

“Exit, Man”: Combating Layered Oppression Through Radical Feminism

Willow Szpilczak¹ and Christopher Brown[#]

¹Germantown Friends School, USA

[#]Advisor

ABSTRACT

This paper contends that Aditi Brennan Kapil’s *Imogen Says Nothing* depicts the power of radical feminism, a branch of feminism that advocates for the de-centering of the male perspective. By comparing how other social identifiers influence gender dynamics in *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Imogen Says Nothing*, this analysis demonstrates that a man’s interest in a woman is contingent on her conformity to racialized ideals of womanhood that uphold male societal authority. Furthermore, the texts exemplify the stress this causes women, especially female minorities, as these harmful standards force them to either relinquish their power or face erasure. Ultimately, this paper argues that *Imogen Says Nothing*’s ending defies *Much Ado About Nothing*’s marriage plot by asserting the necessity of women creating spaces for themselves that do not include men and, therefore, that *Imogen Says Nothing*’s conclusion promotes radical feminism.

Introduction

To make progress in diversifying the literary canon, the tradition of treating Shakespeare like a “saint, who must be worshiped and not criticized” (Hamer 312) must be broken by ending the “fear [of] the visibility without which [the stories left out of his writing] cannot truly live” (Lorde 30). *Imogen Says Nothing* by Aditi Brennan Kapil, “a purposeful re-taking and re-mythologizing” of Shakespeare’s famed comedy *Much Ado About Nothing*, is the product of a growing branch of feminist translation dedicated “to investigat[ing] what happens when the people you cut out of history decide to come and take it back” (Kapil 10, 11). Whereas *Much Ado About Nothing* features white women who leverage their privilege to find some comfort within male-dominated power structures, *Imogen Says Nothing* illustrates how this outdated strategy causes significant discomfort and frustration for female minorities, encouraging them to sacrifice aspects of their identity in exchange for rarely attainable recognition from their male Caucasian peers. By emphasizing the often-erased perspective of women of color, *Imogen Says Nothing* challenges *Much Ado About Nothing*’s false assertion that a woman’s happiness is contingent on their conformity to patriarchal ideals and instead empowers women to find freedom in hijacking¹ the existing exclusionary narrative.²

Kapil wrote *Imogen Says Nothing* to provide an origin story for the silent ghost character in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Imogen (or Innogen as she is titled in the quartos and folios). Imogen, written in the stage directions of

¹ In “Feminist Translation: Contexts, Practices and Theories,” Luise von Flauwton describes the different methods of feminist translation, including “hijacking.” She explains that the practices were developed in response to the “patriarchal language” evident in many of the literary texts women were translating. In her words, “the feminist translator...[gave] herself permission to...collude with and challenge the writers” (74).

² During her interview with Charles O’Malley, Kapil emphasized that “[w]e’re a society built on oppression and erasure,” citing the repercussions of “systemic oppression...[and the] histori[cal] disenfranchisement” of minorities as the reason she believes “the white male canon of literature can stand to be hijacked by a wild and wooly feminist retelling of our story” (11).

Shakespeare's play, is only present in the first two folio editions of *Much Ado About Nothing* and, therefore, is often identified as an overlooked mistake remnant from a cut in the script. She is considered so insignificant to the plot of the story that she has been "relegated to a footnote" or wholly erased from most modern editions of *Much Ado About Nothing* (qtd. in O'Malley 9). Kapil uses Imogen's erasure "to explore...the voices that have been...excluded from our cannon,"³ resulting in a show that forces audience members to examine how power rules our archives and supports the racism interwoven into celebrated literature. Kapil questions Shakespeare's original text by exposing its role in maintaining oppressive structures, relying on a combination of both comedy and metaphor "to facilitate healthy conversation[s]" about "why minorities are so pissed off" (qtd. in O'Malley 12, 11). Kapil's understanding of "the full scope of humanity" results in a play that successfully sustains an accessible yet thought-provoking dialogue (qtd. in O'Malley 12). Kapil provides larger audiences with "a set of tools...to reckon with the injustices of the past," propelling *Much Ado About Nothing* into the future using radical feminist practices (qtd. in O'Malley 12) (Santos 172).

