Summary

Introduction

Although there has been some speculation that *Much Ado about Nothing* may be a heavily revised version of a play that Shakespeare wrote earlier in his career (a "lost" work that is often referred to as *Love's Labour Won*), *Much Ado* was probably written by Shakespeare in 1598 or shortly thereafter. This would make *Much Ado* one of Shakespeare's later comedies. Unlike his earliest comedic works, the humor of *Much Ado about Nothing* does not depend upon funny situations. While it shares some standard devices with those earlier plays (misperceptions, disguises, false reports), the comedy of *Much Ado* derives from the characters themselves and the manners of the highly-mannered society in which they live.

And while the main plot of *Much Ado* revolves around obstacles to the union of two young lovers (Claudio and Hero), the plays sub-plot, the "merry war" of the sexes between Beatrice and Benedick, is much more interesting and entertaining by comparison. Indeed, the play was staged for a long period of time under the title of *Beatrice and Benedick*. Especially when set alongside the conventional, even two-dimensional lovers of the main plot, Beatrice and Benedick display a carefully matched intelligence, humor, and humanity that is unmatched among the couples who people Shakespeare's comedies. Beatrice and Benedick aside, *Much Ado* has been the object of sharp criticism from several modern Shakespeare scholars, the gist of their complaint being that it lacks a unifying dramatic conception. More pointedly, while *Much Ado* is comic, it also has some disturbing elements. That being so, it is often classified as a "problem play," akin to *The Merchant of Venice* in raising the possibility of a tragic ending and in presenting us with "good" characters, like Claudio, who nonetheless act "badly."
Synopsis

Summary of the Play

The play is set in and near the house of Leonato, governor of Messina, Sicily. Prince Don Pedro of Aragon with his favorite, Claudio, and Benedick, young cavalier of Padua, as well as Don John, the bastard brother of Don Pedro, come to Leonato’s. Claudio instantly falls in love with Hero (her name means chaste), Leonato’s only child, whom Don Pedro formally obtains for him. While they wait for the wedding day, they amuse themselves by gulling Benedick and Beatrice (Leonato’s niece), verbal adversaries who share a merry wit and a contempt for conventional love, into believing that they are hopelessly in love with each other.

Meanwhile, Don John, an envious and mischief-making malcontent, plots to break the match between Claudio and Hero and employs Conrade and Borachio to assist him. After planting the suspicion in the minds of Claudio and the Prince that Hero is wanton, Don John confirms it by having Borachio talk to Hero’s maid, Margaret, at the chamber window at midnight, as if she were Hero. Convinced by this hoax, Claudio and Don Pedro disgrace Hero before the altar at the wedding, rejecting her as unchaste. Shocked by the allegation, which her father readily accepts, Hero swoons away, and the priest, who believes in her innocence, intervenes. At his suggestion, she is secretly sent to her uncle’s home and publicly reported dead in order to soften the hearts of her accusers as well as lessen the impact of gossip. Leonato is grief-stricken.

Benedick and Beatrice, their sharp wit blunted by the pain of the slander, honestly confess their love for each other before the same altar. Benedick proves his love by challenging his friend Claudio to a duel to requite the honor of Beatrice’s cousin, Hero. Borachio, overheard by the watch as he boasts of his false meeting with Hero to Conrade, is taken into the custody of Constable Dogberry and clears Hero; but Don John has fled. Her innocence confirmed, her father, satisfied with Claudio’s penitent demeanor, directs him to hang verses on her tomb that night and marry his niece, sight unseen, the next morning, which Claudio agrees to do in a double wedding with Beatrice and Benedict. He joyfully discovers that the masked lady he has promised to marry is Hero. The play ends with an account of Don John being detained by the local authorities.

Estimated Reading Time

Much Ado about Nothing was written to be performed before an audience, without intermission, in less than three hours. Allow your imagination full sway in a straight-through, first reading to grasp the plot and characters. This should take about three hours. To understand the play’s nuances, reread it and take note of the usage of each word glossed at the bottom of the text. This should take about one hour per act. Observe how the syntax assigned to each character reveals their pattern of thought. Give yourself enough time to explore the play. While you enjoy the humor, language, and the composition, chuckle along with Shakespeare at our human vanities.

You can use audiotapes, available at libraries, to follow the text and hear the changing rhythms of verse and prose that this play is famous for. Video taped performances are also available. Study groups may easily read the piece aloud.
Summary (Critical Survey of Literature for Students)

Don Pedro, prince of Arragon, arrives in Messina accompanied by his bastard brother, Don John, and his two friends, the young Italian noblemen Claudio and Benedick. Don Pedro had vanquished his brother in battle. Now, reconciled, the brothers plan to visit Leonato before returning to their homeland. On their arrival in Messina, young Claudio is immediately smitten by the lovely Hero, daughter of Leonato, the governor of Messina. To help his faithful young friend in his suit, Don Pedro assumes the guise of Claudio at a masked ball and woos Hero in Claudio’s name. Then he gains Leonato’s consent for Claudio and Hero to marry. Don John tries to cause trouble by persuading Claudio that Don Pedro means to betray him and keep Hero for himself, but the villain is foiled in his plot and Claudio remains faithful to Don Pedro.

Benedick, the other young follower of Don Pedro, is a confirmed and bitter bachelor who scorns all men willing to enter the married state. No less opposed to men and matrimony is Leonato’s niece, Beatrice. These two constantly spar with one another, each trying to show intellectual supremacy over the other. Don Pedro, with the help of Hero, Claudio, and Leonato, undertakes the seemingly impossible task of bringing Benedick and Beatrice together in matrimony in the seven days before the marriage of Hero and Claudio.

Don John, thwarted in his first attempt to cause disharmony, forms another plot. With the help of a servant, he arranges to make it appear as if Hero is being unfaithful to Claudio. The servant is to gain entrance to Hero’s chambers when she is away. In her place will be her attendant, assuming Hero’s clothes. Don John, posing as Claudio’s true friend, will inform him of her unfaithfulness and lead him to Hero’s window to witness her wanton disloyalty.

