

## The Two Sicilies: Ethnic Conflict in *Much Ado*

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[Professor Richmond prepared this paper for a seminar at SAA 2007 in San Diego. - Eds.]

The Kingdom of the Two Sicilies legally existed by that name only from the time of the Congress of Vienna in 1816 until the Risorgimento of 1860, though the two territories involved had already been reunited in 1735 under one king by the restoration of rule over Sicily by the Bourbon monarchy based in Naples. That Neapolitan kingdom had previously retained its Sicilian title despite the centuries of different, Spanish rule over Sicily via Aragon. This separation resulted from the island's rebellion against the French monarchy in Naples, in the brutal uprising of 1283 called the Sicilian Vespers. In a typical Shakespearean act of historical consolidation and superimposition, Shakespeare combined the plot of his *Bandello* source for the Hero/Claudio story — which had been set in the time when Don Pietro of Aragon secured rule over rebellious Sicily by defeating a Neapolitan fleet — with events following the far later naval victory of the Bastard Don John of Austria over the Turks at Lepanto in 1571. Like Don Pietro after his sea battle, Don John also took up residence in Messina, while barely reconciled with his unsympathetic half-brother Philip II, King of Spain (and hence also King of Aragon, like Don Pietro).

This consolidation of different but mutually illuminating periods in the history of a given society is exactly what Shakespeare did in *Hamlet*, by superimposing the coming of Protestantism from Wittenberg in the person of Hamlet, on top of the original Beowulfian Scandinavia of the Sagas, as re-incarnated in the heroic ethos of Old *Hamlet*. Similarly, in *King Lear* Shakespeare had superimposed onto the failures of pre-Roman Britain some antecedents of Edgar's triumph as the first Saxon High King of all England.<sup>1</sup> We thus have three examples of cultural compression inviting us to speculate on why Shakespeare wished to force such chronologically discrepant cultures together. I believe this pattern is the same which he achieved in tracing the more consecutive political evolution of English history from the deposition of Richard II to the accession of Henry VII in his two tetralogies. In more compact form he has shown the same sequentiality in tracing the coming of a new order in his Roman trilogy based on the career of Octavius. In all these examples Shakespeare was consciously tracing patterns of cultural evolution, which indeed figure in most of his plays (such as the evolution of women's freedom of marriage choice established by Theseus at the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*).

In *Much Ado* this evolution was founded on Shakespeare's awareness of the multi-ethnic nature of Sicilian history resulting from the island's position as a meeting point of Mediterranean cultures and styles, from Magna Graeca to Carthage, Christian to Islamic, Byzantine to Arab and Norman medieval to baroque. As at the court of Frederick II, the result of such mingling in Sicily was often a new cultural synthesis, reflected in the evolution of the classical pastoral, the sonnet, and *dolce stil nuovo*, providing models for later traditions, including Elizabethan ones.<sup>2</sup>

In its opening scenes, *Much Ado* first establishes the archaic chivalric values of Spain about to be questioned in *Don Quixote* (and comparably ridiculed by Shakespeare, in characters like Don Adriano de Armado and the Prince of Aragon). In the play such high sentiments are immediately confronted by the skeptical views of ironic Italians in the tradition of the comedies of Machiavelli, not to mention the characters of the *commedia dell'arte*. This tension appears in Beatrice's skepticism about male heroism in the play's opening lines, and in Benedick's aversion to Claudio's sentimentality about Hero at the scene's end. However, Don Pedro and Don John have already conditioned their young protégé Claudio to accept their haughty style of high romance with its polarizing consequences (as seen in Don John's own affronted pride, which did indeed persist during his historical stay in Messina). As the plot progresses we see the hierarchical nature of Spanish society in which Don Pedro arrogates to himself the matrimonial initiative of his young associate, in a courtship of Hero which

approaches dangerously close to the idea of "droit du seigneur" (1.1.316-28). Don John caps this risky archaism by appealing to the potentially conflicting code of family honor (3.2.88-134) which provides comparable tensions in Corneille's later exploration of the dangers of Spanish absolutism in *Le Cid*.