Racialized Power Dynamics

In "Radical Feminism and Feminist Radicalism," Ellen Willis defines the radical feminist belief that male supremacy is contingent on men's desire, "like any other ruling class," to "defend their interests" (93). Both men in *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Imogen Says Nothing* treat women in a manner informed by their self-interest, specifically their desire to secure their masculinity, supporting Willis' claim. However, unlike Hero and Beatrice of *Much Ado About Nothing*, whose male peers inherently desire them for their whiteness, Imogen must conform to racialized ideals of womanhood. Imogen has to conceal herself to receive even limited respect from the men who surround her because she knows they would see no social advantage in supporting a bear,⁴ the metaphor Kapil uses for women of color, directly contrasting with Hero and Beatrice's experience as wealthy white women.

Hero's romantic relationship with Claudio is a product of the privilege her whiteness affords her. Before Claudio ever has a conversation with Hero, he proudly proclaims that she is "the sweetest lady that ever [he] looked on" and resolves to pursue his premature love for the "jewel" (1.1.183-184, 1.1.177). Although Claudio does not know Hero personally, her physical appearance so clearly embodies the Eurocentric beauty standards of the time period that Claudio is convinced of her perfection and purity, demonstrating the power wielded by women who fit racial conventions of beauty. Claudio's comparison between Hero and a precious stone confirms that his initial attraction to her is solely aesthetic, evidencing that their eventual relationship is a direct product of Hero's looks, specifically her ability to conform to racialized ideals. Yet, Claudio's fascination with Hero heightens once he learns that "she's [the] only heir" to her wealthy father, Leonato's, fortune. Leonato's resources result from his political power as the governor of Messina, a position only a white man could obtain in sixteenth-century Italy. Claudio's materialistic desires inform his determination to win Hero's hand in marriage, as integration into an influential family would quickly elevate his social status by association and grant him access to the generational funds often possessed by the prominent white households of that era. Essentially, Claudio's proclaimed love for Hero is a manifestation of his goal to usurp the social capital she holds as an alluring heiress, evidencing that men sought out privileged women deemed desirable under the unfair power dynamics that controlled Shakespeare's time as a means of securing prosperity.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Kathryn Vomero Santos, discussed the meaning behind the bear comparison in "Hijacking Shakespeare," detailing the history of bear baitings: a competing form of entertainment during Shakespeare's time. Audiences used to gather to watch bears get tortured to death for amusement, over attending plays, resulting in some competition between this cruel practice and Shakespeare's work. By choosing to compare women of color to bears Kapil defines that "[t]he oppression of bears is not a result of inferiority on the part of the bears, but rather" on the players need to secure their "superiority" over them (Kapil 6).

Similarly, Benedick pursues Beatrice to prevent her from wielding the uncharacteristically masculine speech⁵ she has the privilege of adopting as a wealthy woman who is not reliant on marriage for stability. Despite Leonato's concern that his niece "wilt never get thee a husband, if [she] be so shrewd of [her] tongue," Beatrice continues to speak in a manner that "appears more conventionally male than female" (2.1.16-17) (Hunt 166). The fact that Beatrice is unphased by the notion that her wit could detract potential suitors exemplifies that she does not need the financial support a spouse could bring to a relationship. Like Hero, Beatrice's familial connection to Leonato gives her access to the wealth he has as a powerful white man, proving that Beatrice's ability to speak freely without the threat of hurting her livelihood is also a result of her race. Additionally, Beatrice can talk out of turn without fear of severe punishment because her social status as a connected white woman protects her, further solidifying that her race allows her to take on more masculine attributes. These male traits ignite Benedick's romantic interest in Beatrice, as he sees marrying her as the ultimate way to assert his masculinity. By subjugating Beatrice through marriage, Benedick will be able to prove his masculine power is strong enough to "tame [her most] wild heart to [his] loving hand," clearly demonstrating Benedick's supposed love for Beatrice stems from a need to overtake the privileges her race affords her (3.1.112). In this way, Benedick and Beatrice's eventual marriage further proves that men's pursuit of women is determined by a disguised want to seize their social power.