Don Pedro pursues his plan to persuade Benedick and Beatrice to stop quarreling and fall in love with each other. When Benedick is close by, thinking himself unseen, Don Pedro, Claudio, and Leonato talk of their great sympathy for Beatrice, who loves Benedick but is unloved in return. The three tell one another of the love letters Beatrice had written to Benedick and had then torn up, and that Beatrice beats her breast and sobs over her unrequited love for Benedick. At the same time, on occasions when Beatrice is nearby but apparently unseen, Hero and her maid tell each other that poor Benedick pines and sighs for the heartless Beatrice. The two unsuspecting young people decide not to let the other suffer. Each will sacrifice principles and accept the other’s love.

Just as Benedick and Beatrice prepare to admit their love for each other, Don John is successful in his base plot to ruin Hero. He tells Claudio that he has learned of Hero’s duplicity, and he arranges to take him and Don Pedro to her window that very night to witness her unfaithfulness. Dogberry, a constable, and the watch apprehend Don John’s followers and overhear the truth of the plot, but in their stupidity the petty officials cannot get their story told in time to prevent Hero’s disgrace. Don Pedro and Claudio witness the apparent betrayal, and Claudio determines to allow Hero to arrive in church the next day still thinking herself beloved. Then, instead of marrying her, he will shame her before all the wedding guests.

All happens as Don John had hoped. Before the priest and all the guests, Claudio calls Hero a wanton and forswears her love for all time. The poor girl protests her innocence, but to no avail. Claudio says that he had seen her foul act with his own eyes. Hero swoons and lays as if dead, but Claudio and Don Pedro leave her with her father, who believes the story and wishes his daughter really dead in her shame. The priest believes the girl guiltless, however, and he persuades Leonato to believe in her, too. The priest tells Leonato to let the world believe Hero dead while they work to prove her innocent. Benedick, also believing in her innocence, promises to help unravel the mystery. Then, Beatrice tells Benedick of her love for him and asks him to kill Claudio and so prove his love for her. Benedick challenges Claudio to a duel. Don John had fled the country after the successful outcome of his plot, but Benedick swears that he will find Don John and kill him as well as Claudio.
At last, Dogberry and the watch get to Leonato and tell their story. When Claudio and Don Pedro hear the story, Claudio wants to die and to be with his wronged Hero. Leonato allows the two sorrowful men to continue to think Hero dead. In fact, they all attend her funeral. Leonato says that he will be avenged if Claudio will marry his niece, a girl who much resembles Hero. Although Claudio still loves the dead Hero, he agrees to marry the other girl so that Leonato should have his wish.

When Don Pedro and Claudio arrive at Leonato’s house for the ceremony, all the women are masked. Leonato brings one young woman forward. After Claudio promises to be her husband, she un_masks. She is, of course, Hero. At first, Claudio cannot believe his senses, but after he is convinced of the truth he takes her to the church immediately. Then, Benedick and Beatrice declare their true love for each other, and they, too, leave for the church after a dance in celebration of the double nuptials to be performed. Best of all, word comes that Don John had been captured and is being brought back to Messina to face his brother, Don Pedro, the next day. On this day, however, all is joy and happiness.
Act and Scene Summary and Analysis

Preface to the Summary

Trying to follow the multiple, interwoven narrative lines of *Much Ado About Nothing* from this summary (or even the written text itself), may prove frustrating. To simplify matters, it is useful to observe that three distinct plots or schemes unfold within the play. For the sake of convenience, we can speak of "plot A" ("A" standing, perhaps, for "abbreviated"), "plot B" ("B" for "Beatrice and Benedick"), and "plot C" ("C" for "central"). In plot A, having learned that his good brother, Don Pedro, intends to court Hero at a masked ball on behalf of his young lieutenant, Claudio, the villain of the play, Don John schemes to convince Claudio that Don Pedro actually intends to have Hero for himself. This half-baked plot is abbreviated or aborted in Act II, coming to naught when all of the good characters agree on Claudio's proposal of marriage to Hero. Plot B develops immediately thereafter as the good characters in the play (including Don Pedro, Claudio, and Hero) form a benign conspiracy meant to bring Beatrice and Benedick to the marriage altar. This plan ultimately succeeds. Concurrently, the malcontent Don John and his principal henchman, Borachio, launch Plot C. They stage a romantic meeting between Borachio and Hero's serving-woman, Margaret, who play the parts of an unknown lover and Hero, to demonstrate Hero's infidelity to Claudio and Don Pedro. This leads to a very bad scene at the wedding chapel as Claudio denounces his bride, Hero, causing Beatrice to come to her cousin Hero's defense and demand that Benedick kill Hero. Plot C is eventually straightened out, partly due to the inept intervention of the local constable, the clownish Dogberry, and partly due to the wise counsel of the clergyman who was to have presided over the wedding, Friar Francis.

Two additional points are worth noting. First, all of the scenes in Much Ado have essentially the same setting. The action takes place exclusively in and around the "great house" of the governor of Messina, Leonato, who is Hero's father and Beatrice's uncle. This uniformly urban setting differs from the pattern of Shakespeare's earlier comedies that typically move from the city to the country (or a "fairyland/magical" abode) and then back to the city. Second, other than the romance between Hero and Claudio (which is rendered in verse), most of the dialogue in Much Ado (including the repartee between Beatrice and Benedick) is rendered in prose. On the other hand, not only does the character of Balthasar provide songs, including a famous ditty that ends with the refrain "converting all your sound of woe/Into hey nonny-nonny" (II, iii, ll.62-74), these set pieces (and the dance or masque which concludes the play) refer to and reinforce the play's narrative situations and principal themes.

