

'Much Ado about Nothing': Shakespeare's Answer to #MeToo

In one sense, the #MeToo movement seems like an inherently modern event made possible by a perfect storm of social media, sexual revolution, post-Trump outrage, and third-wave feminism. Its accompanying hashtag, #TimesUp, reinforces the idea of timeliness, suggesting that after centuries—if not millennia—of silent suffering under patriarchal oppression, women have finally risen up to hold abusive men responsible.

As it turns out, though, this conversation has been going on for at least 400 years.

In the process of directing a high school production of William Shakespeare's romantic comedy [*Much Ado about Nothing*](#),^[1] I have frequently found myself talking about which characters "believe the allegations" and coming within a hair's breadth of using the dreaded phrase "toxic masculinity."

That phrase could certainly apply to Benedick, the play's central character, and to his friends, Claudio and Don Pedro. In the opening scenes, Benedick declares proudly that he has no love for women, especially not Beatrice, who he hooked up with and then carelessly dumped at some unspecified point before the action of the play begins. He would rather spend his time doing bro stuff with his bros.

When Claudio falls in love with the beautiful—and, more importantly to him, wealthy—Hero, he and Don Pedro use a strange, underhanded tag-team strategy to win her over, and soon she and Claudio are engaged and, it would seem, happily so. At least, that is, until the pernicious Don John begins

spreading the rumor that Hero has been unfaithful.

Claudio doesn't even think of privately confronting Hero and asking for her side of the story or of quietly breaking off the engagement, as Joseph planned to do with the Virgin Mary. Instead, he publicly shames her at the altar. Even her father takes Claudio at his word and joins the pile-on, telling his daughter he wishes she were dead. Hero appears to oblige him when, overwhelmed, she collapses into a deathlike swoon.

Non-consensual sexual activity may not be involved, and the woman may be the accused rather than the accuser, but Shakespeare has presented a situation that is reminiscent of 21st-century instances of sexual misconduct in that a woman has been victimized by a man, disbelieved by the community, and subjected to extreme mental anguish as a result. By making a woman the victim of a false accusation, Shakespeare offers a cautionary tale that lays out the perils of the two extremes to which we often resort in our public discourse surrounding allegations of abuse or sexual misconduct. Shakespeare's play suggests that we should neither [instinctively disbelieve women](#) nor [instinctively believe allegations](#). He strikes a balance between the wellbeing of women and the rights of the accused, a balance that is often sorely lacking, in [one direction](#) or [the other](#), in our public discourse surrounding allegations of sexual misconduct.

Shakespeare's solution is equally relevant.

When Hero loses consciousness, Claudio and Don Pedro leave, and despite their firm (albeit mistaken) belief that they have killed her, within a few hours they're back to making jokes and horsing around. Benedick, however, having recently been tricked into admitting his love for Beatrice, remains behind and shows a willingness to believe Hero's denials. This is our first sign that Benedick is putting distance between himself and his friends, but he still has one final test to pass.

He confesses his love to Beatrice and, in his giddiness at hearing her requite it, tells her to ask him to do anything for her. Her response is brief and icy: "Kill Claudio." At first, Benedick refuses. How can she expect him to turn against his bro, even if that bro has treated a woman abominably? Beatrice furiously laments the decline of chivalry and masculine bravery and insists that if she were a man, she would "eat [Claudio's] heart in the marketplace."

In this moment, Benedick realizes that in order to become worthy and capable of marriage, he will have to leave behind a world that is entirely centered on boys being boys. Such attitudes are common among elementary, middle, and even high school boys, for whom women are largely a distraction from male bonding activities and, as such, can be scorned and manipulated at will. Unfortunately, some of these boys never grow out of this phase. A childhood friend of mine never did. He married a wonderful girl, but seemed more interested in drinking beer and watching sports with his bros than in cultivating a strong marriage or raising a family. Within a few years, he had impregnated his mistress and abandoned his wife.

Beatrice wisely refuses to marry a man like that, and Benedick rises to the occasion, challenging Claudio to a duel and winning Beatrice's hand in the process. In doing so, Benedick does not abandon masculinity, of which he had possessed a distorted and toxic version, but instead discovers it in its true and mature form. When men refuse to grow up, women suffer, but by putting childish things behind him, Benedick is able to take responsibility for his actions and demand that Claudio do the same.

Shakespeare's solution to the mistreatment and silencing of women by men is the same as the twofold solution that [the now-"cancelled" Terry Crews offered in an interview with NPR](#) and in his [testimony before Congress](#). First, men must leave behind the "astounding immaturity" that harms women and leaves no

room for personal growth, marriage, or family. And second, "Men need to hold other men accountable."

[1] This essay focuses on *Much Ado about Nothing*, but Shakespeare tackles the issue of sexual misconduct more directly (though very differently) in [*Measure for Measure*](#).