

# Fallen Angels, New Women, and Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*: Modern Stereotypes in the Elizabethan Era

Stacy Pifer

Dr. Emily Leverett

Department of English and Writing

In many of Shakespeare's plays, gender issues make appearances in a variety of ways. Some of his plays, such as *Twelfth Night* and *Merchant of Venice*, are known for showing audiences the ways in which gender roles can be reversed in order to achieve some end, whether romantic or political in nature. Shakespeare also often addresses gender stereotypes, such as the submissive wife or daughter, the macho soldier, or the stoic king, and he frequently satirizes the proper behavior for men and women, as his characters tend to break the mold of expected societal manners. Those who analyze Shakespeare's works can easily find and discuss these types of gender-related issues, but taking more modern literary characterizations into account can yield interesting results as well. By studying Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* through the lens of nineteenth and early twentieth century gender stereotypes, readers can see how the archetypes of the Fallen Woman and the New Woman can be applied to and seen in the characters Hero and Beatrice, respectively.

"Fallen Woman" is a term used to describe certain women in the society and literature of the Victorian era. The Fallen Woman typically began on a pedestal as the morally upright and virtuous "Angel in the House," who, according to Barbara Welter, was judged on the basis of her "piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" (152). This angel of a woman was seen as the ideal, the gold standard of femininity and a proper wife. The Fallen Woman, then, is defined as one lacking those virtuous qualities, particularly due to her sexual behavior. Welter explains that, in the eyes of society, "the loss of purity brought tears; to be guilty of such a crime ... brought madness or death" (154). Indeed, in many works of nineteenth century literature, the Fallen Woman is treated with animosity, suffering from madness or death following her transgression and the resulting societal backlash. However, sympathetic authors felt that, through death, this character could be treated with compassion instead of enmity. These authors, rather than censuring her, use death as a redemptive escape for the Fallen Woman (Auerbach 35). In Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, Hero can be read as a comic version of the Fallen Woman of the story.



**Louis-Leopold Boilly (1761-1845), *The Fallen Woman*, 1827.**

In contrast, the “New Woman” of the post-Victorian era embodied a different standard of femininity. Greg Buzwell sums up the definition of the New Woman most succinctly: “Free-spirited and independent, educated and uninterested in marriage and children, the figure of the New Woman threatened conventional ideas about ideal Victorian womanhood” (n.p.). While some men found this type of woman intimidating, others found her alluring. She was especially inspiring for other women who were afraid to expose their individual personalities and identities as separate from and not dependent on their male counterparts. The New Woman was able to escape the constraints of society that still bound many women, to elude confinement by the conventional woman’s sphere. If the New Woman chose to marry, it was less for social dependence and more “for intellectual stimulation” (Scott 684-685). In applying this turn-of-the-century concept to Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*, the reader can imagine Beatrice as one of these New Women.

The character of Hero begins as the angel and the ideal image of a woman whom an honorable man would want to marry. In Act 1.1, Claudio refers to Hero as a “modest young lady” as well as “a jewel” (1.1.133, 1.1.146), thus demonstrating his belief that she is a pure woman and therefore of value to him. After Claudio admits his love for Hero to Don Pedro, the latter repeats that she is “worthy” (1.1.180, 187), which reflects society’s opinion that a woman well-born and well-mannered would make a good wife. Part of Hero’s designation as the Angel in the House is the implication that the angel is somewhat trapped in the domestic sphere, in her proper place. In classic literary warrior culture, a woman is a prize to be won as a wife and/or prisoner, and the conversation between Claudio and Don Pedro about Hero reflects

this convention. Claudio has just returned from war, and while he was not romantically interested in Hero before, he now feels that he must have her as his wife (1.1.243-51). Don Pedro's description of how he will secure Hero for Claudio is further proof that she is seen as a sort of trophy:

And in her bosom I'll unclasp my heart  
And take her hearing prisoner with the force  
And strong encounter of my amorous tale.  
Then after to her father will I break,  
And the conclusion is, she shall be thine. (1.1.269-73)

Hero does not have many speaking lines early in the play, besides her innocent acceptance of a walk with the masked Don Pedro (2.1.73-74). The reader gleans the purity of her character mostly based on what others say about her, which demonstrates the importance of society's judgments on women.

As is often the case with a Fallen Woman treated sympathetically by her author, it is not Hero's own conduct that causes her fall. To defend this poor creature, some authors choose to "demythologize the fallen woman by making her victim rather than agent" (Auerbach 31). The actual agent of Hero's fall is Don John, who makes it his mission to ruin Claudio's happiness by making Hero out to be an unfaithful and soiled maiden. With Borachio as his partner, Don John impugns Hero's honor by staging a romantic interlude between Borachio and his lover Margaret; Don John tells Claudio that Borachio's partner is Hero. The societal disgrace of the Fallen Woman was not often dealt with quietly and personally. As Gretchen Barnhill explains, "When a woman contravened societal expectations, she was judged far more harshly than her male counterpart[;] she represented a rent in the social fabric of respectable society that could only be restored by her removal" (4-5). This explains why Claudio felt that it was necessary to publicly shame Hero at their wedding rather than speak with her or her father in private before the ceremony took place.

