

Sex in Elizabethan England

Suspicion, Cuckoldry and Murder

By Jerry James

Men are afraid that women will laugh at them. Women are afraid that men will kill them.

—Attributed to Margaret Atwood



Too late to sound the “Looke out” warning! The husband (who lives at the sign of the Antlers) is already wearing the cuckold’s horns, as his wife prepares to frolic with a dark satyr.

Sex in the Play

Ah, *Much Ado*, that wonderful play with Beatrice and Benedick, the two lovers obviously made for each other but too proud to admit it. Too proud, that is, until their friends set up a scheme: Through their overhearing of staged conversations, each will be fooled into admitting the truth. *Much Ado About Nothing* indeed, pronounced in the Elizabethan way as “noting,” that is, observing.

But in the parallel plot, a similar scheme threatens to destroy Hero and Claudio. Aided by the odd fact that in Shakespeare, no man seems able to tell one woman from another, even when in bed with her, Claudio’s observing of a staged scene fools him into believing Hero is a harlot. This,

too, is *Much Ado About Nothing*—“nothing” here being Elizabethan slang for female genitalia.

And in this case a great deal will come from nothing, all of it concerning what Claire McEachern calls, “...the lethal seriousness of the matter of female chastity to the male imagination.” Leonato has failed to protect his daughter, his property, and so cannot transfer the rights to her into the hands of her husband. Only an accidental intervention prevents the Hero-Claudio plot from becoming the tragedy it is in the source material.

This is Shakespeare’s Italy. But it is also Elizabethan England, in the same way that Gene Roddenberry’s *Star Trek* is also America in the late Sixties. Cuckoldry is as

much a fear in England as it is among the members of the Messina Boys Club. In 1598, the year Shakespeare wrote *Much Ado*, the imbalance of power between the sexes was so great that dishonoring one's husband through adultery was one of the few weapons a Tudor woman possessed—a weapon she could wield only at the risk of her life.

Sex in the Country



All was not hey-nony-nony in the realm of Good Queen Bess. For one thing, the 65 years of religious shifts from Catholic to Protestant to Catholic to Protestant had left the institution of marriage up in the air. Was marriage a sacrament, as the Catholics believed, or was it a contract? If a contract, was not the church ceremony a mere formality that might be put off until “the boisterous erotic urges of young men and women,” as Alan Haynes puts it, were temporarily sated?

Indeed, as Bill Bryson writes, “The Church taught that women's bodies ran hot and thus they always desired sex and acts of fornication. Thus marriage and sex within marriage was the only way to control a woman's desires.”

One came of age at 21. And although boys were permitted to marry at 14 and girls at 12, their parents willing, this rarely happened.

Maggie Secara writes, “In the late 1500s the average age of marriage for a woman was 23. However, when and whom you married depended entirely on your rank. Peasants were free to marry whomever they chose. However, woman of the gentry were married to a man of their father's choosing based on how it would benefit the family.”

In most cases, the marriage process began with “Crying the Banns” in church on three consecutive Sundays or Holy Days, alerting anyone who might object on the grounds on consanguinity or prior contract. But sometimes, greater haste was necessary. Let us examine the 1582 case of one William Shakespeare, 18, and his three-months-pregnant intended, Anne Hathaway, 26.

The underage Master Shakespeare had to obtain parental approval, doubtless speedily granted. But it was already November, and canon law forbade Crying the Banns during December. So it was that late in November, two friends of the bride's family rode 21 miles to the ecclesiastical court in Worcester. There, on November 28, for £40 plus a substantial fee, they obtained a license that allowed the marriage with but a single Crying. Contrary to the experience of the Shakespeares, it is estimated that half the couples marrying were virgins. However, 30-40% of brides were pregnant.

A married woman, no matter her rank or dwelling place, could expect a life of virtually continuous pregnancy until either menopause or death. Indeed, because breastfeeding delays ovulation, the babies of every class that could afford it would be handed over to a wet nurse at birth. The hoped-for result was a rapid return to pregnancy.

One may well wonder how. Couples “...were forbidden to have sex during Lent, Advent, Feast Days, Fast Days, Easter Week, Sundays, Wednesdays and Saturdays... Women were also forbidden to have sex when they were menstruating, pregnant or for the 40 day period after giving birth.” (Secara)

Moreover, it is a truth universally acknowledged that wherever men wish to engage in sexual congress, there are women who wish not to become pregnant. In its simplest form, Elizabethan contraception consisted of making certain ejaculation occurred somewhere other than the vagina. But if her husband was insistent, a wife could insert a pessary of wool soaked in vinegar or cover her cervix with beeswax.

