

Reading Between Their Lines: Euphuism in *Much Ado About Nothing*

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Abstract

Throughout *Much Ado About Nothing*, Shakespeare has three main classes of characters: the average middle-class character, represented by Leonato; the upper-class nobility, seen in Don Pedro and Claudio; and the lower-class citizens, demonstrated by Dogberry. This paper analyzes how each citizen is distinguished by their use of euphuism, or lack thereof, and what that represents about their character. Leonato, who has a strong grasp on euphuistic wordplay, turns his back on his family almost as soon as the nobility imply his daughter is unchaste, demonstrating that although he may have a lot of money, he is certainly not the hero in anyone's story. Don Pedro and Claudio, the resident nobility, are not heroic either; in fact, they attempt to conceal their true relations to others and, when they feel scorned, work to nearly tear apart Leonato's family and life. On the other hand, Dogberry, who is frequently ignored due to his lower-class status and lack of skill with wordplay, is the only one who knows the whole truth and ends up resolving the entire issue, thus becoming the hero of the play. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Shakespeare uses euphuism, as handled by Leonato, smoothly manipulated by Don Pedro, and drastically abused by Dogberry, to argue that social class is incorrectly defined by facility with words instead of true heroism and that true heroism should be defined by actions and integrity.

Keywords: Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, Euphuism

1. Introduction

In Shakespeare's classic *Much Ado About Nothing*, there is significant conflict between the upper-class nobility, including Don Pedro and Claudio, the average middle classmen, as seen in Leonato, and the lower-class people, demonstrated by Dogberry. To differentiate the three, Shakespeare writes each character with a different level of skill with wordplay, as demonstrated by their use of, or lack thereof, euphuism. Euphuism is "obvious and exaggerated" language stuffed with elaborate rhetoric, especially "allusions to myth and history" and "balanced antitheses reinforced by alliteration"¹. Shakespeare frequently mocked users of euphuism and often employed it in "characters who move in court circles, but who are not quite from the top drawer themselves"². In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Shakespeare uses euphuism, as worked through by Leonato, cleverly manipulated by Don Pedro, and poorly imitated by Dogberry, to argue that social class is defined by the wrong things, such as facility with words, rather than true heroism, and that the true hero may not be who the reader thinks it may be.

2. Application to Characters

2.1 Leonato

Leonato is, for the intents and purposes of *Much Ado About Nothing*, your average guy: single father, wealthy merchant, and hopeful nobleman. Because of this status, he has a relatively good handle on euphuism. In fact, he uses euphuism in one of his very first lines: “A kind overflow of kindness. There are no / faces truer than those that are so washed. How much / better is it to weep at joy than to joy at weeping!”³ Here Leonato makes a pun on the word “kind” – he uses it first with its original meaning and then in reference to kinship. He also implements chiasmus in his comment about joy and weeping. At this point, Leonato is not even in the presence of nobility; he is only among his family and a single messenger, a man only slightly more highly ranked than he. However, the messenger has just been with nobility and speaks using casual wit and implementing rhetorical devices, and so it can be inferred that Leonato felt the need to rise to the messenger’s linguistic level.

Another example of Leonato’s use of euphuism comes in a monologue in Act 4 Scene 1, after Claudio has accused Hero of being unchaste. He opens his speech with hyperbole, asking “Why, doth not every earthly thing / cry shame upon her?”³ This demonstrates wild, unchecked emotion – he is so upset that he believes the entire world should be disappointed with and ashamed of Hero. He then implements antithesis, asking “Grieved I, I had but one?... O, one too much by thee!”³ This shows how Leonato’s worldview has changed from when he first had Hero to the events of the play. He originally was sad that he had only one child, but now he fears even one may have been too many. Finally, Leonato uses diacope, or phrase repetition, as he winds down: “But mine, and mine I loved, and mine I praised, / And mine that I was proud on – mine so much / That I myself was to myself not mine.”³ These phrases betray that Leonato is not worried so much about the shame that Hero will feel, but instead he is concerned about what the backlash of this event will do to his own status and reputation. This monologue is inherently euphuistic because the nobility use euphuism to show off their superior intellect and make themselves look more important. Leonato shows he is afraid here that he will lose that importance and is trying desperately, through the use of rhetorical devices, to maintain his status.

