Some critics have claimed that “Much Ado About Nothing” is a simple romantic comedy; others have interpreted it as a sharp attack on a superficial society. To what extent do you feel the conventions of comedy are employed to convey serious social messages in this play?

Nell King defines comedy as “a work which is primarily designed to amuse and entertain, and where, despite alarms along the way, all’s well that ends well for the characters.”¹ There is no denying that ‘Much Ado About Nothing’ is a comedy by this definition; it is brimming with witty banter, crossed conversations and joyful dancing. However, hidden amongst the play’s apparent light-hearted humour are themes concerning gender, love and deception and these have led some to call into question the true nature of the play – is it truly a comedy, or are the tragic elements of the themes the play deals with a method for Shakespeare to tackle serious social issues?

It is not erroneous for one to view “Much Ado..” as nothing more than a simple romantic comedy, designed to therapeutically distract audiences from the solemnity of life. This is suggested in the very title of the play; in Elizabethan society, ‘nothing’ was a euphemism for female genitalia, indicating that a great fuss will be caused over the female characters featured in the play. The play is dominated by complex love dilemmas, as is typical of a romantic comedy, and exhibits a variety of amusing and yet perplexing situations, all of which are resolved, and culminates with a gracious resolution. Even the dry ‘bachelor’ that is Benedick remarks “Let’s have a dance ere we are married.” Furthermore conforming to the stereotype of a romantic comedy, dramatic irony creates comedy within the relationship of Benedick and Beatrice; the audience are aware that their insults and dislike for one another are in fact masking their true feelings. The play is also full of archetypal characters featured in romantic comedies; this is a feature of “new” comedy, which features stock characters that are entertainingly familiar. Benedick, as both the witty courtier and the scourer of love, fits two such comic prototypes.

However, “Much Ado..” can also be interpreted as “a sharp attack on a superficial society.” Shakespeare’s use of drama to challenge the very foundations of Renaissance society and to disrupt traditional values is both original and critical. Throughout the play, the role of women and the nature of love are investigated and raise complex societal issues. For example, Hero is essential in attacking the nature of the superficial society in which Shakespeare lived. It is necessary that the play features Hero, for “Claudio’s attack on Hero conjures up a world in which a woman’s life depends on her good reputation.”² She is similar to the virtue character featured in mystery plays, with her innocent behaviour and moralistic lifestyle and only has one line in the entirety of Act One, presenting her as a rather unimportant character. She is treated as a commodity, which, according to Don Pedro, can be “won” and, despite her aptitude for organisation and her perpetual patience and kindness, she is ignored because of her gender. It is amongst other females that her character truly emerges, having displayed tremendous reticence until given the chance to prove herself; she speaks poetically in verse and uses warm, romantic language when asking Margaret to “bid her steal into the pleached bower where honeysuckles, ripened by the sun, forbid the sun to enter.” Her poetic, romantic speech enhances the pathos of her humiliation and the injustice of her degradation

¹ King, Nell. “Comical Tragedy or Tragical Comedy.” emagazine, 5th September 2012: page 54.
² King, Nell. “Comical Tragedy or Tragical Comedy.” emagazine, 5th September 2012: page 55.
later in the play. She unequivocally conforms to the shallow expectations of Elizabethan men of their wives and daughters and acts as the conventional weak heroine. Beatrice is also a clever construct used to attack the core of Shakespeare’s society. The opposite of Hero, her dominant and determined personality is employed to challenge patriarchal dominance. When she instructs Benedick to “kill Claudio”, she protects more than just Hero; she is not only asking for vengeance here, but is also asking that Benedick prove his love for her, illustrating her strength and independence. Her request is indicative of her capacity to protect herself. Likewise, Claudio’s youth is imperative when questioning the sophistication and superficiality of love. His youth is one of the first things presented to us about Claudio, as he is described as having “borne himself beyond the promise of his age.” He falls in love with Hero immediately after the first glimpse, explaining to Benedick that “she is the sweetest lady that ever I looked on”, exposing his rash judgements and foreshadowing his impulsive mistakes later in the play. This not only questions the type of love in the play, but also in society; can the love between Hero and Claudio, and, by extension, between anyone, really be true if it is merely based upon shallow ideologies? 