Kapil represents the unique pressure women of color feel to conform through Imogen's self-sacrificing attempts to find belonging in a society that discriminates against bears like herself. The play opens with a "tortured eye[d]" bear convincing Imogen to "[d]ance to the beating, [d]ance to the beat..[in order to] [s]how'em that [she is] here," and Imogen's response promising that, "[t]hat much [she will] do" (Kapil 9). Imogen's immediate agreement to change herself after being confronted by a personified manifestation of the torture she will endure as a bear cannot be over-emphasized. Her strong desire to be accepted is a direct result of the oppression inflicted by humans, the ruling class, upon minorities bears, confirming Imogen's desire to change herself is a byproduct of an allegorical system mirroring the systemic discrimination BIPOC women face in reality. Imogen's resolve to pursue the unnamed bear's direction, despite her encouraging Imogen to quietly endure "beating[s]," suggests that Imogen's current oppression as a bear is even more painful than the physical torture recommended to her. Her few choices demonstrate that women of color feel limited to immensely painful methods of belonging because the dominant narrative undervalues their perspective. In addition, the bear urges Imogen to keep "danc[ing]" through the pain, revealing that in order to be successful, Imogen not only must endure suffering but perform for the pleasure of her own oppressors, once again evidencing the double standard that exists for bears, or rather women of color. After internalizing the fellow bear's advice and attempting to pass as white, Imogen is met with seemingly encouraging sentiments from the character of William Shakespeare, who "welcome[s] [her]" by "enter[ing] [her]...[o]n the parchment of the theater" (36). Shakespeare gives Imogen both a metaphorical and literal part in the play when she passes as human, solidifying that race dictates a white male's readiness to include women. Although Imogen is still the target of a portion of her white male peers' mocking, the majority of the men approach her with some empathy, further showing that white men are more willing to recognize women with shared social identifiers. Overall, Imogen demonstrates that by "step[ping] in[to]" the role created for her by her oppressors, she can find some sense of belonging, cementing the fact that whiteness affords women privilege (9).

Women's Happiness within the Patriarchy

Although white women can find positions within a male-dominated society, this does not guarantee them happiness because they lack autonomy. Despite her privilege, Hero is forced to marry Claudio even after he wrongfully interrogates her purity. This shameful union leaves her public image "died defiled" because the rumors he spread about her are free to fester and the "slander live[s]" on (Shakespeare 5.4.65-66). By humiliating Hero at the altar, Claudio shows

⁵ To understand how "Beatrice's acerbic speech" could be classified as "conventionally male" refer to Maurice Hunt's research in "The Reclamation of language in *Much Ado about Nothing*."

that men cannot be trusted as the keepers of women's stories because male figures usually act out of self-interest. Claudio flagrantly disregards Hero's livelihood when he is afraid that her alleged impurity questions his masculinity, illustrating that men are willing to destroy a woman's reputation based on their desire to assert their male narrative. In addition, Hero must now permanently attach herself to the careless man despite the profound impact his lies have had on the trajectory of her life. This marriage demonstrates that white women's reliance on men can lead to sad, insecure partnerships, regardless of a woman's extensive efforts to be perfect. Essentially, Hero's wedding commits her to a man who has targeted her very being and, therefore, robbed her of a happy ending. Unfortunately, Beatrice's fate is no better than her cousin's. When Beatrice finally admits her love for Benedick, Benedick takes advantage of the opportunity to usurp Beatrice's freedom, "stop[ping] [her] mouth" with a kiss (5.4.102). Beatrice, not speaking for the rest of the play, exemplifies how men rob women of their defining traits to support their own power. Additionally, Benedick requires Beatrice to extinguish her fiery wit, contrasting with the freedom of speech he allows himself. This silencing illustrates that men expect women to save all of their energy for their marital relationships. Yet, men maintain their personhood outside of these unequal partnership, furthering the disparity between men and women under the patriarchy.

Like the women of *Much Ado About Nothing*, men crush Imogen's desire for happiness; however, her fate is significantly more disturbing as she not only loses the respect of her male peers but also faces the erasure of her entire existence. After Imogen is revealed as a bear, she is subsequently forced to fight for her life in a bear-baiting match in front of the character of William Shakespeare and his male players. Imogen begs the men to "free [her]" from the undignified death that awaits her by killing her. Instead of helping Imogen, William orders his men not to "upset the natural order" (75). Even though they have spent a significant amount of time getting to know Imogen and were once friendly with her, most of the men are still unwilling to show her any respect once they know she is a bear, demonstrating how deeply race impacts the empathy they show women. Not only that, but during her time with the players, Imogen assisted and entertained them. Yet, they still refuse to be civil to her in her time of need, proving that these white males view race as a prioritized determiner when deciding how to treat others, regardless of the personal gratitude they owe those individuals. Additionally, William's reference to "the natural order" exemplifies that the players' decision to watch Imogen suffer is motivated by their desire to uphold the corrupt system that unfairly favors those who share their social identifiers. This choice solidifies that men cannot be trusted to support women, especially women of color when their inaction upholds their social dominance. Fourteen years later in the story, when asked about a surviving edition of his play that includes Imogen, William refers to the copy as "rife with typographical errors" (84). He continues, citing a lack of "attention to accuracy" and angrily exclaiming that "there's no Imogen in this play!" (84). Will's authoritative denial of Imogen's very existence illustrates the threat white males pose in the status quo through their control over the dominant narrative. Shakespeare unflinchingly erases an entire individual because he is determined to maintain his cultural dominance, contradicting his former welcoming of Imogen simply because she is not white. Overall, William's purposeful rewriting of history cements the unique dangers women of color experience in a society ruled by white males.