Act I, Scene 1 Summary and Analysis

**New Characters:** Leonato: governor of Messina and father of Hero, a man of manners and hospitality, whose conventionality will be tested by the depth of his grief

Hero: Leonato's only child, a docile and conventional young woman, honored for her chastity

Beatrice: Leonato's spirited niece, gifted with a brilliant wit and interested in Benedick

Messenger: brings news of Prince Don Pedro's victory and approach to Messina

Don Pedro: prince of Aragon, who victoriously return from battle against his illegitimate brother for his throne; Leonato's guest during his stay in Messina and enjoys matchmaking

Claudio: young count, Don Pedro's courageous right-hand man, who seeks the hand of Hero; a man who relies on his outer senses, will be duped by Don John into shaming Hero
Benedick: quick-witted and spirited young count who, though an avowed misogynist, is attracted to Beatrice

Balthasar: musician, an attendant on Don Pedro

Don John: Don Pedro's malcontented, illegitimate brother who resents Don Pedro and Claudio and will do anything to cross them

Much Ado About Nothing

Summary
The scene takes place before Leonato's house. The messenger informs Leonato that victorious Don Pedro, Prince of Aragon, will arrive shortly with his favorite, Lord Claudio of Florence, who performed courageously in battle. Beatrice asks about Lord Benedick of Padua and learns that he has returned a hero. Don Pedro arrives with his valiant lords, Claudio and Benedick, his attendant, Balthasar, and his bastard brother, Don John. Leonato and Don Pedro exchange niceties and Beatrice spars Benedick in a spirited word-match during which Benedick calls Beatrice "disdainful" and Beatrice calls Benedick a "pernicious suitor." Leonato invites Don Pedro, Claudio, and Benedick to be his guests during their visit. All exit but Benedick and Claudio.

Claudio confesses his attraction to Hero and his desire to marry her if she be modest. Benedick reveals his attraction to Beatrice, "were she not possessed with a fury," and wonders if there is any man who does not fear his wife will be unfaithful. Don Pedro returns and, hearing of Claudio's love for Hero, attests to her chastity and offers to arrange the marriage, by first wooing Hero (disguised as Claudio), then asking Leonato for her hand. And, Benedick professes both his misogyny and his unwillingness to marry.

Analysis
The exposition advises us that all the players are acquainted. Hero immediately recognizes Beatrice's oblique reference to Benedick as "Signor Mountanto," Leonato refers to the longstanding "merry war betwixt Signor Benedick" and Beatrice, and Claudio confesses his attraction to Hero before leaving for the war. This level of intimacy introduces a mimetic realism, much like that in Hamlet-giving credibility to the character's actions and easing their confrontations-that is sustained throughout the play. Approximately 75 percent of the play is written in prose, a style nearer to colloquial speech than verse. Both the prose and the verse sound with the vitality of Shakespeare's musical style.

The mask motif, predominant in this play, is emphasized by Benedick and Beatrice and subtly disguised as clever diatribe in the roles that they assume to hide their obsession with each other. Fashion imagery, a symbol of appearance versus reality, is introduced as Beatrice states that Benedick "wears his faith but as the fashion of his hat" and Benedick calls "courtesy a turncoat." Their wordplay reveals they are memory-locked, but Shakespeare indicates that their relationship will take a turn for the better by the choice of their names-Benedictus means blessed and Beatrice means blesser.

Beatrice's inquiry about Benedick, though well-seasoned with sarcasm, shows her concern about his welfare as she elicits information about whether he returned safely, if he performed well in battle, and the identity of his present associates. Hero's single line in this scene indicates her modest and retiring nature, builds suspense about her character, and subdues interest in her as emphasis is put on Beatrice, who observes everything around her with a relentlessly playful and unrestrained wit. Benedick momentarily lifts his mask to reveal that his misogyny is assumed as a whetstone for his wit, but closes it quickly.

Claudio suspiciously asks Don Pedro if he praises Hero merely "to fetch [him] in" and Don Pedro protests, both lines serving to initiate a symmetrical pattern which Benedick completes with greater force, stridently using musical imagery in his verbal assaults upon the holy state of marriage, creating an ensemble structure with Claudio and Don Pedro playing his willing straight men.
Since marrying an heiress was a young man's best opportunity, Claudio's first question to Don Pedro is, "Hath Leonato any son, my lord?" Don Pedro's plan, to disguise himself as Claudio in order to win Hero for him at the masked ball, renews the mask motif as a well-intentioned deception. This motif sets the stage for the plot, which turns on a series of misunderstandings and deceptions: a quest for honesty and mutual respect as each character learns to discriminate properly and to estimate everything at its true value. This scene is written in prose up to line 272, then continues in verse.

Act I, Scene 2 Summary and Analysis
New Character: Antonio: Leonato's brother

Summary
In Leonato's house, Antonio advises his brother that his servant overheard the prince, Don Pedro, tell Claudio that he loved Hero and that he would reveal this to her at the dance to be held at Leonato's house that night. And, if she found him suitable, he would request her hand from Leonato. Leonato asks Antonio to convey this information to Hero, so she can also prepare her answer should the report he has just heard be true.

Analysis
Noting which can mean observing, overhearing, and musical notation) is an obvious pun in the title (Elizabethans pronounced nothing/noting alike) and is central to the major theme of this play: appearance versus reality. This theme is continued by having the conversation between Claudio and Don Pedro overheard by a servant, who repeats it to his master, Antonio, who repeats it to his brother, Leonato, who advises him to repeat it to his daughter, Hero, so she, a commoner, can prepare her response to the prince. This brief scene, written in prose, advises us of the speed with which news travels in Messina and complicates the plot with misinformation based on the servant's partial eavesdropping. Hearsay leads to a number of partings between the characters in this play. The word ado in the title may also be a pun on the French word for farewell, adieu, so common in usage that we find it in the dialogue of the play. Note that musicians enter to work for Leonato (26).

Act I, Scene 3 Summary and Analysis
New Characters: Conrade: Don John's companion, who assumes the position of advisor
Borachio: Don John's companion, recently employed by Leonato, who will play a major role in the slander of Hero

Summary
We are still at Leonato's house. Conrade greets Don John, only to find him in a foul mood. When he attempts to reason Don John out of his misery; Don John takes a perverse and self-willed stance. Conrade advises Don John that he needs to bide his time, reminding him that he is too recently taken back in Don Pedro's good graces, after having confronted him in battle, before resuming his mischief. Don John insists on following his own course, stating that his plain-dealing villainy is more virtuous than flattery and reveals his bitterness at any expectation of humility on his part. As Conrade suggests that he make use of his discontent, Borachio enters to inform Don John that his brother is being entertained by Leonato and that, while employed at Leonato's, he overheard the prince tell Claudio that he will woo Hero for himself, then give her to him. Envious of Claudio's standing as the prince's right-hand man, Don John engages Conrade and Borachio to help him to destroy the count, and goes to the party.