“Much Ado.” has been described as Shakespeare’s “severest criticism to date of the weakness lying in romantic love”. The nature of Claudio’s love for Hero is rather insubstantial; he fell in love with the idea of Hero, merely based upon her appearance, and cruelly humiliates her after being falsely informed of her betrayal, unwilling to allow her an explanation. During his condemnation of Hero, Claudio accuses Hero of being “as chaste as is the bud ere it is blown”. The romanticised floral imagery within this statement demonstrates to the audience Claudio’s idealised version of Hero.

Beatrice is greatly angered by the nature of Claudio’s ‘love’ and refers to men as “a piece of valiant dust” here, Shakespeare uses an oxymoron, a common feature of comedy, to describe men and highlight the lack of substance in Claudio’s love and potentially the love displayed by men in Elizabethan society. Beatrice furthermore complains at the nature of Benedick’s attitude towards love, as he wears “his faith but as the fashion of his hat”; his misogyny is also featured in his expectations of women, as he expects fidelity from women, despite his hypocrisy in demanding this. Another comedic moment pertaining to the issue of love derives from the fact that we see both Benedick and Beatrice humbled by love; Benedick declares himself “horribly in love” and must reconsider his previously hugely misogynistic stance. Benedick’s soliloquies are also comedic; they are placed directly before and directly after his gulling, and create a comic frame that highlights how he must rescind his previous words. Here, Shakespeare ridicules misogyny by portraying Benedick as foolish.

In Elizabethan society, women were preordained to be passive and gentle, and yet, on stage, dominant female characters commanded attention from the audience. The destruction of traditional gender roles was unnerving and created concerns about the agitation of the expected social hierarchy. By presenting this in a comedic way to a live audience, the worries of the audience could be not only scrutinised, but also effectively diffused. However, using comedy to conceal the issue of gender is fundamental in provoking a subtle awareness. Hero is treated as an object by the man she is due to marry; Claudio frequently likens Hero to a “jewel”, and bitterly refers to her as “this rich and precious gift” when denouncing her. This imagery reduces her to nothing more than a trophy to be displayed as an object of a man’s honour. This is a typical example of a crossed conversation and is intensely sarcastic, both of which are stereotypically comedic conventions; however, here they are

used to heighten a tragic situation and emphasise the issues with assumed societal gender roles. Another comedic situation used to accentuate gender issues in Elizabethan society is the gulling of Benedick and Beatrice. Unlike Hero and Claudio, Benedick and Beatrice adopt an equivalent position in relation to one another and treat one another as equals. Cleverly, Benedick and Beatrice are chosen to represent genuine love and the only truly functional relationship in the play, highlighting the weaknesses of gender roles and the role they play in damaging relationships. The flaws of the assumption of male superiority are further emphasised by Claudio’s turbulent and changeable attitudes towards Hero. Claudio speaks in prose before his denunciation of Hero; once it has begun, he condemns her in blank verse and informs Leonato that “her blush is guilt, not modesty”, conveying the sudden change from adoration to contempt in his feelings towards her. It is ironic that Claudio denounces Hero for not being what she appeared to be in his eyes, for Claudio idealised Hero. There is a divergence between what Claudio perceives Hero to be and what Hero realistically is. Despite Hero’s innocence, Claudio boasts the freedom to declare Hero “but the sign and semblance of her honour”. The emphasis here lies on the issues with the role of women in Elizabethan society, and how characters such as Claudio, despite his rash judgements and selfish nature, possess the freedom to remain dominant over characters such as the gentle and sweet Hero.

In the words of Sir Philip Sidney, “comedy is an imitation of the common errors of our life.” Amongst the frivolities of “Much Ado...” lies a plethora of mistakes and biting attacks on social troubles that are hard to ignore. The play is superficially entertaining, and deliberately so. Although it may appear that the play is a simplistic romantic comedy – and indeed, it may, for the play features a variety of conventions and characters ordinarily associated with comedies, and follows the traditional structure of a comedy with its joyful resolution – the undertones of the play assure the audience that the meaning is far more complex than this, and that the themes of love and gender are purposefully intertwined into the plot to elevate knowledge of the issues connected to them.

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Bibliography: