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Faith and *Folly*
in
Shakespeare's
Romantic Comedies

Theseus's position here is not necessarily one of absolute skepticism; he merely questions the possibilities of expressing the transcendental. Hippolyta simply believes. She believes the tale of the lovers. And, "beshrew her heart," she even believes, momentarily, in the illusion of the rude mechanicals. St. Paul says at the end of First Corinthians 13, "Nowe abideth faith, hope, and charitie, these three, but the greatest of these is charitie." It is fitting that Theseus, the ranking lord in the play, should exhibit such charity towards the players, the lovers, and even the fairies at the play's conclusion. But Hippolyta, as ranking lady, is not so much laggard in her faith.¹⁹ Their union is a happy note on which the play could end. Still, the fairies must have their last ephemeral words to remind us of their world, still just tantalizingly beyond our own, though our hands can almost join at certain magical moments.

And so we return at last from Theseus's court to Oberon's. Here the fairies, intangible, nighttime creatures, flit about the stage as the final symbols of that elusive truth Bottom, Theseus, Hippolyta, and the lovers all flirt with during the play. Theirs is no truth for the wise or the prudent. St. Paul warns, "for it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will cast away the understanding of the prudent" (I Cor. 1:19). "God hath chosen the foolish things of the world, to confound the wise" (I Cor. 1:27). Most of the characters in the final scene of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* know in their own ways that they are among the foolish things of this world. The fairies symbolize the fleeting shadows of their imaginations and our own, the truths seen through a glass darkly. Puck's intensely human if paradoxical attempt to communicate with us during his epilogue reveals how important it is that the audience also sense, however dimly, its close kinship to all of these foolish shadows, and celebrate that kinship as well. For only then can the play's festive communion in faith and folly be a completely successful celebration of transcendental, theatrical, and human unity. We must give Puck our hands, our hearts, and our belief for the festive experience to be complete. Without such an expression of our epistemological folly, we cannot truly affirm our imaginative faith.

"Man Is a Giddy Thing": Repentance and Faith in *Much Ado about Nothing*

THE FIRST CHAPTER stresses the importance of humility in the teachings of St. Paul and the comic vision of Erasmus. The man of faith, like the comic hero, must acknowledge his folly to achieve true festivity. He must know and admit that his behavior and his perceptions are imperfect. Only then can he embrace a comic or a Christian doctrine that teaches him to celebrate his fallen state, because it is universal, because it is forgiven, and because that forgiveness leads to inconceivable joy. The Anglican liturgy is richly characterized by the same paradoxical awareness. So, quite explicitly, are the two romantic comedies we have already considered.

Love's Labor's Lost and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are both conscious enough of their relationship to this doctrine to have alluded to some of its most familiar or controversial Pauline and Erasmian expressions. Further, both require of their characters a humble acknowledgment of imperfect behavior or imperfect understanding as an important prerequisite to their festive joy. But in *Love's Labor's Lost* the regeneration that should result from this acknowledged folly is not dramatized in the play. Amendment of life, comic penance, the proper result of the ladies' benevolent humiliation, is only promised in a year and a day. Similarly, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the moments of epistemological humility only occur for Bottom and the lovers as fleetingly as dawn or midnight. The process of regeneration is dramatized through the humiliating role-reversals in the forest. And the lovers' amity throughout the final act attests to its continued efficacy. But though we are made aware of the doctrinal dimensions of their changed perspectives at the end of Act IV, the fact that the lovers' humility is seldom demonstrated in Act V, and Bottom's not at all, makes it somewhat more ephemeral than we might like. Much like the promised regeneration of the lords in *Love's Labor's Lost*, we are

asked in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to take a continued humility largely on faith. The audience of both plays seems to have learned more of the folly of wisdom and the wisdom of folly than the characters.

These two plays, then, discover and begin to exploit this paradoxical comic attitude toward faith and folly. They also alert their audiences through allusions to its most important Christian dimensions. But they do not dramatize the achievement of this attitude of humility and faith nearly so much as they dramatize the need for that achievement. The later romantic comedies contain fewer explicit allusions to those Erasmian and Pauline paradoxes, though allusions still appear. However, they increasingly direct their action to the achievement of a humbling edification of the flawed characters. Increasingly, acknowledgment of folly and amendment of life become their comic heart and soul. *Twelfth Night*, the culmination of this process, insists upon varieties of this regeneration as the prerequisite of its comic festivity, and contains characters like Feste and Viola who remind us of its Pauline and Erasmian heritage. *The Merchant of Venice* also has intriguing allusions to Pauline commonplaces and doctrinal controversies. However, its enduring ambiguities stem in large measure from a lack of humility on the part of its self-consciously Christian comic celebrants. In both of these plays, though in opposite ways, edifying humiliation remains central to comic structure and comic vision.

The relative lack of such allusions in *Much Ado about Nothing* and *As You Like It* suggests quite accurately that the delightfully realistic humiliations and regenerations of their complex characters and actions are pushing the explicit doctrinal parallels into the background. Because Pauline and Erasmian influences are becoming more skeletal than skinlike, infusing structure and metaphoric undertone rather than comic surface, the balance will shift in this chapter and the next between doctrine and drama. Freed from the need to reestablish Christian patterns whose explicit place in Shakespeare's comic vision we have already demonstrated and analyzed, we will be able to give their relationships to the fascinating surfaces and subsurfaces of these four later comedies the closer attention they demand. That closer look will reveal that the final attitudes of the major characters towards the in-

escapable imperfections of their behavior and their knowledge, their folly and their faith, still determines the dimensions of their final happiness and defines the quality of their concluding festivity. Those attitudes will have occurred through a delightful but strenuous regenerative humiliation that has now become central to Shakespeare's comic action. If the allusions to Erasmus and St. Paul diminish in these later plays, their thematic and structural pertinence does not.

Much Ado about Nothing is especially interesting from this perspective because it contains two pairs of lovers who stand at opposite poles of psychological and thematic interest. Hero and Claudio are pasteboard characters whose heavily stylized psychologies will never compete for our attention in the play. But thematically they are worth our scrutiny, for they practically embody the process of regenerative humiliation that is going on so much more attractively in Benedick and Beatrice. Claudio is little more than a *humanum genus* figure from the old morality plays.¹ He is erring man, grotesquely flawed in his faith in Hero as well as in the charity with which that lack of faith is finally expressed in the church; he is imperfect even in his enactment of penance for those errors. If we expect too much psychological realism from him, Claudio will surely offend us. Hero, if virtually invisible as a character beside the psychological brilliance of Beatrice, is nevertheless also quite important in her thematic representation of that principle of forgiveness that stands behind Shakespeare's comic attitude toward acknowledged folly. For most of the play Claudio lacks faith and charity, and he lacks as well the knowledge of his folly, yet Hero implicitly accepts his imperfect penance, believes in his eventual repentance, and forgives him everything. However, in spite of watching Claudio enact the most formal penance in the comedies, one conceived by a priest and administered by a priestlike father, the audience has trouble following Hero's most charitable example of forgiveness. Therein lies one of the most enduring interpretive problems in Shakespeare.²

The problem is accentuated by the rich psychology of Benedick and Beatrice, and the equally rich enactment of their regenerations into romantic faith and the acceptance of folly. Like Claudio, but of course much less abstractly, they both must be led from the bondage of pride

and skepticism to the freedom of humility and faith. Like Claudio, they will learn to distrust their excessive pride in their senses and their reason, and to admit their own imperfection instead of being obsessed with the possibility (should we say certainty?) of imperfection in a mate. These benevolent lessons in faith and humility will make of them the almost perfect match they have always been for each other, appearances notwithstanding. The thrusts and parries of their merry war will continue to edify them both for ever after. Like them, we are glad that this is so. For Benedick and Beatrice are characters the audience loves quickly and deeply, characters they never forget.

