MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING


(Much Ado About Nothing, IV.i.)

Claudio's exclamation, quoted above, although arising from an abused mind, can be passed as Shakespeare's general commentary on man's existential situation in this world. More often than not, he is not his true self, being either self-deluded or deceived by others.

He is without knowledge although he speaks and acts as though he were possessed of knowledge and certitude.

Now what Claudio says above is ironically true of himself as it is true of a number of other characters in Much Ado About Nothing. It is certainly true of the two wit-crackers, Benedick and Beatrice, who do not suspect the strategems employed by others and believe the conversations they are meant to overhear to have been conducted in a serious vein. And it is true of Leonato himself, Hero's father, who persuades himself to believe Claudio's revolting accusation against his daughter and joins in the cruel denunciation of slandered innocence.
As will appear gradually from our detailed analysis of the play, the theme of the supposed unchastity of Hero takes into account and operates through the forces of violence and evil (omnipresent both in Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies), the basic inability to tell apart truth and error, reality and appearance, and the dramatist's faith in an unpredictable turn of events where truth is stumbled upon by the ignorant when it has eluded the 'wise'.

The two plots that are worked into the design of the play are the Claudio-Hero plot and the Beatrice-Benedick plot. While the latter plot is Shakespeare's own, the former one is borrowed from Baudello and Ariosto. The Dogberry-Verges episodes are also Shakespeare's own.

Even though the Claudio-Hero plot is borrowed, Shakespeare uses it to enact his own singular vision. The two plots are brought together and so dovetailed into each other as to create a tangled web of characters, incidents and situations where comedy is not very far from the shadows of tragedy.

The 'Unchastity' of Hero in Much Ado comes about by the machination of Don John, the bastard
brother of Don Pedro. The opening scene introduces all the important characters of the play. It also tells us about the rebellion of Don John and how this is put down and a reconciliation brought about. This scene also introduces the love-note out of which emanates the various problems of the play. Shakespeare has indeed very cleverly introduced a 'go-between' in the character of Don Pedro. We are told how Don Pedro has 'bestowed much honour' upon Claudio and taken him into his confidence. This in turn makes Don John malignant even towards Claudio. Don Pedro succeeds in winning the hand of Hero for Claudio. It is at this point that the complications in the play arise. Evil which has so long been dormant in the person of Don John suddenly erupts. The endemic human vulnerability to error and deception also makes its terrible presence felt.

Shakespeare has taken care to introduce such characters as Borachio and Margaret who are given to the ways of the flesh, and would do anything for the right price (especially Borachio). Don John has been aligned to Borachio who in turn had clandestine sexual relation with Margaret. The bringing together of these three characters proves disastrous but adds to the interest of the play by sealing the fate of Hero at least for sometime.
As we have said, Borachio's hold on Margaret provided food to the displeasure of Don John. The scene in which Margaret looks out of the window in the guise of Hero, supposed to be having a secret love affair, has indeed been conceived very cleverly. The scene takes place in the middle of the night when visibility is low, so that the 'viewers', Don Pedro and Claudio, would be deceived by their eyes while their ears would hear Margaret being addressed as Hero by Borachio. The outcome of this scene brings about the final crisis of the play. Hero is supposed to be seen where she is not, and the marriage scheduled to take place between her and Claudio is foiled at least for the time being.

The play indeed is a comment on the insecurity of man's knowledge. While the mind of man is infinite, he simultaneously is prone to error, and to wrong judgement. As we saw in the preceding chapter, Shakespeare's age was obsessed, pervasively and pronouncedly with the problem of knowledge and error. This was so because the age was an age of discovery and new knowledge of the workings of nature. Hitherto man's mind was limited to the limits of the small world he lived in. But with new discoveries being made, the ideas which he had taken for granted were shaken to the very roots.
The Copernican revolution with the resultant transformation of the geo-centric and well-enclosed Ptolemsic universe had a telling effect on man's ideas about himself, his place in the scheme of things, the foundation of his knowledge, its nature, extent and reliability. The medieval certainty about man's status and knowledge gave way to an uncertainty about them. Faith and undependable belief gave way to a nagging awareness about the nature and scope of knowledge.

Shakespeare has taken care to show how little Claudio knows of Hero:

O, my lord,
When you went onward on this ended action,
I look'd upon her with a soldier's eye,
That lik'd but had a rougher task in hand.

(I.i.)

The above quoted passage shows that Claudio has seen Hero but beyond that nothing is said of any kind of acquaintance between the two. Claudio thus does not know her well enough. It is not surprising therefore, although it is interesting, that whenever there is a suggestion that she is not to be trusted or that Don Pedro might misappropriate her to his loss, Claudio is not only willing to listen but is prepared to believe the contrary of what he had thought
of her; ("...the sweetest lady that I look'd on," and "Can the world buy such a jewel?/ I.i.)