Analysis
The counterplot to the Hero-Claudio plot is introduced through the mean-spirited character of Don John, illegitimate heir to Prince Don Pedro's throne, revealed with pounding alliterative phrases, "moral medicine" and "mortifying mischief," who, although accepted back into the prince's good graces after challenging his throne, is incapable of any gratitude and marinates in his one-dimensional misery. His hanger-ons, Conrade
and Borachio, are willing to assist him in any mischief in order to be in his good graces. Don John's casual use of astrological language in his allusion to Conrade being born under the planet Saturn, a signature of cold ambition and sullenness, indicates its common usage in Shakespeare's time.

We learn that news of the marriage is still being overheard and travelling quickly, and Don John intends to take advantage of it to ruin his adversaries. In contrast to the preceding scenes, the only allusion to music here is Don John's out-of-tune statement that he has decreed "not to sing in my cage." This prose scene shows traces of verse (18-24).

Act II, Scene 1 Summary and Analysis

New Characters: Margaret and Ursula: waiting gentlewomen to Hero

Summary

While Leonato's household awaits the arrival of the maskers, Beatrice tells us that no man is her match and she advises Hero on how to answer the prince when he seeks her hand. The maskers arrive and we are treated to a variety of deceits as they dance. Don Pedro, pretending to be Claudio, takes Hero aside. Beatrice, pretending that she does not know that she is speaking with Benedick, uses the opportunity to call him a fool. All exit except Don John, Borachio, and Claudio.

Don John and Borachio purposefully mistake Claudio for Benedick and tell him that Don Pedro is in love with Hero and swore he would marry her that night. Claudio, believing their deception, is joined by Benedick who teases him about losing Hero. Claudio leaves and Benedick reflects on his conversation with Beatrice.

Don Pedro, Hero, and Leonato return. Don Pedro assures Benedick that his wooing was on Claudio's behalf. When Claudio and Beatrice return, Benedick exits to avoid Beatrice. Don Pedro announces that he has won Hero for Claudio, and Leonato concurs. When Beatrice leaves, Don Pedro observes that Beatrice would be an excellent wife for Benedick, and enlists Leonato, Claudio, and Hero to aid him in making a match.

Analysis

The masquerade ball, fashionable in Tudor England, and the guessing game it engenders, emphasizes the problem of knowing/not knowing, which leads to harmony/disharmony. In this scene, Shakespeare offers us both actual music and musical metaphor (Don Pedro teaching birds to sing, i.e., to love).

Claudio's inclination to jealousy and his reliance upon sense information not only leads him to believe Don John's deceit but foreshadows the tragic action he will take at his nuptials. Hero, too proper to do anything but acquiesce in her father's choice, reveals nothing about her feelings for Claudio. Benedick, stung by Beatrice's description of him as little more than a court jester, wonders how she can know him and not know him, ignoring the fact that he said her wit was out of the Hundred Merry Tales, a coarse book. The infection of this sting swells toward the end of the scene-when he requests that Don Pedro send him on any absurd mission rather than have three words with Beatrice-and will not be lanced until the end of the act. Beatrice reveals her previous relationship with Benedict when she speaks of his heart (265-68):

Indeed, my lord, he lent it me awhile; and I gave him use for it, a double heart for his single one; marry, once before he won it of me with false dice, therefore your Grace may well say I have lost it.

Only Don Pedro, dazzled by her lively sallies with him on the topic of marriage, exhibits a flash of intuitive knowledge as he moves past the outer appearance given by Beatrice's mock logic and clever comedy to see her as "an excellent wife for Benedick."

This scene begins and ends with emphasis on Beatrice's unwillingness to consider marriage, which parallels Benedick's diatribe on marriage and sets the tone for the double gulling scenes to come; the counterplot to
Beatrice and Benedick's seeming disaffection for each other.

Fashion imagery is continued in this scene. Benedick describes Beatrice as "the infernal Ate" (Greek goddess personifying foolhardy and ruinous impulse) "in good apparel," and Beatrice tells Don Pedro, "[y]our Grace is too costly to wear every day." Note the appearance of rhymed fourteeners (87-8) and Claudio's speech of 11 lines of end-stopped verse (159-69).

Act II, Scene 2 Summary and Analysis

Summary
Borachio tells Don John that he can cross the marriage of Claudio and Hero. Don John jumps at the opportunity. Borachio lays out his plan to have Margaret, Hero's waiting-gentlewoman, look out her mistress' window the night before the wedding and be mistaken for Hero, while he, Borachio, woos her. He directs Don John to tell Don Pedro that he has dishonored himself by arranging a marriage between Claudio and a common trollop, and then offer him proof of Hero's disloyalty by bringing him to witness the staged deceit. Don John accepts the plan and offers Borachio a fee of a thousand ducats.

Analysis
Borachio, recently employed as a perfumer at Leonato's, is the directive force of this prose scene. Don John, disappointed that his ploy to break the friendship between Don Pedro and Claudio failed, willingly accepts Borachio's plan and direction to destroy the planned marriage of Claudio and Hero, which moves the counterplot forward and prepares the audience for the crisis to come.

The plan hinges on Don John's ability to persuade Don Pedro that he has dishonored himself, and the coldness of Don John assures us that he will have no second thoughts about implementing this action. His offer of a large fee to Borachio ensures that Borachio will play his part well. Shakespeare emphasizes the sourness of this scene's note by placing it between two musical scenes. At this point the first movement of action, dominated by Don Pedro, in the role of matchmaker, ends and we look forward to seeing the marriage-mockers reformed and the villain defeated.