Let us start then with Claudio's errors of folly and faithlessness, his abstract and troubling penance, and Hero's equally troubling forgiveness of him. Through their stylized actions, whose doctrinal contexts at least will become quite clear, we will be able to see the subtler doctrinal dimensions of the much more satisfying regenerative experiences of Benedick and Beatrice. Even if we cannot rejoice in Claudio's final forgiveness and his final joy, we might at least come to understand, as Robert Hunter and others have urged, why it has to occur and what it means.³ Our background in the Pauline and Erasman paradoxes of faith and folly will enhance our understanding of each of these actions. It can also direct our responses to the play's festive conclusion, whose joy need be no more paradoxical than the doctrine of celebrated universal folly that lies so close behind it. If the manifestations of these paradoxes in the Benedick-Beatrice plot are subtler than before, they will probably also be more interesting.

i. Hero and Claudio

Claudio's grotesque and ingrained folly will need little documentation, since it is the stumbling block of almost every critic of the play's festivity. He lacks all faith, not only in Hero but also in his friend Don Pedro. He believes naively and obstinately in the evidence of his senses and his reason. He is an uncharitable cad in the church. Also a formalist, he follows far too precisely the format prescribed regarding

"impediments" in the marriage ceremony. And his own acknowledgment of his folly, which is almost too charitable a word for it, is very slow in coming. But gradually, guided by what amounts almost to a liturgical ceremony of penance, he does "acknowledge and bewaile his manifold sinnes and wyckedness," and promise to lead a "new and better life, in faith." This highly stylized penance leaves many in the audience (none in the play) unconvinced. But Hero accepts and forgives this flawed man, and in her extraordinary action she redeems him for the comic festivity. Their characterizations are so flat, and their mutual enactments of now-familiar comic motifs of faith and folly so abstract, that they touch the larger play with unresolved ambiguities. However, since they also help to point out important thematic interests of the entire play, especially as they occur in the much more interesting relationship of Benedick and Beatrice, we need to look briefly at the doctrinal and liturgical dimensions of these two virtually allegorical characters.

We might suspect the sincerity of Claudio's affections as soon as he speaks of them in the first scene. True, after Benedick leaves the language turns to poetry. But his first question of Don Pedro has a strangely metallic ring: "Hath Leonato any son, my lord?" (1.i.262). His friend knows his drift immediately: "No child but Hero; she's his only heir." Shortly thereafter Claudio seems too fond of his appearance as a lover: "But lest my liking might too sudden seem, / I would have salved it with a longer treatise" (1.i.282-83). But far worse is to come. Two words of Don Pedro's infidelity spoken to him by the villains Don John and Borachio convince Claudio of its truth; and so immediately and without further investigation he loses faith in his good friend: "Friendship is constant in all other things / Save in the office and affairs of love" (11.i.157-58). Claudio learns of this specific error soon enough, but not of the profounder folly within him that would allow such unwarranted mistrust. And so Don John will work upon him again. When he does, the deception is far more convincing, as is witnessed by its success on Don Pedro as well as Claudio. Kirby Neill suggests that Claudio is less culpable than his predecessors in Shakespeare's analogues because he is less mercenary, less carnal, and taken in by a very effective deception.⁴ But Claudio's offense

transcends his foolish belief in what he can see, his trust in his senses over his nonexistent intuition. It lies also in the brutal formalism with which he exposes Hero's purported infidelity just before the wedding. Humiliating Hero and appearing to kill her by this uncharitable public action, Claudio has overstepped the bounds of ethical folly prescribed by comic conventions. Perhaps this is why his regeneration for these crimes against romantic faith and these blindnesses to his own comic folly—these severe errors of pride—must be couched within an equally formal framework, one like that for repentance prescribed by the Christian church. Even more than the lords of *Love's Labor's Lost*, Claudio needs a formal means to grace, and an amazing forgiveness. But though Shakespeare provides them both, we are still not sure how to take them.

In fact, the highly stylized presentation of Claudio's repentance and forgiveness has itself been a major stumbling block to critics, who find it excessively formal, hence contrived. There is, however, good reason for that formality, and considerable likelihood that Shakespeare's audience would have appreciated it more than we do today. Claudio's most stunning error is his formalistic, uncharitable abuse of the wedding ritual, the Solemnization of Matrimony he and Hero are about to celebrate in Act IV. At the beginning of that ritual the minister admonishes the congregation, "if any man can shewe any just cause, why thei may not lawfully be joined together let hym now speake, or els hereafter for ever holde his peace" (p. 122). He likewise charges the couple "that if either of you doe knowe any impedymēt, why ye may not be lawfully joyned together in Matrimony, that ye confesse it" (p. 123). Among the best known words in the Prayer Book, these admonitions are followed even today by an unquiet hush in the church, so sombre are their implications at so festive a time. Claudio says the thing everyone dreads hearing at this moment, and, technically speaking, he is correct in breaking the ritual. But spiritually he is at fault, not only in mistaking the facts ("Blessed are they that have not seen, but also believe"), but also in insisting on public disclosure and public vindication. For he does not have "just cause." This uncharitable, faithless interruption of one sacrament would seem, then, to require another sacrament, penance, if Claudio is to be restored to comic grace.

Claudio almost certainly enacts something like the Aquinian pattern of penance to which Hunter and Lewalski compare his late experiences with Leonato.⁵ A related form of repentance more familiar to the Renaissance playgoer might have been the liturgical pattern prescribed in the Homilie of Repentance and derived from the communion service of the *Book of Common Prayer*.⁶ That homily asserts "foure parts of repentance": "contrition of the heart," "an unfained confession and acknowledging of our sinnes," "faith," and "an amendment of life, or a new life." As we shall see, contrition, confession, faith in forgiveness, and the visible amendment of life all occur separately and sequentially in Act V. Their formality as well as their liturgical basis will help us to perceive their much subtler equivalents in the Benedick-Beatrice plot, even if they don't redeem Claudio in our eyes.

The homily introduces its subject with the keen excitement of prophecy: "Now there bee foure parts of repentance, which being set together, may bee likened to an easie and short ladder, whereby we may climbe from the bottomlesse pit of perdition, that wee cast our selves into by our dayly offences and greevous sinnes, up into the castle or towre of eternall and endlesse salvation." We immediately notice the assumption of universal, daily sin, a liturgical commonplace we have discussed before. The first step in repentance is "contrition of the heart": "For we must be earnestly sorry for our sinnes, and unfeignedly lament and bewaile that wee have by them so greevously offended our most bounteous and mercifull GOD, who so tenderly loved us."⁷ In order for contrition to occur, there must be events, "which most lively doe paint out before our eyes our naturall uncleannesse, and the enormitie of our sinfull life."

Dogberry and Borachio "point out" that uncleanness for Claudio. First, Dogberry's expounding of the offenses of the deceivers is prefaced by a liturgical reminiscence of the Litany's catalogue of the "sins of the world." In the Litany, or General Supplication for forgiveness, the priest petitions God: "Remember not, Lorde our offences, nor the offences of our forefathers." Then, to the familiar response "Good Lorde, delyver us," he catalogues most of the offenses of erring mankind: "From all evil and mischief; from synne, from the

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craftes and assaultes of the Devil . . . from all blyndnes of herte, from pride, vayne glorye, and hypocrisy; from envy, hatred and malice, and all uncharitablenes . . . from hardnes of harte . . . frome all the de-ceiptes of the worlde, . . . *Good Lorde, delyver us*" (pp. 54-55). Though Dogberry's catalogue comically sticks on false report like a broken record, it sounds a similar note:

CLAUDIO. Hearken after their offense, my lord.

PEDRO. Officers, what offense have these men done?

DOGBERRY. Marry, sir, they have committed false report; moreover, they have spoken untruths; secondarily, they are slanders; sixth and lastly, they have belied a lady; thirdly, they have verified unjust things; and to conclude, they are lying knaves.⁸

Borachio establishes the more serious atmosphere of confession when he outlines his complicity in Claudio's guilt. He is contrite, and he confesses publicly and completely:

I have deceived even your very eyes. What your wisdoms could not discover, these shallow fools have brought to light. . . . My villainy they have upon record, which I had rather seal with my death than repeat over to my shame. The lady is dead upon mine and my master's false accusation; and briefly, I desire nothing but the reward of a villain. (v.i.220-31)

Borachio's painful reciting of his crime reminds the lords of their arrogant belief in their own senses over their intuition. By confessing his own sin, Borachio is the agent of their contrition. After he finishes, Don Pedro and Claudio "unfeignedly lament" their offences against Hero. The first step in repentance is fulfilled: both men are utterly contrite:

PEDRO. Runs not this speech like iron through your blood?

CLAUDIO. I have drunk poison whiles he uttered it.

.
Sweet Hero, now thy image doth appear
In the rare semblance that I loved it first.

(v.i. 232-34, 238-39)

As the homily predicts, the second stage of their regeneration will be confession:

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The second is, an unfained confession and acknowledging of our sinnes unto GOD, whom by them we have so grievously offended, that if he should deale with us according to his justice, we doe deserve a thousand helles, if there could bee so many. Yet if wee will with a sorrowfull and contrite heart make an unfained confession of them unto GOD, hee will freely and frankely forgive them, and so put all our wickednesse out of remembrance before the sight of his Majestie, that they shall no more bee thought upon.⁹

By using Hero's father, Leonato, as their father confessor, Shakespeare secularizes the analogy and makes it more comfortably comical. Hero's father, like Hero herself, is only analogous to the real priest (Friar Francis) Shakespeare could have used, or to the Father of all mercies the Protestant would confess to. But his listening to their confession, his administration of penance, and his eventual forgiveness of them initiates the sequence of sacramental analogies which conclude the play and help to explain its festivity. Similar priestlike functions are performed by the lords and ladies of *Love's Labor's Lost*. Because of Claudio's remaining imperfection, Leonato's forgiveness of Claudio, like Hero's, is a mark of personal grace and an action which establishes this comic world as one pervaded by a forgiveness that is undeserved but almost universal.

Upon Leonato's chiding, both Claudio and Pedro acknowledge their sin and ask for penance:

CLAUDIO. I know not how to pray your patience;
Yet I must speak. Choose your revenge yourself;
Impose me to what penance your invention
Can lay upon my sin. Yet sinned I not
But in mistaking.

PEDRO. By my soul, nor I!
And yet, to satisfy this good old man,
I would bend under any heavy weight
That he'll enjoin me to. (v.i.258-65)

This moment is their most imperfect during the sacramental sequence. Claudio only grudgingly admits his sin, minimizing it and confessing it defensively. His sin is far greater than mere mistaking. Having failed to forgive, he has legally deprived himself of God's forgiveness. His comic confusion of "revenge" and "penance" illustrates his

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precarious position. We feel uneasy, then, even though the two men confess their sin and agree to a public penance. They do, however, gamely submit themselves to the dispensation of their creditor; to their good fortune, he can forgive better than they can repent. "The third part of repentance, is faith, whereby wee doe apprehend and take hold upon the promises of GOD, touching the free pardon and forgiveness of our sinnes. . . . For what should avayle and profite us to bee sorrie for our sinnes, to lament and . . . confess . . . our offences, . . . unlesse we doe stedfastly beleve, and bee fully perswaded, that GOD . . . will forgive us all our sinnes."¹⁰ Predictably, the Anglican homily here supplements the Catholic, Aquinian formula which Hunter proposes—contrition, confession, and repentance—with "a lively faith in him whom he had denied." This distinction is central to the Catholic-Protestant controversy over salvation by faith or works. That Claudio is most dramatically repentant in this area of faith suggests how sensitive Shakespeare might have been to the Pauline and Erasmusian undertones of his action.

Claudio, like Beatrice and Benedick, has placed too much trust throughout his experience upon the senses.¹¹ He believes what he sees, and in so doing he is frequently deceived, like Othello, when confronted either by sensible deceptions or by transcendental truth, the intuition of love or purity. Don John exploits this failing twice. Because Claudio twice denies the person he should trust, his penance is finally a crucial test of his faith in love. He must accept blindfolded the mercy of his victim's father and of love itself. After his public confession Claudio joyfully agrees to this ultimate test of his faith:

O noble sir!
Your over-kindness doth wring tears from me.
I do embrace your offer; and dispose
For henceforth of poor Claudio.

(v.i.279-82)

The old, faithless Claudio is dead; the rebirth to come should remind us of a basic Christian paradox: you must be born again. Such a familiar articulation of this Augustinian and Pauline commonplace¹² suggests how directly the conversion of Claudio would have seemed to

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parallel doctrinal understandings. It also introduces the fourth step in repentance.

In acting out his faith Claudio begins to fulfill the last requirement, amendment of life. Let us look finally at its homiletic formulation and then see how accurately it describes Claudio: "The fourth is, an amendment of life, or a new life, in bringing fourth fruits worthy of repentance. For they that doe truly repent, must bee cleane altered and changed, they must become new creatures, they must be no more the same that they were before."¹³ "A true and sound repentance . . . may bee knowen and declared by good fruits." Claudio first demonstrates his amended life at Hero's grave. There, Don Pedro and Claudio, accompanied by their fellow men, undergo a very formal public confession and penance:

Done to death by slanderous tongues
Was the Hero that here lies. (v.iii.3-4)

Their ritual reenacts all of the phases of Claudio's repentance and forgiveness, from acknowledgement and confession to the begging for pardon. Such heavy stylization may be Shakespeare's way of suggesting the restoration of a broken ritual order:

Pardon, goddess of the night
Those that slew thy virgin knight.
(v.iii.12-13)

The slant rhymes, stiff syntax, and uneven meter of the tortured, amateurish verse can suggest in their labored earnestness a new faith. "Tongues," "wrongs," "tomb," "dumb"; then "woe," "go," "moan," and "groan" can impress upon us their sincere contrition—"heavily, heavily"—but earnestly as well.

After the observance is done, Claudio hopefully and faithfully awaits his unknown fate:

And Hymen now with luckier issue speeds
Than this for whom we rend' red up this woe.
(v.iii.32-33)

Still remembering his sin of distrust, still evidently regretting it, Claudio places himself completely in the providence of love. No man

can become perfectly faithful or perfectly charitable. But Claudio seems to have followed the prescribed process of repentance fairly well.

We learn that Claudio's forgiveness has begun when Leonato, the father, tells us immediately after the scene of penance that he has forgiven him (v.iv.2). Once Claudio takes the hand of the masked bride and declares, "before this holy friar / I am your husband, if you like of me" (v.iv.58-59), he has performed the last act of faith that will be asked of him. At least partially amended in faith and in charity, and freely admitting his folly, he is as worthy of love and even of Hero as he can become; she un.masks and becomes his.

But partly because her extraordinary forgiveness contrasts so sharply to the uncharitable renunciation which occasions it, clusters of ambiguity still surround both his penance and her forgiveness. As well as Claudio has fulfilled the injunctions levied by Leonato, and demonstrated his "new life" or "new faith," his conversion still leaves the audience dissatisfied with his sincerity and incapable of forgiving him. The formality and suddenness of the repentance, the heavy stylization of his characterization as well as his penance, partially explain this inability to forgive and love him. Even though some of his actions, like the Calvinist or humourous convention of sudden conversion, have ample doctrinal and dramatic precedent, on the stage they also seem stock, unbelievable dramatic conventions. Other reservations abound. Claudio's confusion of revenge and penance (v.i.259-60) suggests a misapprehension of human and divine forgiveness and helps to explain his own unforgiving vengeance in church. His easy acceptance of another bride may be both too soon and too materialistic. His shifting of the blame to Don John occurs ambiguously close to his experience of personal repentance. Finally, his verse may be tortured simply because it is insincere. There are obviously more than enough reasons here for Hero to distrust his penance and withhold her forgiveness. Paradoxically, many of them may stem from Claudio's flat characterization. We seem to be asking a stock figure to be something more than he is, and Claudio cannot oblige us. Shakespeare invites such a problem, of course, because of the complexity of other charac-

ters in this very play. But that does not relieve most of us of our discomfort.

Unlike us, however, Hero either accepts these signs of his repentance or she forgives him in spite of their imperfections. Once again we cannot be sure because as a character she is even less complex than her Claudio. Her exceptional forgiveness, no less than Claudio's enactment of penance, is therefore another action we have difficulty understanding or celebrating. But if we accept them for what they are, the most abstract actions of the most stylized characters in these mature romantic comedies, the interpretive difficulties diminish. For Hero and Claudio seem to embody in allegorical fashion the same comic-Christian patterns we have already found to be so central to Shakespeare's comic vision. Their marriage, however unsatisfying it might be on the psychological level, makes good sense allegorically. It represents the blending in all men of the ideal and the real; more especially it represents the yoking together of the promise of forgiveness with erring man, who needs that promise. That the ritual of marriage is also a symbol of the unity of Christ and erring man is surely not an accidental association here.¹⁴ For marriage, like communion, also celebrates both of those unions. Lewalski, in fact, has mentioned her sense of analogies, at this moment of profound forgiveness, between Hero and Christ.¹⁵ The connection is intriguing.

But Hero, as her name suggests, is a static character, ideal but also almost invisible. She performs her extraordinary acts of faith and forgiveness silently and unobtrusively. We are not privy to her misgivings, if indeed she has any. For she remains almost purely an abstraction to the end. In the final scene Benedick and Beatrice wittily celebrate the couples' unions; Hero and Claudio almost evaporate in the warmth of such realism. Indeed, both Hero and Claudio must be understated verbally and psychologically or the whole comedy, including the subtler relationship of Benedick and Beatrice, would become uncomfortably doctrinal, and lose as well the richness of its ambiguous colorings. We understand Hero's allegorical significance well enough. That is precisely why we have so much trouble accepting it psychologically.

George and George suggest in doctrinal terms that seem especially appropriate to this moment and to others in Shakespearean comedy (like Orlando's extraordinary forgiveness of Oliver in the Forest of Arden) how special Hero's acts are, and how natural it is that they make us uncomfortable: "Men typically are enemies to other men; not to be an enemy in turn—to follow the ethics of universal love and to love one's enemies—this is the exceptional achievement of that exceptional individual, the true Christian, the brand plucked from the burning by the hand of God" (p. 77). Claudio is Hero's enemy, as we often remain his. It attests to Hero's election, her "Protestant sainthood" as George and George describe a perfection like hers (pp. 98–114), that Hero can so manifest the grace of God by loving and forgiving her enemy as neither we nor Claudio could. Like Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*, who may be Hero's ironic counterpart, the Protestant saint is a precariously isolated individual, balanced as he or she is between the conflicting idealism and realism of man's mixed nature, and also between the conflicting Christian ideals of righteousness and humility. Unlike Antonio, Hero maintains her balance, but only at the cost of her virtual invisibility in the play. Like Antonio, therefore, she remains strangely isolated from everyone else, though she willingly participates in the final festivity and actually has a hand in causing it to occur. Such creative ambiguity obviously transcends simple allegory. But if we fail to perceive any of Hero's or Claudio's abstract, doctrinal dimensions, we cannot fully appreciate the festivity of *Much Ado about Nothing*.

ii. Benedick and Beatrice

Benedick and Beatrice, in contrast, stand before us throughout the play in great psychological complexity. As a result, we can enjoy their antics and their witplay on many levels before we begin to consider their possible relationships to Shakespeare's comic themes of faith and folly. Paradoxically, the abstract depiction of Claudio and Hero, fool and forgiver, faithless and faithful lover, can lead us to understand the connections between doctrine and drama in the depiction of Benedick

and Beatrice. Neither Benedick nor Beatrice is as flawed as Claudio; neither is as good as Hero. But their relationships to both of them demand our attention. Like Claudio, both of them have follies they must admit and try to amend. Both of them are also far too sure of their own senses and reason to know truth from falsehood. Like Hero, both of them will have to embrace imperfections in their mates, with humor and with love, if they are ever to thrive in marriage. The old comic equation Shakespeare seems to have discovered in *Love's Labor's Lost* and enriched in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* thus finds two added dimensions here. First, folly becomes both faithlessness and the self-love which occasions it. Second, humility and faith in love involve knowing that imperfection may be thine as well as mine, and loving another both in spite of that knowledge and because of it. Such loving is romantic madness at its finest and most mature.

Both of these changes represent important progressions in Shakespeare's comic vision. The cuckold's horn becomes a paradoxical badge of faith as well as a mark of folly. And while the theme of romantic faith continues to touch the epistemological concerns of the noting-nothing pun, it also becomes with Benedick and Beatrice a vitally important metaphor that defines their love relationship.¹⁶ Like faith, penance becomes another such metaphor, in their words as well as their actions. It is thus no accident that their faithlessness and their folly as lovers, and their ultimate repentance too, are frequently described in religious imagery. That imagery, like their rich characterization, is still not far removed from the Pauline and Erasmian context from which it first emerged in Shakespeare's comic vision. Of course, the religion of love was something of a literary cliché in Shakespeare's time. But with his fresh awareness of its Pauline and Erasmian roots, Shakespeare seems to have given it new life.

One of the best indications of the importance of these thematic patterns in the play is the care with which they have been woven into its structure. We can discuss the regenerative humiliations of Benedick and Beatrice simultaneously because they are so prominent and so contrivedly juxtaposed in the play, not only against the Hero-Claudio action but also against themselves. Their mutual faithlessness or skepticism is articulated in closely parallel early speeches and scenes, and

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dramatized throughout their merry war. Beneath their scornful façade, again expressed by both characters in parallel speeches, is something suspiciously like love, despite their disclaimers. The benevolent deception directed against both of them thus strikes right at the root of their faithlessness and their fear of folly. It, too, occurs in scenes that are mirror-images of one another. And the good-natured jesting that marks the success of the plots is also highlighted by parallel structure. That Beatrice and Benedick remain unique and believable characters in spite of this symmetry is a remarkable achievement of the play. Each of these moments is worth a closer look through our Pauline and Erasmian perspective. We will simply have to make that perspective more flexible to accommodate their subtler portrayal.

At the very beginning of the play Beatrice places the themes of faithlessness and folly before us by anatomizing Benedick. The Messenger describes him as returning from the wars with all honor: "A lord to a lord, a man to a man; stuffed with all honourable virtues" (1.1.49-50). But Beatrice will see only his folly: "It is so indeed. He is no less than a stuffed man; but for the stuffing—well, we are all mortal" (1.1.51-52). If he is stuffed in Beatrice's eyes with folly, he is also faithless:

BEATRICE. Who is his companion now? He hath every month a new sworn brother.

MESSENGER. Is't possible?

BEATRICE. Very easily possible. He wears his faith but as the fashion of his hat; it ever changes with the next block. (1.1.63-67)

There is some truth to her caustic observations, but her own considerable faithlessness and folly also shine through them. Benedick needs to be cured of these related diseases; so does she.

The skepticism or faithlessness of Benedick and Beatrice is portrayed by Shakespeare in the lightest comic terms. It is almost a game, a "merry war"; and it will likewise be cured through play. Benedick is, however, seriously flawed in his romantic faith. He is afraid to trust any woman in fact, because he is obsessed with womanly unfaithfulness, with becoming a cuckold:

That a woman conceived me, I thank her; that she brought me up, I likewise give her most humble thanks; but that I will have a rechate

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winded in my forehead, or hang my bugle in an invisible baldrick, all women shall pardon me. Because I will not do them the wrong to mistrust any, I will do myself the right to trust none; and the fine is (for the which I may go the finer), I will live a bachelor.

(1.1.212-19)

It is Benedick, of course, who is without faith. Obsessed by his own goodness, and afraid of what he cannot control, he refuses to commit himself to life, to maturity, or to love.

Beatrice similarly fears men, for their unfaithfulness and also for their physicality. She is repulsed by beards, yet simultaneously aware that to get a man she must have his beard:

BEATRICE. Lord, I could not endure a husband with a beard on his face. I had rather lie in the woollen!

LEONATO. You may light on a husband that hath no beard.

BEATRICE. What should I do with him? dress him in my apparel and make him my waiting gentlewoman? He that hath a beard is more than a youth, and he that hath no beard is less than a man; and he that is more than a youth is not for me, and he that is less than a man, I am not for him. Therefore I will even take sixpence in earnest of the berrord and lead his apes into hell. (1.1.26-35)

Beatrice, much better than Benedick, perceives her dilemma. Afraid to trust a member of the opposite sex, and thus in a sense afraid to trust herself to him, she, like Benedick, cannot muster the faith to love. Like Hamlet, and like Antonio, she is deeply aware of the imperfection of man, but unable to place her awareness within a consoling comic or Christian perspective. She would never marry "till God made men of some other metal than earth. Would it not grieve a woman to be overmastered with a piece of valiant dust? to make an account of her life to a clod of wayward marl?" (1.1.51-54). It might indeed grieve Beatrice, but if she or Benedick is to marry at all, there is no alternative. For from the Erasmian or Pauline perspective that Shakespearean comedy shares, we are all fools.

Beatrice ironically expresses this corrective truth at the end of the same speech, but she still does not understand it: "No, uncle, I'll none. Adam's sons are my bretheren, and truly I hold it a sin to match in my kindred" (1.1.54-56). Later in the same scene Beatrice unwittingly repeats the same paradox. She would not have Benedick put her

down, "lest I should prove the mother of fools." But she must be the mother of fools if she is to have human children. There is no other kind. That kinship with Adam, with universal imperfection, must become cause for forgiveness, trust, and love if comic festivity is to occur in *Much Ado*. The lesson of humility is thus intensified from *Love's Labor's Lost*, where the lords had to learn only of their own folly. Here, like Viola and Olivia in their relationship with the changeable Orsino and Sebastian-Cesario in *Twelfth Night*, and like Orlando and Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Benedick and Beatrice must learn to expect and embrace imperfection in one another while they learn to accept their own folly. In fact, in *Much Ado* one lesson clearly depends upon the other. That interdependency is enhanced by the irony that its prideful and faithless learners Benedick and Beatrice are destined for one another.

The frequent imagery of faith and repentance during the same parallel scenes is further evidence of the pertinence of Erasman and Pauline paradoxes about faith and folly to the relationship of Benedick and Beatrice. In the first scene, Benedick cannot abide the lavish praise of Hero by Claudio and Don Pedro. Therefore he replies to their Petrarchan conventions: "That I neither feel how she should be loved, nor know how she should be worthy, is the opinion that fire cannot melt out of me. I will die in it at the stake" (1.1.205-7). Don Pedro continues this religious imagery when he thereupon remarks on the strange pride of Benedick's faithlessness: "Thou wast ever an obstinate heretick in the despite of beauty." This leads Benedick to his just-quoted comments about universal cuckoldry. Then he vows his eternal faithlessness in love:

Prove that ever I lose more blood with love than I will get again
with drinking, pick out mine eyes with a ballad-maker's pen and
hang me up at the door of a brothel house for the sign of blind
Cupid. (1.1.222-25)

Don Pedro again describes this posture in the ironic imagery of faith: "Well, if ever thou dost fall from this faith, thou wilt prove a notable argument." But Benedick thinks such a conversion highly unlikely:

"If I do, hang me in a bottle like a cat and shoot at me; and he that hits me, let him be clapped on the shoulder and called Adam." As we have just seen, Beatrice also refers ironically to Adam when she is revealing her obsession with infidelity and imperfection. The association is as inevitable as it is pertinent to their mutually fallen state. But for the moment, Benedick will not yet repent his faithlessness or admit his folly. To him, marriage should be signified with horns in the forehead and the inscription "Here you may see Benedick the married man" (1.1.237-38). "The horn, the horn." Benedick abhors such humiliation. Its possibility is one of the reasons marriage is such an act of faith. Benedick replies, "In faith" twice during the scene (at ll. 152 and 175), but he evidences none at all.

In the closely parallel scene at the beginning of the second act, Beatrice illustrates her kinship with this skeptical attitude in another cluster of amusing religious images, this time images of repentance and salvation. As with Benedick, the images mark both the foolish pride and the lack of faith that stand between her and married happiness. The horns she fears suggest cuckoldry, but also too much (or too little) sexuality, like the beard joke earlier: "I shall lessen God's sending that way; for it is said, 'God sends a curst cow short horns,' but to a cow too curst he sends none" (11.1.19-21). Her bondage is still obvious; she would lessen God's sending, when she must instead lesson herself to accept whatever he sends, even as Claudio finally does. But Beatrice prays instead for no husband, for none will be good enough for her: "For the which blessing [no husband] I am at him upon my knees every morning and evening" (11.1.24-26). There follows the business about the beard; in Claudio's parallel scene it was the horns. Her heaven is a paradise of bachelors and maids, for neither of them can have committed the adultery that both she and Benedick seem to consider inevitable in their common faithlessness.

To Leonato's question, "Well, then, go you into hell?" she therefore replies,

No; but to the gate, and there will the devil meet me like an old cuckold with horns on his head, and say, "Get you to heaven, Beatrice, get you to heaven. Here's no place for you maids." So deliver

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I up my apes, and away to Saint Peter. For the heavens, he shows me where the bachelors sit, and there live we as merry as the day is long.
(II.i.37-43)

Like Benedick, she swears "Yes, faith," but she has none at all. As she advises Hero,

Wooring, wedding, and repenting is as a Scotch jig, a measure, and a cinque-pace: the first suit is hot and hasty like a Scotch jig (and full as fantastical); the wedding, mannerly modest, as a measure, full of state and ancience; and then comes Repentance and with his bad legs falls into the cinque-pace faster and faster, till he sink into his grave.
(II.i.63-69)

This may be shrewd apprehension, as Leonato suggests; it is also bad faith. Shakespeare's subsequent dramatic use of repentance, not only as the formula for Claudio's stilted regeneration but also as the metaphor for the spirited and complex regeneration of Benedick and Beatrice is thus a significant comic achievement. Theirs becomes a faith that is the opposite of this skepticism; but it retains a healthy, caustic awareness of human imperfection that they will never lose.

If they must learn to accept and celebrate the folly of the horns, the inevitable imperfection they can expect in their mates, Benedick and Beatrice must also learn the more characteristic comic lesson of their own folly. In fact, a touch of humility will make the other lesson easier. They will both be edified in this direction by the charitable deceptions of Act III. Their merry war serves a similar purpose for both of them throughout the whole play, especially for Benedick. The exchange which comes closest to edifying him early in the play comes during the masked dance, an occasion for similar humiliation in *Love's Labor's Lost*. Since their witty skirmishes have been so often discussed, let us look at just this one moment.