Another example of Leonato’s use of euphuism is in his monologue to his brother Antonio about his grief in the beginning of Act 5. He opens with a simple metaphor, saying that Antonio’s advice “falls into mine ears as profitless / As water in a sieve.”³ His message here is simple: it is too late for him to take his brother’s advice, and so there is no point in giving it. Again, he repeats the word “mine,” this time implementing epistrophe:

Nor let no comforter delight mine ear
But such a one whose wrongs due suit with mine
Bring me a father that so loved his child
Whose joy of her is overwhelmed like mine
And bid him speak of patience
Measure his woe the length and breadth of mine³.

This time, his use of “mine” is not to indicate selfishness; it is to indicate his awareness of the mistakes he has made. However, it is still worth noting that, even when alone with his brother, Leonato is still using rhetorical devices to try to emulate the gentlemen he idolizes even after they have caused him so much grief, demonstrating that these men may not be the heroes Leonato sees them as.

2.2 The Nobility

When it comes to euphuistic wordplay, the nobility of *Much Ado About Nothing* is the best of the best. The noblemen speak lines thick with rhetoric effortlessly, embodying the concept of sprezzatura, rather than the more labored euphuism. According to *New York Times Magazine* writer William Safire, sprezzatura is best defined as “studied carelessness,” as it is a form of wordplay that “conceals all artistry and makes whatever one says or does seem uncontrived and effortless.”⁴ The first example of effortless wordplay comes when we first meet the nobles, specifically when Don Pedro first speaks. Upon first arriving in Messina, Don Pedro says, “Good Signor Leonato, are you come to meet / your trouble? The fashion of the world is to avoid cost / and you encounter it... You embrace your charge too willingly.”³ Although Don Pedro uses no rhetorical devices in this short speech, it still draws attention with its effortless flow and grace. Don Pedro speaks to Leonato as though Leonato has a choice in coming to welcome

him, but that is not the case. Not only is Don Pedro nobility, but he is also coming to stay at Leonato's house; by not coming out to welcome him enthusiastically, Leonato would have been committing social suicide. Don Pedro is using sprezzatura here to try to disguise the true power relations between himself and Leonato.

Don Pedro again tries to hide power relations in Act 2, this time when talking with one of his men. When Don Pedro urges Balthasar to sing, "I pray thee sing, and let me woo no more," he is again ignoring popular rhetorical devices to instead appear as though he is speaking from the heart³. His tone is casual and elegant, but simultaneously final: Balthasar will sing, whether he wants to or not. When Balthasar responds, with faked nonchalance, "Because you talk of wooing, I will sing,"³ Don Pedro firmly replies, "if thou wilt hold longer argument, / do it in notes."³ As one of Don Pedro's men, Balthasar is obligated to serve him, and as such does not have much say in whether or not he will sing. Still, Don Pedro makes the request in a way that implies that Balthasar has a choice in the matter, again attempting to conceal the true power dynamic.

Where Shakespeare writes Don Pedro as a classy, charismatic count, he portrays Don Pedro's fellow nobility Claudio as a spoiled brat. Don Pedro's sentences are often free of fancy rhetorical devices; Claudio's are stuffed to bursting with them. There is no better example of this than in Claudio's speech denouncing Hero at the beginning of Act 4. He opens with "O Hero! What a Hero hadst thou been," making a pun out of the name of the woman he is openly disgracing in front of her closest friends and family³. He then bluntly dismisses her using a combination of anadiplosis and antithesis, saying "fare thee well, most foul, most fair! Farewell."³ Finally, Claudio tells Hero that she has turned "all beauty into thoughts of harm," adding insult to already substantial injury³. While Don Pedro chose to refrain from fancy wordplay, Claudio uses it to slap those he sees as less important in the face. It is in Claudio that Shakespeare makes the point that, although one may possess the latest fashions or effortlessly manipulate rhetorical devices, that does not make one a truly noble, heroic person.