Shakespeare almost immediately entangles his idealists, Don Pedro, Claudio, Leonato, and Hero, in their plan for a mischievous conjunction (2.1.347-52) of the two outspoken critics of their values via their hubristic plot against Beatrice and Benedick (2.1.384-6). By this trickery the idealists unconsciously violate their own pretensions to social decorum, and foreshadow their own humiliation through Don John's similar fraud about amatory feelings. For this betrayal, they are in turn aptly punished by the analogous machinations of Don John, himself historically a victim, as a bastard, of just those pretensions to honor which he subverts. Don John's perverse temperament was notorious among Elizabethans. With the recent Armada, and the concurrent wars in the Low Countries, Elizabethans in the 1590s were acutely aware of the threats of Spanish imperialism. They all remembered that the Bastard Don John of Austria was the first who sponsored the idea of the Armada, as a means to achieve a forced marriage with Mary Queen of Scots and thus secure the throne of a conquered England for himself. He also led the forces of Spain in the fight against the autonomy of the Low Countries, whose cause was supported by Queen Elizabeth, with the personal aid of many associates of Shakespeare, such as Will Kempe and Ben Jonson. There again Spanish pride went before a fall.<sup>2</sup>

In *Much Ado* perverse Spanish pride ultimately shatters against the clumsy bluntness of the Watch and the skeptical values of Italian sophisticates such as Beatrice and Benedick, who early on pre-empt the audience's potential sympathies, turning them against the haughty sentiments of Spanish honor. It is rewarding to see how this ethnic interpretation modifies stage interpretation of the characters. When the U.C. Berkeley Shakespeare Program staged the play at the rebuilt Shakespeare's Globe in London in 1996, we were fortunate to have several talented performers, among them Rebecca Tourino, who played Hero (she has recently become a recognized performer and playwright herself). In her handling of Hero's stage relationship with Beatrice, what she stressed was not a naïve friendship felt by Hero for Beatrice, but the tension between Hero's inexperience and Beatrice's jaded skepticism (3.1.29-56) — so that the plot against the latter clearly illustrates Hero's desire to score off Beatrice's posture of superior sophistication. Don Pedro's emotional sensibility is equally disadvantaged by Beatrice's deft rejection of his own naïve suit to her (2.1.301-11), though her manner to him is more gracious than in her expressions of contempt for Claudio's childish petulance (2.1.69-71). Of course, her attitude to Don John (2.1.1-4) is at least as sardonic as her initial treatment of Benedick (1.1.36-83).

So the ethnic interpretation of the play as a cultural confrontation lends a richer meaning to it than the mere theme of naive virtue vindicated. The play's Sicily is a locale for the kind of ethnic confrontations that also lie at the heart of the multicultural metropolis in *The Merchant of Venice*, where the deficiency of Antonio's Christian sentimentality is neatly balanced against the cost of Shylock's Judaic legalism. Both Sicily and Venice were selected as locales of cultural intersection, just as Reformation Vienna was for the historical conflict there between Lutheran Puritanism and imperial orthodoxy in *Measure for Measure*. The primary cultural problem established is that the Spaniards take things at face value (even Don John), and act accordingly, without reservation, with nearly disastrous consequences. On the other hand, the flippant skepticism of Beatrice and Benedick is equally self-defeating as we see in their initial relationship, in which their surface antipathy is clearly driven by a mutual pre-occupation, not to say fascination, with each other. This emotional paradox matches

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the diagnosis of his relationship to Lesbia by Catullus, as translated by Jonathan Swift:

Lesbia for ever on me rails,  
To talk of me she never fails.  
Now, hang me, but for all her art,  
I find that I have gained her heart,  
My proof is this: I plainly see  
The case is just the same with me;  
I curse her every hour sincerely,  
Yet, Hang me, but I love her dearly.<sup>3</sup>