Even though Beatrice and Benedick would seem equally to deserve their comic epithets of Lady Disdain and Signior Mountanto for their faithlessness and pride, Benedick is the one who suffers (and learns) the most through their exchanges. Beatrice is much quicker than he is, very adept at the humiliating jibe. One of her best moments comes when Benedick unwisely asks if she knows a certain Benedick. She gladly obliges him with a stinging anatomy of his folly:

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Why, he is the Prince's jester, a very dull fool. Only his gift is in devising impossible slanders. None but libertines delight in him; and the commendation is not in his wit, but in his villainy. . . . I am sure he is in the fleet. I would he had boarded me.
(II.i.122-28)

This hard lesson is accompanied by an obvious challenge to reply. Benedick, intimidated by her wit and his own folly, fearfully refuses her challenge and later exits rather than bear more blows. He also begins to think about what she has said:

That my Lady Beatrice should know me, and not know me! The Prince's fool! Ha! it may be I go under that title because I am merry. Yea, but so I am apt to do myself wrong.
(II.i.183-86)

Later in the same scene he publicly shares her criticism with Don Pedro, who cagily neither confirms nor denies her observations:

She told me, not thinking I had been myself, that I was the Prince's jester, that I was duller than a great thaw; huddling jest upon jest with such impossible conveyance upon me that I stood like a man at a mark, with a whole army shooting at me. She speaks poniards, and every word stabs.
(II.i.218-23)

They stab so painfully that he could almost mend under her humiliation. Yet in both cases Benedick finally attributes his wounds to her scorn and not to his folly:

I am not so reputed. It is the base (though bitter) disposition of Beatrice that puts the world into her person and so gives me out.
(II.i.186-88)

Through this clever evasion of the humiliating truth of her witty words Benedick perpetuates both his unwarranted pride and his faithlessness in the other sex.

But Beatrice has frightened him away with her wit. Surely that must have given him an intimation of his own folly. Benedick says something else as he smarts from her wounds that makes us wonder if his heretic's "faith" is not crumbling along with his pride: "I would not marry her though she were endowed with all that Adam had left him before he transgressed" (II.i.225-27). Here is Adam again, that repeated eponym of universal imperfection. And "my Lady Beatrice" instead of "my Lady Disdain"? Who asked him to marry her? What

has already entered his giddy brain? We will have to wonder for only another scene or so. There is some suggestion, incidentally, that Beatrice may also have come off halting from this fray. For her later comment in the scene suggests that she fears that the very wit in which she takes such pride may have chased away her favorite target forever: "Thus goes every one to the world but I, and I am sunburnt. I may sit in a corner and cry 'Heigh-ho for a husband!'" (II.i.285-87). Beatrice seems to have precious little desire to remain single. Her momentary lapse from her role as Lady Disdain prompts Don Pedro to promise, "Lady Beatrice, I will get you one." He does so quite nicely, but only after the game he stages (with the help of the ladies and the gentlemen) finally convinces Benedick and Beatrice to throw over their faithlessness, distrust the evidence of their senses, and embrace their inevitable folly with profound joy.

There have of course been earlier indications that behind their façades of wit and hard-heartedness lies something suspiciously like love. To be sure, Benedick proclaims in his first exchange with Beatrice that though he is loved of all ladies he loves none. And she replies "I am of your humour for that. I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me" (I.i.116-18). But in anatomizing Hero for Claudio, Benedick also has these words of praise for Beatrice:

There's her cousin, an she were not possessed with a fury, exceeds her as much in beauty as the first of May doth the last of December.
(I.i.169-71)

And Beatrice, speaking of the hypothesized union of Don John and Benedick, betrays similar inclinations:

With a good leg and a good foot, uncle, and money enough in his purse, such a man would win any woman in the world—if 'a could get her good will.
(II.i.13-15)

They would still remake their mates; but the new image would not be too different from the old. We even hear Beatrice admit to Don Pedro that she has loved Benedick once, and thought that he loved her too. Of his heart she says,

Indeed, my lord, he lent it me awhile, and I gave him use for it—a

double heart for his single one. Marry, once before he won it of me with false dice; therefore your grace may well say I have lost it.
(II.i.249-52)

We hear no more of this. Still, this false dicing, imagined or no, underlies her lack of faith in Benedick. She cannot forgive him what is past. Like Demetrius with Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Benedick seems almost completely unaware of this episode. But he is as afraid of her scorn as she is of his faithlessness. Clearly, then, their mutual disdain is a defense mechanism that is keeping them from noting with faith their mutual love, and accepting with humility their mutual folly. Benedick says at one point, "I can see yet without spectacles" (I.i.168). Beatrice's parallel comment is "I have a good eye, uncle; I can see a church by daylight" (II.i.71-72). But both of them are believing the appearance of scorn instead of the reality of love. They are skeptics trusting in outer rather than inner truth. In their mutual lack of faith in things not seen, in their excessive trust in daylight and eyesight, they are mutually unaware of their mutual love.

The pageant or game that converts both of them strikes right at their ethical and epistemological pride. On the one hand, Don Pedro and Hero convince their "victims" that looks are deceiving, that they are both really worshipped while they appear to be scorned. Once this first seed of faith is sown, the lovers see with new eyes, and believe, momentarily at least, in things hoped for, not seen. This is not religious faith, to be sure. But the religious-romantic analogy enriches the comic action just as it has before. It continues to be highlighted with appropriate religious metaphors. Simultaneously, the pageant corrects their pride just enough for them to recognize their own follies and thus accept more generously the possibility of imperfections in others, after the manner of Olivia in *Twelfth Night*. Two dedicated romantic skeptics are thus finally, miraculously, converted into true believers in love.

Benedick frames his experience with two soliloquies which vividly illustrate the dimensions of the change he has undergone. Before the play he is to see, he wonders how

one man, seeing how much another man is a fool when he dedicates his behaviors to love, will, after he hath laughed at such shallow fol-

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lies in others, become the argument of his own scorn by falling in love. (II.iii.7-11)

How can a proud young man embrace a known folly and rejoice in it? On the other hand, how, either, can a confirmed skeptic suddenly become transformed by faith?

May I be so converted and see with these eyes? I cannot tell; I think not. I will not be sworn but love may transform me to an oyster; but I'll take my oath on it, till he have made an oyster of me he shall never make me such a fool. (II.iii.20-24)

Remember what John Colet said about man's acceptance of mysteries transcending his reason and his senses, and about the miraculous transformations that accompany such religious faith: "These mysteries of God are in truth of such a kind, that he who denies not himself utterly, he who becomes not a fool that he may be wise, . . . shall never feel . . . what are the Divine wisdom and spirit. A man must needs be . . . born again, . . . that . . . he may spiritually discern, search out, gather, and receive, the spiritual things of God."¹⁷ Bottom becomes an ass; Benedick may become an oyster. But as both are transformed they touch upon the comic and Christian mysteries of faith and folly. Benedick, no fool as he is about to embrace his folly, knows enough about this experience to talk about it in precisely such terms. Will I become such a fool? Will I be so transformed and converted to this new faith? Stranger things have happened before. Inside the barnacled shell of folly may lie the twin pearls of humility and faith.

Nothing else will change, however, until he rids himself of that fear of imperfection in others that he shares with Beatrice:

One woman is fair, . . . another is wise, . . . another virtuous, . . . but till all graces be in one woman, one woman shall not come in my grace. Rich she shall be, . . . wise, . . . virtuous, . . . fair, . . . mild, . . . noble, . . . of good discourse, an excellent musician, and her hair shall be of what color it please God. (II.iii.24-32)

As the scene starts, Benedick has glimmers of the wisdom of folly, but he also has a long way to go to achieve it.