2.3 Dogberry

In almost every Shakespearean play, there is a clown; whether he knows it or not, Dogberry is the clown of *Much Ado About Nothing*. Dogberry is convinced that he is a master of language manipulation, but, in reality, he uses malapropism more than metaphor. Malapropism, or the "misapplication of words" by unknowingly using the wrong word, is frequently used by Shakespeare as a "kind of unconscious punning by naïve characters," of whom Dogberry is a prime example⁵. Mihir Bhattacharya, a professor at Ashoka University, writes that "Dogberry's speech, wherever it occurs, is an event of such formal interest that its material surroundings often recede into the background"⁶. The first example of Dogberry's failed attempt at euphuism comes in Act 3, Scene 3, where he is attempting to gather troops to serve on the prince's watch. First, he asks if the men he has gathered "have any allegiance in them."³ What he is really asking here is if any of the men have any treacherous inclinations, which is a very different question. Next, he asks the men "who think you the most desertless man / to be constable?"³ Here, he wants to know whom the men think is the most deserving man to be his second in command but, again, he is not clear. Finally, he tells the men "You are thought here to be the most senseless and fit / men for the constable of the watch."³ Ideally, men serving on the night watch would not be senseless, but sensible. Throughout this scene, Dogberry is trying to sound like the nobility he now serves, but his accidental malapropisms betray his true lower-class standing.

Next, Dogberry tries to interrogate Borachio and Conrad and again greatly misuses language. He starts the scene by asking if the "whole dissembly appeared," when he means to ask if the whole assembly is present³. When Borachio and Conrad have finished testifying, he claims that they "wilt be condemned into / everlasting redemption for this."³ Everlasting redemption isn't much of a threat, but everlasting damnation, which is what Dogberry means, certainly would be. Finally, he commands that Borachio and Conrad will be "opinioned," when he means "pinioned", or tied up³. This scene is crucial to the play, as it is the first time that one of the "good guys" knows the entire plot and could solve the problem. In this way, Dogberry becomes the hero of the play: he is the only one who can save the day. However, because Dogberry is socially beneath almost everyone else, no one listens to him or takes him seriously, as we see when he tries to explain to Leonato what has happened.

However, Dogberry doesn't let Leonato's dismissal slow him down and, in Act 5 Scene 1, he brings Borachio and Conrad to confess, forcing Don Pedro and Claudio to listen to their testimony despite his previous failure. When Don Pedro asks what the two men have done, Dogberry gives this bumbling, repetitive reply:

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 knaves³.

In this speech, Dogberry does not mix up his words, he merely repeats the same phrase a myriad of ways and numbers them out of order. Don Pedro notices this and mocks him in a parallel fashion: “First, I ask... thirdly, I ask...sixth and lastly, why... and to conclude, what you lay to their charge?”³ Even as Don Pedro blatantly mocks Dogberry, he is willing to listen to Borachio and Conrad and, because of this, he realizes what his brother has done. As Dr. Indira Ghose of the Université de Fribourg in Switzerland writes, “In the dross that Dogberry produces, there is often a hidden nugget of truth”². This is significant because, if Leonato had listened to Dogberry in the first place, the play could have been resolved by Act 4 but, because Dogberry has a lower social standing, Leonato ignored him. By giving a lower-class character all the secrets of *Much Ado About Nothing* and thereby allowing him to become the hero, and having upper-class characters keep themselves out of the loop, Shakespeare demonstrates that being of a lower social class doesn’t make someone less important.

3. Conclusion

Throughout *Much Ado About Nothing*, Shakespeare has three main classes of characters: the average middle-class character, represented by Leonato; the upper-class nobility, seen in Don Pedro and Claudio; and the lower-class citizens, demonstrated by Dogberry. To illustrate the difference between these three kinds of people, Shakespeare has each of them speak with different levels of euphuism, which is the skill of filling everyday language with intense, exaggerated rhetoric¹. Leonato, who has a strong grasp on euphuism, turns his back on his family almost as soon as the nobility imply his daughter is unchaste, demonstrating that although he may have a lot of money, he is certainly not the hero in anyone’s story. The nobility are not heroic either: in fact, they attempt to conceal their true relations to others and, when they feel scorned, work to nearly tear apart Leonato’s family and life. On the other hand, Dogberry, who is frequently ignored due to his lower-class status and lack of skill with wordplay, is the only one who knows the whole truth and ends up resolving the entire issue, thus becoming the hero of the play. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Shakespeare uses euphuism, as handled by Leonato, smoothly manipulated by Don Pedro, and drastically abused by Dogberry, to argue that social class is incorrectly defined by facility with words instead of true heroism and that true heroism should be defined by actions and integrity.

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