Act II, Scene 3 Summary and Analysis

New Character: Boy: sent by Benedick to fetch a book

Summary
The scene takes place in Leonato's garden. Benedick reflects on love and marriage. He hides himself in the arbor when Don Pedro, Leonato, and Claudio enter. Pretending not to note his presence, they listen as Balthasar sings a song about the deceptions of men. Then they speak of Beatrice's love for Benedick, which they claim they learned from Hero. Benedick does not believe it to be a gull because Leonato is involved. They detail the depth of Beatrice's passion and frustration, fearful that she will harm herself because of it, then list her virtues. They agree that Benedick is too scornful to be told of the matter and exit. Reflecting on what he has just heard, Benedict acknowledges to himself his love for Beatrice. Beatrice, sent by Don Pedro to call Benedick to dinner, is perceived by Benedick in a new light as he looks for evidence of her affection for him.

Analysis
The second movement of action, which propels this play into high comedy, begins now and continues through the first scene of Act IV. Highly theatrical, this is Benedick's chief scene in the play, the one his lines have been building toward and the one on which the validity of the rest of his actions depend. The phrasing of the soliloquies, well-written for stage delivery and the actor's memory, require a balanced performance with inventive stage business (player's actions that establish atmosphere, reveal character, or explain a situation) to succeed. The scene takes place in the evening, before supper. It is written in prose except for 21 lines of blank verse spoken by Don Pedro and Claudio (36-56). The new character, the boy, perhaps serves as an image of innocence, or possibly the line was written for the child of one of the company members to play.
Ironically, in Benedick’s pre-gulling soliloquy, amply full of his usual self-satisfied, machismo rhetoric, he wonders, for a moment, if he may be so converted as to see with the same eyes of love he has just expressed contempt for. In this moment, Benedick’s character initiates a new level of awareness by stepping out from his position as clever onlooker and seeing himself as part of the comedy of human behavior. Although he immediately dismisses the thought, he proceeds to share his ideal woman with us (25-33):

One woman is fair, yet I am well; another is wise, yet I am well; another virtuous, yet I am well; but till all graces be in one woman, one woman shall not come in my grace. Rich she shall be, that's certain; wise or I'll never look on her; mild, or come not near me; noble, or not I for an angel; of good discourse, an excellent musician and her hair shall be of what color it please God.

Shakespeare references and thereby emphasizes the title of this play with a musical extension of the pun on “noting” and “nothing” before Balthasar sings a love song, which serves to soften Benedick, although he dismisses Balthasar’s singing as a dog's howl. As the gullers proceed to speak of Beatrice's love for him, Benedick's comments about them abate, and he eavesdrops in blank amazement. They cite in her the very virtues he demanded before their arrival. The irony is that Don Pedro, Claudio, and Leonato think they are lying about Beatrice's love for Benedick, when, in fact, they are telling the truth.

In his post-gulling soliloquy, a chastened Benedick steps forward and speaks directly for the first time (217-226):

This can be no trick. The conference was sadly borne. They have the truth of this from Hero. They seem to pity the lady. It seems her affections have their full bent. Love me? Why, it must be requited. I hear how I am censured. They say I will bear myself proudly, if I perceive the love come from her; they say too that she will rather die than give any sign of affection. I did never think to marry. I must not seem proud; happy are they that hear their detractions and can put them to mending.

The passage reveals that Benedick has undergone an attitude adjustment from which he emerges with an expanded conscience, a humbled ego, and an intuitive understanding of his real feelings for Beatrice, then he bursts into his old effusiveness with the declaration that he will love Beatrice “most horribly” and climaxes with the comedic hyperbole, “the world must be peopled.” At this point, Shakespeare sends in Beatrice, which heightens the comedic value of the scene as Benedick, a confirmed bachelor turned love fanatic, spies “some marks of love” in her curt speeches. This is a prose scene except for 21 lines of blank verse.

Act III, Scene 1 Summary and Analysis

Summary
The scene takes place in the garden. Hero sets the trap for Beatrice by sending Margaret to tell Beatrice that she is the subject of Hero and Ursula’s gossip. Beatrice appears instantly and follows them, hidden among the honeysuckle, to eavesdrop. Hero and Ursula speak of Benedick's unrequited love for Beatrice and Beatrice's disdainful scorn for Benedick. They speak of Benedick's virtues and Beatrice's faults, concluding that Beatrice is too self-endowed to be told of the matter. Hero, feigning exasperation, tells Ursula that she will devise some honest slander to poison Benedick’s love for Beatrice and thereby save him from wasting away with love. Alone, reflecting on what she has just heard, Beatrice surrenders contempt and maiden pride, determined to accept Benedick's love.

Analysis
A day has passed since the gulling of Benedick. This charming parallel scene is written wholly in verse, most of which is endstopped, and terminates with a 10-line stanza composed of quatrains and a couplet. We find the usually loquacious Beatrice quietly listening, and you can be sure that any skilled actress will find a variety of attitudes to express in this silence. Surprisingly, quiet and docile Hero mischievously leads the gull. Beatrice's soliloquy shows her lyric response to their conversation (107-16); it is short and to the point:
What fire is in mine ears? Can this be true? Stand I condemned for pride and scorn so much? Contempt, farewell, and maiden pride, adieu! No glory lives behind the back of such. And Benedick, love on; I will requite thee, Taming my wild heart to thy loving hand. If thou dost love, my kindness shall incite thee To bind our loves up in a holy band; For others say thou dost deserve, and I believe it better than reporting.

Through a series of parallels, Shakespeare has brought both Benedick and Beatrice from feigned antipathy to mutual romantic idealism. Beatrice's simple, humble, intuitive acceptance of her faults and her willingness to change foreshadows the intimacy of her next meeting with Benedick.

The scene is short but believable. There is no reason to extend this scene because we know from the first scene of the play that Beatrice's concern for Benedick is real, though guarded due to an earlier perceived rejection by him. Since we've witnessed Benedick's change, we readily accept her change.

Act III, Scene 2 Summary and Analysis

**Summary**

It is the night before the wedding. Don Pedro announces he will depart for Aragon right after the nuptials. He refuses Claudio's offer to accompany him. Don Pedro and Claudio observe a change in Benedick, including a shaved face and pristine habits of personal hygiene, and tease him about it. Benedick, unusually sober in demeanor, protests that he has a toothache. He invites Leonato to walk with him in order to enter into a short but private conversation. Don John enters. He tells Don Pedro and Claudio that Hero is disloyal and invites them to go with him to witness her chamber window entered that night at midnight. Claudio vows to shame Hero before the congregation if he witnesses such disloyalty that evening and Don Pedro vows to join him in disgracing Hero.

