we also realize that although Beatrice is not being facetious in the least, when she says "Kill Claudio" there is no chance that Claudio will indeed be killed.

This reassurance combines with the element of surprise to provide the release that laughter requires, but there is yet another element, the rhythm of the play. By "rhythm" I mean not much more than the simple fact that the audience is expecting Benedick and Beatrice to get together. We have had two scenes—the most enjoyable of the play—in which first Benedick, then Beatrice, have been deceived into honest love. We have also had a scene in which each has been

teased about a change of heart which each still thinks is secret. All of this build-up demands a satisfactory sequel in the form of an encounter between the two new converts to love; the other characters in the play have been looking forward to it, and so have we.

In addition, I believe we also expect that this encounter will be the beginning of the end of the dramatic action. The union of Benedick and Beatrice will be the last event in their story, and we feel that the end of their story will bring upon its heels the end of Claudio and Hero's story because the playwright has taken care to link the two. Claudio helps to deceive and tease Benedick, and Hero does the same for Beatrice. Also, Don Pedro first proposed the match-making as a pastime for the impatient Claudio during the "interim" before his marriage (2.1.364).

As a result of this carefully arranged linkage between the two couples, when that long-awaited encounter between Benedick and Beatrice is begun, we feel that the entire action of the play is drawing toward its proper resolution. It is unthinkable that Benedick and Beatrice should confess their love for one another, marry, and leave Claudio and Hero to their separate unhappiness. It is so unthinkable that we just don't think of it. Rather, we expect the happiness of the one couple to be answered by the happiness of the other. Thus "Kill Claudio" is enveloped in the audience's sense that the action is moving towards a conclusion in which Claudio not only lives but is made happy. Thus this element too allows us to enjoy—to laugh at—Beatrice's expression of our hostility towards Claudio.

We need to remind ourselves, though, that it is not hostility we feel when we laugh, but joy. Though our dislike of Claudio is a necessary part of what Shakespeare does to us, we are not made to think about that dislike. Instead we share Benedick's surprise (his "Ha!"), and we laugh. We laugh and feel joy because we are given the freedom to vent a justified anger against Claudio's arrogance, while at exactly the same instant we are brought to sense that the natural rhythm of things has been re-established and that Hero and Claudio will live and be happy.

This variety of comic release and clarification is accomplished by art working directly on the emotions, without thought. Consequently, those who insist that the audience must think and who support efforts of directors to kill or embarrass the laugh that naturally accompanies "Kill Claudio" are simply asking for the suppression of one of the purest moments of high comedy in Shakespeare.

Notes

1. Kathleen L. Carroll, "The Americanization of Beatrice: Nineteenth-century Style," *Theatre Survey* 31 (1990): 81.

2. William Shakespeare, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

3. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982) 26.

4. Robert Crosman, "Do Readers Make Meaning?" *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, ed. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980) 54.

5. David Bleich, *Subjective Criticism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1978). Of Holland's works, I have in mind particularly *Laughing: A Psychology of Humor* (Ithaca: Cornell UP,1982). Turning to other critics who are known to be interested in "reader response" isn't much help. First, none that I know of consider any audience other than readers. Second, many, such as Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980); Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974); or those represented in Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman's *The Reader in the Text* (Princeton: Princeton UP,1980), are really interested in the theoretics of textuality, rather than actual responses of actual readers.

6. John Russell Brown, *Shakespeare's Plays in Performance* (New York: St. Martin's Press) 266.

7. Arthur Sprague and J. C. Trewin, *Shakespeare's Plays Today: Some Customs and Conventions of the Stage* (Columbia, S. C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1971) 74.

8. Sprague 76.

9. Herbert R. Coursen, Jr., *Shakespeare Quarterly* 23 (1972): 413.

10. Berners Jackson, "Shakespeare at Stratford, Ontario, 1971," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 22 (1971): 369-370.

11. Jeremy Kingston, "*Much Ado About Nothing*: Open Air Regent's Park," *Times* (London) 30 May 1990: 76.

12. John Russell Brown, "Free Shakespeare," *Shakespeare Survey* 24 (1971): 128.

13. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960) 130.

14. George Bernard Shaw, *Shaw on Shakespeare*, ed. Edwin Wilson (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1961) 152-153.

15. Robert G. Hunter, *Shakespeare and the Comedy of Forgiveness* (New York: Columbia UP, 1965) 83.

16. Edmund Chambers, *Shakespeare: A Survey* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1947) 134.

17. See Nadine Page, "The Public Repudiation of Hero," *PMLA* 50 (1935): 739-744. Also Charles Prouty, *The Sources of* Much Ado About Nothing (New Haven: Yale UP, 1950) 41. For a brief summary of this controversy over Claudio's character, and a discussion of how it has affected the text-editing of the play, see Michael D. Friedman, "The Editorial Recuperation of Claudio," *Comparative Drama* 25 (1991): 369-386.