Both Spanish absolutism and Italian skepticism are self-defeating, and need tempering by a dash of their opposites. For the Spaniards this comes by recognition that their own culture contains elements of perversity, as incarnated in Don John. But for Beatrice and Benedick it comes by wry acceptance of a potentially fatal commitment to the cause of honor, displayed not simply in loyalty to each other but to the defense of Hero, when Beatrice orders her lover to "Kill Claudio." (4.1.285). One of the ironies of the play is that amongst all of the plots and contrivances hatched in it, one of the most therapeutic is the fiction invented by Friar Francis. The tale of Hero's death reinforces the humility of Claudio when he willingly accepts the "arranged" marriage which re-establishes social harmony (in a much happier way than the similar piece of "White Machiavellianism" attempted by Friar Lawrence in *Romeo and Juliet*). This irony is further reinforced by the defeat of Don John's plot by two unsophisticated members of the Watch, and the Sexton, roles untouched by any cultural pretensions (3.3 and 4.2).

*Much Ado* is usually considered to be an improbable melodrama based on an archaic romance about virtue falsely accused. Seeing it in its deliberately chosen context of Sicilian history makes clear that the issues are far more ideological. As in *The Merchant of Venice*: the confrontation of two equally incomplete ethics must compromise for mutual survival. Perhaps this interpretation may seem an imposition on a play which scholars and audiences have often found to be an awkward fusion of sentimental melodrama with a social sophistication borrowed from Castiglione's *Courtier*. However, in the current confrontations of Hispanic and Anglo cultures raging in such sites as modern San Diego, we may see the play as a proto-Ibsenite problem play more relevant to the situation in the American South-West today, rather than as a piece of theatrical artifice. This contemporary approach to it is reflected in a newspaper item about a recent production of *Much Ado* at Brown University:

Shakespeare's romantic comedy *Much Ado About Nothing* is transformed into a delightful jaunt through Spanish-controlled California in Brown Theatre's adaptation of the play. . . . "I looked for a society in which questions of honor are still significant, duels still exist and class stratification is still present," the director John Emigh said. . . . Messina, the Italian city in which Shakespeare set the play, becomes the Northern California town of Yerba Buena in 1846, when Hispanic Californian land barons ruled the region. . . . The content allowed for the play to be re-invented in a milieu that holds contemporary significance. In light of the current debates over immigration rights, "it may be useful to look at Mexican-American history as intertwined, not just the encroachment of one upon another," the director Emigh said.<sup>4</sup>

The need for mutual assimilation between Hispanic and Anglo attitudes remains as important in modern California as it was for the Elizabethans and Jacobean, or for the Spanish and the Italians of medieval and renaissance Sicily. It is to foster this synthesis that the Shakespeare Program at the University of California at Berkeley has used its production of *Much Ado* as a key part of its latest video documentary: *Shakespeare & the Spanish Connection* (TMW Media).<sup>5</sup>

### NOTES

[References to Shakespeare use *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997.]

<sup>1</sup>See Hugh M. Richmond, "A Letter to the Actor Playing Lear" in *Shakespeare Illuminations: Essays in Honor of Marvin Rosenberg*, co-edited by Jay Halio & Hugh Richmond, Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1998, pp.110-130.

<sup>2</sup>Hugh M. Richmond "Much Ado About Notables," *Shakespeare Studies* XII (1979), 44-63.

<sup>3</sup>*The Latin Poets*, ed. Francis R.B. Godolphin, New York: Random House (Modern Library), 1949, 10.

<sup>4</sup>"*Much Ado About Nothing* Recast in Spanish-Controlled California," *Brown Daily Herald*, 20 October 2006.

<sup>5</sup>For more detail see U.C.B. web-site: [shakespearestaging.berkeley.edu](http://shakespearestaging.berkeley.edu)

## Books for Review



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