**Analysis**

Although this prose scene opens in a relaxed manner, the pacing of the play is speeding up to propel us toward the crisis in Act IV. Claudio's prompt offer to leave with the prince, rather than stay for his honeymoon, indicates that he loves Hero as an image to be possessed rather than as a person to be explored. This does not surprise us since he kept his interest in her on the back burner until the war was over. We see a new and reflective Benedick, unwilling to play court jester and no longer completing Claudio and Don John's lines with witty rejoinders, hidden behind the excuse of a toothache. His memorable line from this scene is "everyone can master a grief but he that has it." Don Pedro and Claudio use clothes imagery to tease cleanshaven, perfumed, and fashionably dressed Benedick, who takes Leonato offstage for a few short words, presumably about Beatrice, to avoid his friend's jesting. At this point the two harmoniously interwoven major plots begin a polarization, not to be reconciled until the solution, forming a strong dramatic rhythm.

The confusions thrown on the path of the action of the play have prepared us for this moment and the major action of this scene arrives with Don John and unfolds as he puts the scheme to slander Hero into action. Characterized as an observer rather than a participator, he knows exactly how to trap his prey, appealing to Don Pedro's reputation and Claudio's jealousy. He dominates the dialogue, feeding Don Pedro and Claudio their lines, which he completes with deceitful sophistry. The subordinate voice pattern Shakespeare assigned to Don Pedro and Claudio, in which their lines had no meaning unless completed by a third party, now traps them tragically (111-130):

Claudio: May this be so?

Don Pedro: I will not think it.

Don John: If you dare not trust that you see, confess not that you know. If you will follow me, I will show you enough; and when you have seen more and heard more, proceed accordingly.
Claudio: If I see anything tonight why I should not marry her tomorrow, in the congregation where I should wed, there will I shame her.

Don Pedro: And, as I wooed for thee to obtain her, I will join with thee to disgrace her.

Don John: I will disparage her no farther till you are my witnesses. Bear it coldly but till midnight, and let the issue show itself.

Don Pedro: O day untowardly turned!

Claudio: O mischief strangely thwarting!

Don John: O plague right well prevented! So will you say when you have seen the sequel.

Prisoners in Don John's world of sense evidence, they abandon their judgment and adopt his cruel view of the world; Don Pedro and Claudio reflect its emotional scenery as they move into prejudicial and vindictive stances prior to witnessing the evidence. We can easily guess what their response to Don John's hoax will be. The action toward the crisis of the play is now in full spin.

Act III, Scene 3 Summary and Analysis

New Characters: Dogberry: illiterate master constable, whose love of high--faluting words is only matched by his misuse of them, he exposes the slanderous deception, thereby saving Hero

Verges: headborough, or parish constable, Dogberry's elderly companion

First Watchman and Second Watchman (George Seacoal):

Dogberry's assistant, who providentially overheard Borachio describe the details of the deception perpetrated upon Hero

Summary

The scene takes place at night, on the street, to the side of the door of Leonato's house. Master Constable Dogberry, bearing a lantern, and his elder compartner, Verges, arrive with the watch. Dogberry gives them their charge, specifically instructing them to watch about Leonato's door because of the preparations for the marriage. Borachio staggers forth from Leonato's, followed by Conrade, into the drizzling rain. The watch overhear Borachio, his tongue liquor-loose, boast that he earned a thousand ducats for his villainy from Don John. Borachio then discourses upon fashion, calling it a deformed thief. Then he details how he wooed Margaret, by the name of Hero, while being observed by Don John, Don Pedro, and Claudio from the orchard and how, believing the deceit, Claudio vowed to shame Hero at the wedding before the congregation the next day. The watch immediately takes them into custody.

Analysis

The tragic apprehensions stirred by the last scene are quickly relieved as Shakespeare introduces his broadly comic auxiliary plot in the person of the initimable Master Constable Dogberry, which brings a common touch to a play peopled with aristocrats. The scene is impeccably timed for the process of discovery and the direction of our dramatic responses and Dogberry's world of language parodies the syntactic landscapes of the other characters in the play and, as he says, "present[s] the Prince's own person."

As this prose scene opens, Dogberry instructs the watch with the zaniest misuse of language imaginable—"This is your charge: you shall comprehend all vagrom men."
"[y]ou are thought here to be the most senseless and fit man for the constable of the watch," "for the watch to babble and talk is most tolerable and not to be
endured," and "[b]e vitigant," all of which translates into normal police procedure—challenge suspicious characters, make no noise, send drunks home, don't strike too quickly and "let [a thief] show himself what he is and steal out of your company."

Dogberry is the name of a shrub that sprang up in every county of England, a commentary on the constabulary of Shakespeare's day. The names Oatcake and Seacoal suggest that the men were dealers in these commodities and trained to read and write. The name Borachio is derived from a Spanish word meaning drunkard.

Seacoal follows Dogberry's instructions precisely and directs the watch to stand close as Borachio, "like a true drunkard, utter[s] all," which Shakespeare emphasizes by giving him plenty of sibilants to slur. Borachio brings the clothes imagery, sustained throughout the play, to a climactic point with his seemingly tangential discourse on fashion (116-42):

Borachio: Thou knowest that the fashions of a doublet, or a hat, or a cloak is nothing to a man.

Conrade: Yes, it is apparel.

Borachio: Tush, I may as well say the fool's the fool. But seest thou not what a deformed thief this fashion is .... Seest thou not, I say, what a deformed thief this fashion is, how giddily 'a turns about all the hot bloods between fourteen and fifty and thirty, sometimes fashioning them like Pharaoh's soldiers in the reechy painting, sometime like god Bel's priests in the old church window, sometime like the shaven Hercules in the smirched worm--eaten tapestry, where his codpiece seems as massy as his club?

Conrade: All this I see and I see... that thou hast shifted out of thy tale into telling me of the fashion?

Borachio: Not so either.