Imogen Says Nothing as Radical Feminism

While Imogen faces the inherently violent erasure of her being, unlike *Much Ado About Nothing*, Kapil refuses to accept silence as a resolution. At the end of the play, riddled with guilt about his complicity in Imogen's death, Henry tries to ease his conscience by adding Imogen to the *Much Ado About Nothing* manuscript. However, he limits her impact on the narrative to her "[e]xcent," claiming that mentioning her once is representative of "the truth of it" (Kapil 98). When he extends Imogen this small kindness, a "full[ness]" (98), or relief, overcomes Henry, demonstrating his ability to derive contentment from even limited decency towards those outside of the ruling class. Additionally, Henry's feelings of affirmation are not truly a product of acknowledging Imogen. Instead, the sense of security he finds results from editing the story to be consistent with his version of "the true truth" (Santos 167), exemplifying the dangers of women's forced reliance on male storytellers to share their unique perspectives. However, Kapil shows

women, specifically female minorities, how they can successfully reclaim their experiences when Imogen makes “good use” of Henry’s self-serving kindness (Kapil 99). Imogen reappears to warn the audience of “the fearsome thing [it is] to be absent” (99). Alluding to the “[terrifying] mirror” that was the symbolic dancing bear from the beginning of the play, Imogen finally promises to break the cycle of oppression by not “danc[ing]...no more” (99). Instead, she “devours Henry” while speaking the defining final lines of *Imogen Says Nothing*: “[e]xit, man” (99). Kapil’s finale is an evident example of radical feminism because it promotes women creating their own spaces outside of male authority. This ending directly answers Ellen Willis’ concern that men’s defense of the masculine narrative will uphold the patriarchy by illustrating the efficacy of pursuing solutions apart from men. Imogen’s rejection of the dancing bear confirms that conforming is an ineffectual means of achieving equality, encouraging the audience to practice radical feminism as an alternative. Kapil’s deliberate decision to end the story with a bloody depiction of Imogen eating Henry, tearing him limb by limb, indeed threatens viewers to stop perpetuating the harmful patterns of erasure depicted in the show. The gore forces them to apply the subject matter of *Imogen Says Nothing* to their own lives and demonstrates the consequences if they fail to change, aiding in the show’s success in advocating for these revised feminist ideas. Moreover, by hijacking the exclusive, male-dominated literary canon, Kapil is practicing the methods of obtaining equality that *Imogen Says Nothing* preaches, illustrating the play’s commitment to radical feminist practices through Kapil’s own actions.

Conclusion

By providing diverse audiences with an entertaining way to engage in an exceedingly meaningful dialogue about the continued targeted erasure of women of color from the literary canon, *Imogen Says Nothing* successfully propels Shakespeare’s work into the future. *Imogen Says Nothing* explores an overlooked narrative and expands upon it, turning a “typographical error” into an elaborate world filled with zany characters. Using behavior that questions the structures of power that dominate society, these characters ask audiences to consider who is behind the popular narrative. Additionally, Kapil’s representation of discrimination through the metaphor of bears creatively opens an informed dialogue about the efficacy and exclusivity of different feminist practices, using connections between sixteenth-century England and today’s world that demonstrate Shakespeare’s relevance to our modern moment. Furthermore, Kapil extends the conversation around radical feminism to a wider audience by weaponizing the Shakespearean tactic of carefully “mixing high-brow and low-brow” (qtd. in O’Malley 11), making her writing more accessible. In conclusion, Kapil connects audiences through a jarring viewing experience, creating a safe space for women to consider how they can empower their perspective by reclaiming the silent stories that exist in the margins.

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