Thus when Don John feigning goodwill, comes to report that Hero is faithless and that he can provide ocular proof of it, Claudio, far from contesting the suggestion, is swayed into exclaiming:

"If I see her to-night why I should not marry her, to-morrow in the congregation where I should wed, there will I shame her."

(III.ii.)

Earlier on, when the same villain had come to report that Don Pedro had intended to marry Hero, Claudio showed an equal measure of gullibility and thought that, that was the end of his affair with Hero.

"Thus answer I in the name of Benedick, But hear these ill news in the ears of Claudio. 'Tis certain so: the Prince woos for himself. Friendship is constant in all other things Save in the office and affairs of love; **** Farewell therefore, Hero."

(II.i.)

These indeed are some instances of the playwright's suggesting that Claudio has no certain know-
ledge and is therefore at the mercy of tale-bearers.

The 'reconciliation' between Don Pedro and Don John is also another important piece of action that serves to comment on the insecurity of man's knowledge. Don Pedro does not seem to be sufficiently aware that his bastard brother nurtures active malevolence towards him and Claudio.

The introduction of the 'middle man' between Claudio and Hero plays an important part in the structure of the drama itself. We have stated earlier that Claudio's knowledge of Hero is very meagre indeed and therefore it necessitates Don Pedro's proxy-wooing. From then on Shakespeare purposely does not bring Claudio and Hero together. They are not allowed the chance to get to know each other intimately. This particular fact opens the ground wide for Claudio to doubt Hero's integrity at the slightest possible chance. And this he does when duped by Don John into believing Margaret to be Hero.

Human beings are prone to error and wrong judgement. This is especially more so when evil forces are at work against what a man has taken to be the truth. In Othello, the hero and the heroine have been
married. But in this play too Shakespeare has taken care to bring out the fact that Othello is more of a soldier than a lover or a man with great knowledge of the world outside of the battle fields.

"...For since these arms of mine had seven years' pith,
Till now some nine moons wasted, they have us'd
Their dearest action in the tented field;
And little of this great world can I speak ...
"

(Othello, I.iii.)

Besides this, there is another discrepancy in the marriage between Othello and Desdemona and this comes in the shape of colour. Othello is a moor, a black man, whereas Desdemona is a white woman. Therefore the field is left wide open for evil to creep in and create havoc. Evil comes in the person of Iago whom Othello never doubts for a single moment.

"...Honest Iago,
My Desdemona must I leave to thee."

(Othello, I.iii.)

On the contrary Iago has no love for Othello.

"...Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago.
In following him I follow but myself—
"

(Othello, I.ii)

He has his grievance against Othello, which
proves fatal in the end for Othello and Desdemona. Evil which is manifested in the person of Iago works upon the very weaknesses we have mentioned.

Thus even between man and his wife evil finds a place and slowly but decidedly works to the destruction of both. In Much Ado About Nothing the situation develops differently because it is a comedy. The 'reconciliation' between Don Pedro and Don John is an important factor in this play. This is to bring about the crisis of the play, although not directly. Here too Shakespeare has taken care to comment indirectly on the insecurity of human knowledge. Upon being reconciled, Don Pedro takes Don John into his confidence. Don Pedro and Don John are half brothers. And this explains why Don Pedro never for once doubted Don John's truthfulness until Borachio has been captured and the mischief has come to light.

In this connection, the parallelism between Iago and Don John can hardly escape notice. Their motivations seem so strikingly alike. Both are disgruntled and both nurture a strange grudge against their superiors. If Cassio is an eye-sore to Iago, so is Claudio to Don John. And their idioms are so alike.

This is how Iago refers to Cassio:
"...One Michael Cassio, a Florentine,
A fellow almost damn'd in a fair wife,
That never set a squadron in the field,

******
He, in good time, must his lieutenant be,
And I, God bless the mark! his moorship's ancient.

(Othello, I. i.)

And here is Don John about Claudio:

"Come, come, let us thither; this may prove food to my displeasure; that young upstart hath all the glory of my overthrow.
If I can cross him in any way, I bless myself every way."

(I. iii.)

The outburst of Claudio in the church is the outcome of the 'Window Scene.'

O! what men dare do! what men may do! what men daily do, not knowing what they do!

(IV. i.)

As we suggested at the outset, the speech is very ironical indeed. It is ironical in the sense that Claudio himself does something which he will ridicule others for doing. He has taken for granted that Margaret was Hero and thus he dares do what he with any semblance of reason should not have been doing. The dormant evil in him has been let loose and it lashes
at the very chastity of Hero, who like a lamb before a shearer takes every blow. She has been defamed by the very person she is to marry, who with his spurious knowledge and the promptings of evil has been led to believe the reverse of the true nature of Hero.