He finally gets to the meat of his story. Borachio, architect of this hoax, now repeatedly calls Don John his "master," claiming he made him do it:

But know that I have tonight wooed Margaret, the Lady Hero's gentlewoman, by the name of Hero. She leans me out at her mistress' chamber window, bids me a thousand times good night—I tell this tale vilely; I should first tell thee how the Prince, Claudio and my master, planted and placed and possessed by my master Don John, saw afar off in the orchard this amiable encounter.

Conrade: And thought they Margaret was Hero?

Borachio: Two of them did, the Prince and Claudio, but the devil my master knew she was Margaret; and partly by his oaths, which first possessed them, partly by the dark night, which did deceive them, but chiefly by my villainy, which did confirm any slander that Don John had made, away went Claudio enraged; swore he would meet her, as he was appointed, next morning at the temple, and there, before the congregation, shame her with what he saw o'ernight.

At this point, the watch charge him.

Shakespeare surprises us, placing the action of the deceit offstage. There was no need to slow the action of his play, which, with all its play-acting and deception, has already called attention to its own devices of illusion. Instead, he moves the play forward by embellishing the discovery with a broadly comic brush.
Seacoal's recognition of one Deformed, is an allusion more popular in Shakespeare's time, but, nonetheless funny. One Deformed may be a pun on a contemporary's name, possibly French, or a comment on the planet Uranus (in myth, a god maimed by his son, Cronus/Saturn), whose change of signs every seven years introduces an extreme change in fashion and public interest, called the seven-year--itch or a person born under that planet. The only thing we know for sure is that he wears a fashionable lock. Borachio's insistence that fashion, i.e., outer semblance, validly relates to his story of deception is a strong clue to the theme of the play.

We now know that Don John's plot will be revealed. Though fools, the watch is effective—they gather evidence before making an accusation, something their betters have not yet learned to do. Shakespeare maintains his comedic stance and prepares us for the scenes to follow by dissolving our tensions into hilarity.

Act III, Scene 4 Summary and Analysis

Summary
The scene is set in the sitting room adjacent to Hero's bedchamber. Hero sends Ursula to wake up Beatrice and tell her to come to the sitting room. Hero and Margaret discuss what she will wear. Beatrice arrives, sick, and tells Hero it is time to dress for the wedding. Margaret teasingly suggests to Beatrice that she take the herb, carduus benedictus, for her malady. Ursula returns to announce that the wedding party is ready to escort Hero to the church. The women hasten to the bed-chamber to dress her.

Analysis
This innocent prose scene, on the morning before the wedding, softens us to empathize with Hero. Margaret does not want Hero to wear a certain rebato, possibly the one she wore in the staged deceit the night before, but Hero lets us know she has a mind of her own by insisting on it, dismissing both Margaret and Beatrice as fools, and Margaret scandalizes Hero with her bawdy humor. This scene refreshes the fashion imagery and theme of outer appearance.

Beatrice's illness explains why she slept separately from Hero the night before; it also affords the ladies the opportunity to tease her about her new-found love. Margaret, fancying herself as good a wit as Beatrice, gets in a pointed stab when she advises Beatrice, "Get you some of this distilled carduus benedictus and lay it to your heart. It is the only thing for a qualm." And Hero quips, "There thou prick'st her with a thistle." The pun and double entendre is obvious. We, with the wedding party; await her as she runs off to dress.

Act III, Scene 5 Summary and Analysis

New Character: Messenger: calls Leonato to the wedding.

Summary
The scene takes place in the hail in Leonato's house. Dogberry and Verges visit Leonato just as he is about to leave for the wedding. They chatter, trying Leonato's patience. Finally they tell him that they apprehended two suspicious characters who they want to have examined that morning before him. Leonato instructs them to take the examination and bring it to him. Leonato leaves to give Hero in marriage. Dogberry instructs Verges to send for Francis Seacoal, the sexton, to write down the examination which they will take at the jail.

Analysis
Shakespeare provides us with the most suspenseful moment of the play when Dogberry's tediousness and Leonato's impatience collide to prevent the disclosure of Don John's villainy before the wedding. Whatever the matter is, Leonato simply doesn't want to hear it. Ironically, he can't possibly imagine that anything these patronizing and tangential commoners could say would be of any interest to him. The dialogue is painfully funny:

Act III 65 Leonato: Neighbors, you are tedious.
Dogberry: It pleases your worship to say so, but we are the poor Duke's officers; but truly, for mine own part, if I were as tedious as a king, I could find in my heart to bestow it all of your worship.

Leonato: All thy tediousness on me, ah? Dogberry: Yea, an 'twere a thousand pound more than 'tis; for I hear as good exclamation on your worship as of any man in the city, and though I be but a poor man, I am glad to hear it. Leonato: I would fain know what you have to say.

Verges then tells him they've taken prisoners, but Dogberry, not to be upstaged, pursues another loquacious tangent and an exasperated Leonato tells Dogberry to examine the prisoners himself. This is Dogberry's triumph and, fortunately, he will have only the best, learned writer take his first interrogation and so these men, "honest as the skin between their brows," who have done their job and "comprehend [ed] vagrom men," are off to the jail to question Borachio and Conrade. Knowing that, eventually, the wrong perpetrated against Hero will be righted, we proceed to the wedding.

Act IV Scene 1 Summary and Analysis

New Characters:
Friar Francis: priest at the nuptials of Claudio and Hero, who devises a plan to change the hearts of Claudio and Don Pedro and reverse the effects of the slander

Attendants: the bridal party

Summary
This scene takes place before the altar in the church. Claudio contemptuously rejects Hero as a proved wanton. Leonato assumes that Claudio took Hero's virginity, which Claudio denies. Leonato appeals to the prince but Don Pedro, echoed by his brother, Don John, confirms Claudio's accusation. Claudio interrogates Hero about the man he saw at her window the night before. Hero denies the encounter. Claudio vows to love no more. Leonato seeks to be killed. Hero swoons. Don John, Don Pedro, and Claudio storm out of the church. Leonato, unable to believe that the two princes and Claudio could lie, accepts the slander as true and declares that if Hero is not dead he will kill her himself, disowning her. After Friar Francis recognizes her innocence and Benedick intuits that Don Pedro and Claudio have been misled by Don John, the good father directs Leonato to hide Hero away, to announce that she died upon being accused and to hold public mourning for her to change slander to remorse and to soften the heart of Claudio.