By the end of the scene, having learned what his eyes could not see of himself or of Beatrice, his conversion is completed. He has heard

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his follies recited by his friends, and he has profited by them. He is too scornful; she is wise "in everything but in loving Benedick." He will torment her with it, for he "hath a contemptible spirit." This dose of edifying humiliation is sugared over with some muted praise: "He hath indeed a good outward happiness"; "He doth indeed show some sparks that are like wit." Yet even those moments are mixed with his folly: "In the managing of quarrels you may say he is wise, for either he avoids them with great discretion, or undertakes them with a most Christianlike fear." This jab at the folly of his recent ignominious retreat from Beatrice's assault surely strikes home.

At the same time, his doubt is replaced by faith; he has seen only the outward Beatrice: "most wonderful that she should so dote on Signior Benedick, whom she hath in all outward behaviors seemed ever to abhor." "She loves him with an enraged affection, it is past the infinite of thought" (II.iii. 92-94, 98-99). A lovely touch is Benedick's belief during this gulling in yet more evidence of the senses: "knavery cannot, sure, hide himself in such reverence"; or "Then down upon her knees she falls, weeps, sobs, beats her heart, tears her hair, prays, curses—'O sweet Benedick! God give me patience!'" (II.iii. 116-17, 138-40). This preposterous report of her miraculous transformation is all the evidence he requires.

And so Benedick is doubly transformed. His soliloquy at the end of the scene shows him acknowledging his follies and accepting his love with a new faith. In fact, the "new creature," "clean altered and changed," is nowhere more evident than when Benedick sees in Beatrice's scorn sure marks of love. Like a literary critic twisting a verse until it fits his thesis, Benedick says of her words to him:

Ha! "Against my will I am sent to bid you come in to dinner." There's a double meaning in that. "I took no more pains for those thanks than you took pains to thank me." That's as much as to say, "Any pains that I take for you is as easy as thanks." If I do not take pity of her, I am a villain; if I do not love her, I am a Jew. I will go get her picture. (II.iii.236-41)

Double meaning, indeed! His faith is just as adamant as his skepticism once was. Heresy—sheer unbelief—is forsworn. Folly is embraced with humility and faith:

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I hear how I am censured. They say I will bear myself proudly if I perceive the love come from her. . . . I must not seem proud. Happy are they that hear their detractions and can put them to mending. They say the lady is fair—'tis a truth, I can bear them witness; and virtuous—'tis so, I cannot reprove it; and wise, but for loving me—by my troth, it is no addition to her wit, nor no great argument of her folly, for I will be horribly in love with her. I may chance have some odd quirks and remnants of wit broken on me because I have railed so long against marriage. . . . No, the world must be peopled. When I said I would die a bachelor, I did not think I should live till I were married. (II.iii.206-23)

The freedom and the joy of these strange paradoxes is profound and immediate. There will be more humiliation for Benedick; he is human after all. There will also be great joy. The familiar proverb suggests the Pauline and Erasmian dimensions of this experience: "Happy are they that hear their detractions and can put them to mending." Beatrice is now in his eyes the sum of all beauty, virtue, wisdom. "By this day, she's a fair lady! I do spy some marks of love in her" (II.iii.223-25). So now, with considerable irony, she functions for him as her namesake did for Dante. At last Benedick is an inspired lover. But he is not one who can speak by the book, and he never will be. That he and Beatrice will both have the good sense to see how foolish such a style makes them sound, and the humility to celebrate that folly at the end of the play, suggests how completely they are changed.

The tactics of Beatrice's conversion are similar; the scene is in verse and quite compressed. Once again, the scorn of her misconstrued encounter with Benedick after his conversion is juxtaposed against the faith of her new vision at the end of the scene. In between she comes to acknowledge her faults and to accept, with faith, Benedick's love. She hears Hero criticize her pride and disdain:

Nature never framed a woman's heart
Of prouder stuff than that of Beatrice.
Disdain and scorn ride sparkling in her eyes,
Misprizing what they look on; and her wit
Values itself so highly that to her
All matter else seems weak. She cannot love,
Nor take no shape nor project of affection,
She is so self-endear'd. (III.i.49-56)

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Worse, she would laugh anyone to scorn who tried to correct her. Beatrice overhears the recitation of her self-love, her foolish blindness to her own follies and the virtues of others; like Benedick the detractions put her to mending. She also hears Benedick praised and his amazing love proclaimed. We should notice that there is no counter-praise intermixed with this blame, a suggestion, perhaps, of the degree of her self-love and the strength of her ego as contrasted to Benedick's. But the result is the same. Like Benedick, Beatrice is also made new, born again. She accepts her folly and vows to amend it; and she accepts with faith the miracle of Benedick's love against the evidence of her own senses. Most miraculous of all, she manifests the new Beatrice by speaking all of this in impassioned, rhymed verse, her first verse utterance of the play:

What fire is in mine ears? Can this be true?
Stand I condemned for pride and scorn so much?
Contempt, farewell! and maiden pride, adieu!
No glory lives behind the back of such.
And, Benedick, love on; I will requite thee,
Taming my wild heart to thy loving hand.
If thou dost love, my kindness shall incite thee
To bind our loves up in a holy band;
For others say thou dost deserve, and I
Believe it better than reportingly.

(III.i.107-16)

Like Benedick, she believes it "better than reportingly." Their testimony confirms and crystallizes a love they both have wanted to believe in but never quite trusted. Freed from their twin follies of pride and faithlessness, given a new understanding of the meaning of universal folly, they have both been born again.¹⁸ The newly barbered and tailored Benedick evidences this rebirth just as surely as the rhymed verse of Beatrice. But the content of their soliloquies made the inner conversion evident before we were vouchsafed such external evidence of it. We celebrate their conversion for the rest of the play.

Benedick bears the anticipated scorn of his converters with a new confidence: "Gallants, I am not as I have been" (III.ii.13). In fact, his countenance is much changed, evidencing the new man, reborn in faith and in folly. He is shaved, perfumed, washed, painted, and the

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folly of these signs of rebirth is bearable. In fact, the anticipated jibes hardly hurt at all: "Old Signior, walk aside with me. I have studied eight or nine wise words to speak to you, which these hobby-horses must not hear" (III.ii.62-65). Beatrice finds her folly a little tougher to bear. But in the parallel Scene iv of Act III, bear it she does. Beatrice says she has a bad cold: "I am stuffed, cousin; I cannot smell" (III.iv.57). What she has caught is that infection she called "the Benedick" in the first scene, and described as great folly. Margaret chides her lovingly, "Get you some of this distilled *carduus benedictus* and lay it to your heart. It is the only thing for a qualm" (III.iv.66-68). Even better is her bawdy pun on stuffed: "A maid, and stuffed! There's goodly catching of cold" (III.iv.58-59). Beatrice had earlier said of Benedick "he is no less than a stuffed man; but for the stuffing—well, we are all mortal" (I.i.51-52). Later Beatrice seemed apprehensive of the physical aspects of love (II.i.26-54 *passim*). Now she will be stuffed with his folly, with her good will. When Margaret talks of the strange conversions of lovers, Beatrice must enjoy her words almost as much as the other two ladies. For marriage is in the air:

You may think perchance that I think you are in love. Nay, by'r lady, I am not such a fool to think what I list; nor I list not to think what I can; nor indeed I cannot think, if I would think my heart out of thinking, that you are in love, or that you will be in love, or that you can be in love. Yet Benedick was such another, and now is he become a man. He swore he would never marry, and yet now in despite of his heart he eats his meat without grudging; and how you may be converted I know not, but methinks you look with your eyes as other women do. (III.iv.72-82)

Her image of conversion, like her references to folly and faith, suggests how nicely this scene and this speech highlight the full comic significance of what Benedick and Beatrice have achieved.

They haltingly express the joy of their love in the strange aftermath of the aborted wedding.

BENEDICK. I will swear by it [my sword] that you love me, and I will make him eat it that says I love not you.

.....

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BEATRICE. You have stayed me in a happy hour. I was about to protest I loved you.