Evil is a dominant feature in human situation. This is so because every human being is capable of doing evil not only to himself but to others too. Needless to say, evil is present in each and every human being. It is only a matter of suppressing it or letting it out that decides whether a man is good or bad. In the play we are dealing with, evil has been presented in the person of Don John.

I had rather be a canker in a hedge than a rose in his grace; and it better fits my blood to be diadain'd of all than to fashion a carriage to rob love from any. In this, though I cannot be said to be a flattering honest man, it must not be denied but I am a plain-dealing villain. I am trusted with a muzzle and enfranchised with a clog; therefore I have decreed not to sing in my cage. If I had my mouth, I would bite; in the meantime let me be that I am, and seek not to alter me.

(I.iii.)

It is obvious that the action of the drama rests, on the whole, upon the machination of Don John, the very instrument to comment upon the fallible
nature of human knowledge and its proneness to error, wrong judgement and wrong action. Don John sets out to foil every step taken by Claudio and Don Pedro. As we have have stated earlier, he succeeds in deceiving them by imposing Margaret as Hero in the 'Window Scene'. Thereafter, the decision is left open to Claudio and Don Pedro, who ironically do exactly what Don John intended them to do, although Don John remains quiet after he has led them into his desired trap. But the machination of Don John does not come all of a sudden. A breezy superciliousness divorced from a stable insight into men and things is infused into the very main stream of the drama, so that the catastrophe in the action of the play comes as a result of the grave flaws working in the characters of Don Pedro and Claudio. Evil in the play is given the chance of creating turmoil but since it is a comedy, it is exposed in due course.

The outburst of Claudio in the church can be attributed to the presence of a near-fatal cognitive and moral blindness afflicting him without his knowing it. Otherwise, why should he doubt Hero at all when Don John is the prime factor in bringing them to witness the clandestine meeting between Borachio and Margaret (posing as Hero). Let us at this point see how
Borachio, Don John's man, gloatingly describes the scene that carried a sort of religious conviction to the wise prince and his favourite (Claudio) that the girl whom Claudio once described as a 'gem' and whom the other courted on his behalf, was not what she had been thought to be.

Borachio: ...but know that I have to-night wooed Margaret, the Lady Hero's gentlewoman, by the name of Hero; she leans out at her mistress' chamber-window, bids me a thousand times goodnight - I tell this tale vilely. I should first tell how the Prince, Claudio, and my master Don John, saw afar off in the orchard this encounter.

Conrade: And thought they Margaret was Hero?

Borachio: Two of them did, the Prince and Claudio; but the devil my master knew she was Margaret; and partly by his oaths, which first posse'd them, partly by the dark night, which did deceive them, but chiefly by my villainy, which did confirm any slander that Don John had made, away went Claudio enrag'd; swore he would meet her, as he was appointed, the next morning at the temple, and there, before the whole congregation, shame her with what he saw o'er night, and send her home again without a husband.

(III.iii.)

Indeed, it is ironical that the very moment of triumphant gloating turns out to be the moment of nemesis overtaking him. He has given himself away, without his knowing it, to the officers of the state.
He has been fatally overheard.

IIInd Watch: We charge you in the Prince's name, stand.
Ist Watch: Call up the right Master Constable; we have here recover'd the most dangerous piece of lechery that ever was known in the commonwealth.

(III.iii.)

This is Shakespeare's technique of presenting his moral vision of a world where we do wrong, then give ourselves airs, chuckle over the fate of our victims, and then, when feeling so secure inside our 'invulnerable' armour, we are most unexpectedly tripped up. Don Pedro and Claudio are gulled, Hero is defamed but Borachio has his share of misfortune too.

To return to Don John, he has already planted the seed of suspicion in Claudio's mind when he said:

Signior, you are very near my brother in his love; he is enamour'd on Hero; I pray you dissuade him from her; she is no equal for his birth. You may do the part of an honest man in it.

(II.i.)

However, this suspicion was soon forgotten when Don Pedro told him of his true intention;
...Here, Claudio, I have wooed in thy name, and fair Hero is won. I have broke with her father, and his good will obtained. Name the day of marriage, and God give thee joy!

(II.i.)

This particular act of Don John, although seemingly a trifle, has bearing upon the final crisis of the play. He succeeds in planting doubt in Claudio, a seedling that is to be nursed by him. Don John knows beforehand of the intended wooing of Hero by Don Pedro for Claudio. Moreover knowingly he has addressed Claudio as Signior Benedick. Now, the seed of doubt which had been planted in Claudio bears fruit when he witnesses the meeting between Borachio and Margaret (posing as Hero).