All else failing, there were always “herbs for delayed menses.” Tudor abortifacients usually involved rue—which gives a whole new meaning to Ophelia’s rue for remembrance. (Contraception and abortion were illegal; they interfered with God’s plan.) Childbirth was both painful and dangerous, but thought to be no more than the punishment due a sinful Daughter of Eve. Death in childbirth was common enough to befall two of the wives of Henry VIII.

The husband was his wife’s absolute ruler. She was expected to be obedient, submissive and modest. And yet, men seemingly lived in constant fear of being cuckolded. How many did this fear drive to murder? Remember, as Elizabeth Fremantle writes, “If a man killed his wife he was tried for murder. However, if a woman did the same the charge was treason, as it was a crime against authority.”

Sex in the Town

In London, population 200,000, things were much the same. But because the city had quadrupled in size during the past century and was now the third largest in Europe, things were also different. That no one could marry in London until age 24 was only part of it.

The unprecedented urbanization had two major causes. The first was the bad harvests of 1594-1598. Hungry peasants packed up and moved to London. They didn’t own the land anyway, a fact evident in the second major cause: the recovery of the English wool industry from a 25-year collapse. Landowners enclosed their lands, hired a

few tenants to tend the sheep and threw the remainder out. The result? Too many people chasing too few jobs at extremely low wages that barely fed them.

Thomson Gale writes, “London’s population... included a small but powerful population of wealthy nobles, a prospering middle class, and a large and impoverished lower class living in miserable conditions. Disease and crime were widespread. Many turned to small crime... simply to avoid starvation.”

It was not a salubrious atmosphere for a young peasant woman recently come to town. With varying degrees of luck, by Tudor standards, she might find both honest work and a good man; she might find herself the mistress of a noble (until he tired of her); she might find work with a middle-class master who would demand sex, then throw her out when she became pregnant—or she might turn to prostitution.

A “nightwalker” trolling for customers charged tuppence a trick. Far better to work in a brothel charging 4p. This also protected a working girl from being arrested and sentenced to Bridewell for a prison term that commenced with her being stripped and whipped, after which the luckless convict would have to beat hemp for hangman’s nooses for a week or two until her release.

The brothels—known as stews, “the original meaning of a heated room used for hot air or vapour baths” (Haynes)—existed in the suburbs, outside the City of London and its laws, right handy to the taverns, playhouses and other near occasions of sin.

Given that syphilis had arrived about 100 years earlier and that few clients would use a “Venus glove,” the life span of a London prostitute was Hobbesian: nasty, brutish and short.

Englishmen called it the French Pox; the French, the English Disease. Avoiding it meant finding a virgin. The madam of a house, realizing this, would traffic in both true and false virginities. A young woman would do well to recognize her market

value, no matter in which market she was selling.

Cuckoldry



Cuckold. The word first appears in English around 1250, a back-formation from “cuckoo,” the bird that supposedly lays its eggs in another’s nest. In an era where the husband had all the power and the wife none, adultery was always available to even the odds in a way that shrewishness or financial profligacy could not.

The cuckold’s horns come from Ovid’s tale of the hunter Actaeon spying on the naked goddess Diana. Outraged, she turns him into a stag and has him torn to pieces by his own hounds—although how one gets from a virgin goddess defending her modesty to an Englishwoman doing anything but is more than a little murky.

Worse, a man might be cuckolded and not even know it, no matter how closely he

observed his wife’s speech, her dress, her actions! How to combat a crime that left no trace? As Lady Macbeth says in another context, “A little water clears us of this deed.” And even if a man had evidence, how could he drag his wife before an ecclesiastical court on the charge of adultery? Everyone would then be able to see the horns that had sprouted upon his head—and laugh at him. Laugh!

Anne Salmon gets to the point. “The specter of the unfaithful wife was an affront to patriarchal social order itself... It represented a danger not just to the sanctity of marriage but, given the possibility of pregnancy, to the security of paternity and thus of patrilineal inheritance as well—a man could never be sure that his children and heirs were his own.” Better perhaps to kill her, and hope for a husband’s justice from a jury of husbands.

There are no true cuckolds in Shakespeare (except perhaps the Duke of Albany). But oh, do men suspect, with tragic results in *Othello*, near-tragic in *The Winter’s Tale* and comic in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. In *Much Ado*, the villain is foiled, the lovers are united and all’s well that ends well.

And yet, what are we to make of Benedick’s penultimate line, “There is no staff more reverend than one tipped with horn?” Will the final outcome be *Much Ado About Nothing*... or *Much Ado About Nothing*?

Jerry James has been working in the theatre for over fifty years. For forty of those years, he lived in New York City, where he was an award-winning writer and director.