BENEDICK. And do it with all thy heart.

BEATRICE. I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest.

BENEDICK. Come, bid me do anything for thee.

BEATRICE. Kill Claudio. (IV.i. 272-73, 279-85)

Kill Claudio? We need no longer fear that Benedick and Beatrice will degenerate into a conventional Petrarchan pair now that they have expressed their love. Their learning must continue to progress. Beatrice must finally forgive Claudio; Benedick must believe in Beatrice's faith in Hero. His first response comes from the old Benedick: "Ha! not for the wide world!" His second is more like the new man accepting his strange quest:

BENEDICK. Think you in your soul the Count Claudio hath wronged Hero?

BEATRICE. Yea, as sure as I have a thought or a soul.

BENEDICK. Enough, I am engaged. I will challenge him. I will kiss your hand, and so I leave you. By this hand, Claudio shall render me a dear account. (IV.i.323-28)

So, evidently, he does, through his formal repentance. At least it finally satisfies Beatrice and Benedick. His faith in Beatrice, like hers in Hero, is brilliantly a part of this celebratory and yet tense scene.¹⁹

Their faith proven, their folly remains to be celebrated. Benedick tries his hand at poetry. Like Orlando, he is no good at it; unlike him, he knows it immediately and laughs at his folly:

Marry, I cannot show it in rhyme. I have tried. I can find out no rhyme to "lady" but "baby"—an innocent rhyme; for "scorn," "horn"—a hard rhyme; for "school," "fool"—a babbling rhyme. Very ominous endings! No, I was not born under a rhyming planet, nor I cannot woo in festival terms. (V.ii.33-38)

His good-natured attitude toward horns as well as his own foolishness suggests that though he cannot woo in festival terms, he can woo festively. In fact, when Beatrice enters, we see that their wit-battle has returned as a new mark of their love. As Benedick says, "Thou and I are too wise to woo peaceably" (V.ii.64). Predictably, this occasions

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Beatrice's corrective barb, "It appears not in this confession. There's not one wise man among twenty that will praise himself." If Benedick has slipped momentarily back into pride, Beatrice has returned him quickly enough to proper humility with a variation on the Erasmian and Pauline theme about wise fools. Their witty relationship will always keep them from taking themselves too seriously.

And so in the final scene, theirs is the festive burden, though the miraculous forgiveness of Claudio, and Hero's unveiling, preface their witty "festival terms." Their faith and their folly come out once more in the cleverness with which they fence with words as the play comes to an end:

BENEDICK. Do not you love me?
BEATRICE. Why, no; no more than reason.
BENEDICK. Why, then your uncle, and the Prince, and Claudio
Have been deceived—they swore you did.
BEATRICE. Do not you love me?
BENEDICK. Troth, no; no more than reason.
BEATRICE. Why, then my cousin, Margaret, and Ursula
Are much deceived; for they did swear you did.
(v.iv.74-79)

They celebrate their love past all reason, but with irony; they celebrate their exposed folly by referring to the merry game inflicted on them. And then, in another replay of the edifying humiliations of *Love's Labor's Lost*, their halting sonnet attempts are produced as indisputable proof of their faith and their folly. As Benedick joyously proclaims, in a clever parody of Hero's miraculous resurrection,

A miracle! Here's our own hands against our hearts. Come, I will have thee; but, by this light, I take thee for pity. (v.iv.91-94)

Beatrice's last retort suggests that this merry war will last forever after:

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 seals her mouth and their vows with a kiss. And then he pronounces a fitting benediction to their mutual happiness. They have

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just ironically sworn "by this light" and "by this day." But both have been liberated from their bondage to the evidence of their senses and their reason. They are in fact now reciting the main outlines of the foolish deception that taught them the joy of that faith. Benedick's benediction also celebrates their eternal, inevitable, and joyous folly:

I'll tell thee what, Prince; a college of wit-crackers cannot flout me out of my humor. Dost thou think I care for a satire or an epigram? No. If a man will be beaten with brains, 'a shall wear nothing handsome about him. In brief, since I do purpose to marry, I will think nothing to any purpose that the world can say against it; and therefore never flout at me for what I have said against it; for man is a giddy thing, and this is my conclusion. (v.iv.99-107)

Beatrice must smile in spite of herself at this fine, ironic profession of his love. For if man is a giddy thing, he can also believe and do surprising things. Benedick and Beatrice will never be complacent lovers. But they will be happy ones, in their faith and in their folly, forever and a day. What a lovely combination of psychological realism, the conventions of romance, and Shakespeare's rigorous new comic-Christian equation!

Claudio and Hero are also a part of this final scene, and in fact their stylized presentation has contributed to our understanding of it. But Benedick and Beatrice are almost solely responsible for the joyous tone of the final festivity. In fact, were that festivity determined only by the successful working-out of the Hero-Claudio plot, the play's ending would be much less delightful. However, if our reluctance to celebrate their joy can indict the resolution of the Hero-Claudio plot, it can also dramatize both the difficulty and the mystery of forgiveness. After all, their highly stylized presentation may seem static and contrived against the brilliant psychology of Benedick and Beatrice without necessarily being satirized. Claudio does come to acknowledge his comic folly and faithlessness, and to amend his life, and this is the first comedy in which such change is fully dramatized. Hero's "resurrection" and her implicit forgiveness of Claudio when she accepts his hand in marriage are also considerable comic miracles, with a rich tradition of continental drama behind them.²⁰ Further, crucially, no one in the play distrusts this penance or this forgiveness. Beatrice, who

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had ordered Benedick to "kill Claudio," and the wise friar who is about to marry them have both evidently accepted his penance. Leonato too, and Benedick, are satisfied and say so explicitly in the final scene:

FRIAR. Did I not tell you she was innocent?

LEONATO. So are the Prince and Claudio, who accused her.

ANTONIO. Well, I am glad that all things sort so well.

BENEDICK. And so am I, being else by faith enforced

To call young Claudio to a reckoning for it.

(v.iv.1-9 *passim*)

The good-natured jokes about cuckoldry (ll. 40-52) between Benedick and Claudio may testify to their reconciliation on the one hand, and on the other to their newfound willingness to embrace the possible folly of an unfaithful wife, at the very moment of marriage. How happy a change this is from their mutual distrust of women earlier! Both seem to have learned the wisdom of folly.

There is still no question but that Hero and Claudio exist in almost totally abstract terms, while their thematic and psychological counterparts Benedick and Beatrice are undergoing Shakespeare's first successful regeneration of complex comic characters within the time-span of the play. This contrast inevitably works to Hero's and Claudio's disadvantage today in terms of the audience's response. But in the Renaissance the novelty of psychological realism plus the inescapable thematic relationships of the two plots would probably have minimized the problem of response. As Hunter suggests, the audience, trained in the Anglican or Aquinian doctrine of repentance, would have been likely to understand the regeneration of Claudio as richer in allegorical or representative content, and that of Benedick and Beatrice as richer in psychological realism.²¹ That psychological response could hardly have ignored the comic-Christian overtones of both plots, however, since they are so insistently similar. Benedick and Beatrice, the meaning of their relationship highlighted by the stylized Claudio, are also skeptics who finally evidence their conversion by significant acts of personal faith. Each of them is delivered from an unrealistic belief in his own senses and reason and in his own incomparable goodness. Their consequent acknowledgment of imperfect eyesight and foolish

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behavior announces a rebirth into humility which is celebrated in the final act. Before we convince ourselves of the darker side of the Hero-Claudio plot, we should remember its intimate relationships to the parallel plot through the paradoxical Christian themes of faith and folly that are so central to Shakespeare's comic vision. For as Northrop Frye and others have argued, only if we demand of Hero and Claudio a psychological complexity which was never intended for them, and ignore the important dimensions of their thematic complexity, will their final joy seem to be unduly puzzling.