The introduction of Dogberry, Verges and the Watch is of utmost importance in the final resolution of the play. In fact they serve as the saving gods who finally put things into their respective places. When these characters are introduced in Act III, Sc. iii., one is led to think of why Shakespeare has taken pains in introducing such characters. We use the word 'pains' deliberately because they are among the 'wittiest' of Shakespeare's lowly characters. But Shakespeare never introduces characters without purpose in the dramatic structure. Their indulging in 'wits' also serve to com-
plicate the play. If they had been straightforward in their speech the crisis in the play would have been resolved without the complications in the 'Church Scene.'

Dogberry: One word sir: our watch, sir, have indeed comprehended two aspicious persons, and we would have them this morning examined before your worship.

(III, iv.)

Some bits of conversation had gone before Verges told Leonato of the apprehension of the rogues. But even now there is no mention of the calumny of Hero. Had they even mentioned Hero's name, Leonato might have taken interest in the captives. The overall spirit of the play before Claudio's outburst in the Church has been created in such a way that there is no place for suspicion and mistrust. Don John who is to create havoc in the play is taken as one who has indeed repented his past misdeeds. One therefore is led to believe that two moods have been created in the play. The festive mood dominates, while running parallel to this is the more serious mood which ultimately overrides the former mood for a while. Leonato who is so far dominated by the former mood (his daughter being married) puts aside the case brought to him by Dogberry and Verges.
Take their examination yourself, and bring it me; I am now in great haste, as it may appear unto you.

(III.v.)

Leonato is 'in great haste' to see his daughter married and this is very ironical. It is ironical because he is confronted with something whose implications do not reach his mind, since he is no mood to address himself to it. Shakespeare has used this device to add to the crisis and thereby heighten the final comic effect. This scene though short is very important in that it helps to complicate the plot.

The complication of the plot is of vital importance to attain the final comic effect. The Church Scene is the turning point of the play. Hitherto the atmosphere has been one of merriment. It is no doubt true that plotting has already been underway, affecting the course of the play. Hero is all set to marry Claudio and Leonato is 'in great haste' to see his daughter wed. In the Church Scene the plot against all the major characters of the play, devised by Don John, finally hatches through Claudio. The atmosphere abruptly changes from one of merriment to that of grief.

The final resolution of the crisis is
brought about by the lowly characters; Dogberry, Verges and the Watch. They are the saving gods of the play. This shows clearly how Shakespeare subtly differentiates between the 'higher'ups' and the 'lower down' of society. The final illumination of the characters serves to heighten the final comic effect. Don John is denuded and his true self is revealed. Hero is reinstated in her true position. And the play concludes in an atmosphere in which it began. Don John is also taken captive but his trial is postponed until the next day. The concluding lines of the play serve to bring about the atmosphere of merriment in which it ends.

Think not on him till to-morrow. I'll devise thee brave punishments for him. Strike up, pipers.

(V.iv.)

Thus we see how Shakespeare makes use of the theme to show how even within the framework of Comedy, the tragic note can be brought about by the clouding of reason through the basic instability of man and the work of evil. The instrument we have in this study is Don John, the bastard brother of Don Pedro. He is the evil-incarnate, a necessity in the comic structure of the play. A necessity because Shakespeare has imitated life and in life evil is necessarily there.
But the more important point, perhaps, is that evil can operate so successfully and to such an alarming effect only because the mind is not anchored in the certainty of faith and reason and because it can be a victim of delusion and self-delusion.

It must be noted that Shakespeare has so designed the dove-tailing of the two plots that the defaming of Hero is not only the means of organically relating the Dogberry-Verges episode to the main plot and of finally unmasking Don John and Borachio, but also of bringing Benedick and Beatrice to wedlock. In fact, Hero's defamation brings out the best in the two wit-crackers. Both are shocked beyond belief, for they are instinctively convinced of Hero's innocence. Their reaction is therefore instinctive and immediate and they rush to take up her cause. Benedick decides to challenge Claudio to a duel to avenge the wrong done to Hero who is supposed to have died from the shock. And he has the support of Beatrice in this. In fact, the wronged and supposedly dead Hero has been given the role of bridging the gulf between them, thus quickening the pace of their eventual union.

Yet another happy feature of the otherwise atrocious affair is the discovery of a saviour in
the friar who plays the same role as Pisanio in *Cymbeline* and Paulina in *The Winter's Tale*. Even though it is a dramatic necessity, the friar's role is a testimony to the unsuspected presence and assertion of good in a world of evil when the rest of humanity appears benighted and lost to reason and grace. Into the graceless world of erring mortals, the Friar looks like a heaven-sent angel who, in the process, turns out to be instrumental in the symbolic passage from death to resurrection. Hero dies and is to acquire a new life. It is significant that the same symbolism is at work in *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale*. 