The Fallen Woman in nineteenth century literature almost always dies in the end in order to distance her and her crimes from the community, and this literary trope appears to have been in use even in Shakespeare's time. According to the playwright, the most suitable remedy for Hero's assumed fall from societal grace is her fainting and subsequent faked death. Hero's father, Leonato, tells Hero that she should keep her eyes closed and die, since

. . . the wide sea  
Hath drops too few to wash her clean again,  
And salt too little which may season give  
To her foul tainted flesh. (4.1.139-42)

While her father should have known her character better, he assumes the rumor to be true that Hero has been having an affair with Borachio. However, the Friar, who seems to recognize Hero's virtue better than her father does, uses this opportunity to restore Hero's good name by playing on the guilt and sympathy of Claudio and others who will be shocked to hear that their accusations of her impurity have killed Hero on the spot.

Not many literary Fallen Woman characters get this chance at redemption while still living, and Shakespeare is able to give a happy ending (a necessity in a comedy) to Claudio and Hero, who marry in the final act of the play. Had Hero been a Fallen Woman in a Victorian novel or a turn-of-the-century novel such as Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, she would have gone the way of Lily Bart and characters like her, "whose inner nobility of character is insisted upon by their authors, [yet who] are not saved from the conventional literary death of the fallen woman" (Barnhill 8). No matter how much of an angel a woman is or seems to be before her fall, Victorian society demanded that the Fallen Woman be permanently removed. Hero is lucky that an Elizabethan author is writing her story.

In contrast to Hero as the Fallen Woman, Shakespeare's character Beatrice fits the post-Victorian era concept of the New Woman. Beatrice is not afraid to speak her mind, and her speech is eloquently witty. Her uncle Leonato is not troubled that his niece is not the pious angel that his daughter Hero is; rather, Leonato accepts Beatrice's personality and admits that she enjoys a "merry war" or a "skirmish of wit" with Benedick (1.1.50-51). In saying this, Leonato positions Beatrice in a somewhat masculine role, but her character is never undermined by her being portrayed as anything other than a fine woman. Her character is similar to Benedick's, in that they



**Late Victorian Era Fashion—Bloomers, 1890-1899.** Note, in this depiction of the "New Woman," not only the trouser-like bloomers but also the bicycles, other sporting equipment, and small cigars, highly improper in earlier times for women in public places. Source unknown.

would both rather remain single than submit to another's authority. Stephen Greenblatt comments on their preference for remaining single by noting that "Benedick knows that a married man must put his honor at risk by entrusting it to a woman, while Beatrice knows that a married woman must put her integrity at risk by submitting herself to a man" (318). Beatrice sees more honor in maintaining her individuality, whereas Hero and other pious women find honor in marriage and submission. Even so, Benedick's friends hope that he will quit his bachelor mindset and admit to loving Beatrice, while Beatrice's friends have matching hopes for her. Because Beatrice is so forceful of mind and so independent, her friends must trick her rather than convince her to give Benedick a chance. Society's influence is so strong that even Beatrice, who would rather visit the gates of Hell in order to be sent to Heaven as a single maid (2.1.33-41), agrees to marry Benedick. She herself says that she had to "yield to great persuasion" (5.4.94) in consenting to the marriage.

Shakespeare's time saw no great feminist movements like the ones begun in the nineteenth century, but the playwright was aware of the gender stereotypes and conflicts existing in his society. Readers can easily find the archetypal figures of the Victorian Fallen Woman in Hero and the post-Victorian New Woman in Beatrice when analyzing *Much Ado About Nothing* with these social and literary constructs of femininity in mind. Even as an Elizabethan author, Shakespeare appears to have understood the pressure that society, throughout history, has placed on women in regard to their reputations and their relationships with men.

### Works Cited

- Auerbach, Nina. "The Rise of the Fallen Woman." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 35.1 (1980): 29-52. JSTOR. Web. 1 Nov. 2015.
- Barnhill, Gretchen Huey. *Fallen Angels: Female Wrongdoing in Victorian Novels*. MA Thesis. University of Lethbridge, 2003. Alberta, Canada. 2005. Print.
- Buzwell, Greg. "Daughters of Decadence: The New Woman in the Victorian *Fin de Siècle*." *British Library*. Web. 28 Nov. 2015. <<http://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/daughters-of-decadence-the-new-woman-in-the-victorian-fin-de-siecle#sthash.cUy1yfhU.dpuf>>
- Greenblatt, Stephen. "Foreword." *Much Ado About Nothing*. By William Shakespeare. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2009. 313-319. Print.
- Scott, Anne Firor. "What, Then, Is the American: This New Woman?" *The Journal of American History* 65.3 (1978): 679-703. Web. 1 Dec. 2015.
- Shakespeare, William. "Much Ado About Nothing." *The Norton Shakespeare: Essential Plays-The Sonnets*. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2009. 322-376. Print.
- Welter, Barbara. "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860." *American Quarterly* 18 (1966): 151-174. Print.