Beatrice and Benedick, suddenly alone before the altar, confess their love for one another. Benedick bids her to ask him to do anything for her. Beatrice answers with the chilling request, "[k]ill Claudio." Benedick asks Beatrice if she believes in her soul that Claudio wronged Hero. Receiving her affirmative answer, he agrees to challenge his friend and comrade-in-arms, Claudio.

Analysis
Shakespeare breaks the tone and movement of the comic action with a solemn ritual of marriage held before the altar, the visual effect of which is powerful and lends dignity to the scene. The first 21 lines of this scene are in prose, then in verse that ends in a quatrains (at 253) when the prose resumes.

Here we reach the climax of the many references to appearances and reality, when Claudio, locked in a world of sense evidence, in a church, before a congregation, accuses and refuses Hero, comparing her to a rotten orange. Dramatically, this crisis scene can be nothing but shocking, no matter how much we are prepared for it, and our mood is instantly altered.

Claudio, enjoying his revenge, takes his time to reject Hero and plays the injured lover to the hilt. He focuses his rejection on her name, asking her only one question (71-80):
Claudio: Let me but move one question to your daughter; And by that fatherly and kindly power That you have in her, bid her answer truly.

Leonato: I charge thee do so, as thou art my child.

Hero: 0, God defend me, how am I beset! What kind of catechizing call you this?

Claudio: To make you answer truly to your name.

Hero: Is it not Hero? Who can blot that name With any just reproach?

He can only justify his action with the words, 'Are our eyes our own?" (71), echoed by Don Pedro, "Myself, my brother, and this grieved count/Did see her/Did hear her" (89-90). Then Claudio tearfully teeters in antithesis and pummels Hero with paradoxes (99-103):

Oh Hero, what a Hero hadst thou been,
If half thy outward graces had been placed
About thy thoughts and counsels of thy heart!
But fare thee well, most foul, most fair! Farewell,
Thou pure impiety and impious purity!

before storming out of the church, with a melodramatic vow never to love again, his immaturity revealed by his love for Hero's chaste image rather than her person.

When shocked Hero swoons, escaping into a coma, before an amazed congregation, her father, infected by the slander and burning with shame, falls into the cruel abyss of courtly code and seeks to regain his dignity with the death of his own daughter (120-127):

Wherefore? Why doth not every earthly thing
Cry shame upon her? Could she here deny
The story that is printed in her blood?
Do not live, Hero, do not ope thine eyes;
For, did I think thou wouldst not quickly die,
Thought I thy spirits were stronger than they shames,
Myself would, on the rearward of reproaches,
Strike at thy life.

He lapses into self-pity; he cannot believe the princes could lie. Only the friar, Benedick, and Beatrice show any concern for Hero, the real victim. Beatrice instantly recognizes Hero's innocence and her eight words, "0, on my soul my cousin is belied!," prepare us for the dialogue she will have with Benedick at the end of this scene.

The friar's innate wisdom and long experience in dealing with his flock gives him another point of view (155-170):

Hear me a little;
For I have only been silent so long
And given way unto this course of fortune
By noting of the lady. I have marked
A thousand blushing apparitions
To start into her face, a thousand innocent shames
In angel whiteness beat away those blushes,  
And in her eye there hath appeared a fire  
To burn the errors that these princes hold  
Against her maiden truth. Call me a fool;  
Trust not my reading nor my observations,  
Which with experimental seal doth warrant  
The tenor of my book; trust not my age.  
My reverence, calling, nor divinity  
If this sweet lady lie not guiltless here  
Under some biting error.

Leonato cannot accept this readily since, holding to courtly code, he is ready to destroy whoever harmed him. Benedick astutely recognizes the error to be the practice of John, the Bastard. The benign hoax Father Francis suggests gives Leonato an immediate means of saving face and the experimental medicine he suggests for Claudio is guilt. We, the audience, look forward to seeing his remorse paraded before us.

The scene becomes poignant as everyone leaves the church except Benedick and Beatrice, still weeping for her cousin. The other characters have been exposed and we've been waiting for about a half-hour of playing time since Benedick and Beatrice recognized they were in love for this private moment. This is the climactic scene in the play when Benedick and Beatrice first confess their love for each other. Shakespeare used suspense and careful timing to bring us here and the rejection of Hero prepared us emotionally for its intimacy and intensity. Their crisis will counterpoint the one we have just witnessed and completely polarize the two plots. This is the point of greatest intensity in the play.

Benedick is the first to break through the wit-defended reserve that has kept them apart (267-272):

Benedick: I do love nothing in the world so well as you. Is not that strange?

Beatrice: As strange as the thing I know not. It were as possible for me to say I loved nothing so well as you. But believe me not; and yet I lie not. I confess nothing, nor I deny nothing. I am sorry for my cousin.

He renews his avowal of love and Beatrice answers, "I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest." Then he makes his fatal error:

Benedick: Come, bid me do anything for thee.

Beatrice: Kill Claudio.

The comedic element of the play, subdued until this moment, momentarily pops back into place when Benedick, who offered to do anything that Beatrice wanted, refuses the very first thing she asks. But Beatrice cannot be happy in her love until her kinswoman is vindicated, and she displays the full depth and range of her emotional landscape to Benedick. In that context, this terse dialogue takes place:

Benedick: Think you in your soul the Count Claudio hath wronged Hero?

Beatrice: Yea, as sure as I have a thought or a soul

Benedick is engaged and leaves to seek out Claudio. He has passed his first test, which is to choose between his love for Beatrice and his friendship for Claudio.
Benedick and Beatrice's meeting, originally designed to furnish sport for their superficial friends, has occurred in a context of crisis and suffering. Their direct speech has reached the level of sincerity and they alone have resisted Don John's evil and agreed to vindicate Hero.

Act IV, Scene 2 Summary and Analysis

New Character:
Sexton (Francis Seacoal): town clerk, a learned writer who, taking down the examination of Borachio and Conrade, recognizes the importance of its contents and immediately delivers it to Leonato

Summary
This scene takes place at the jail. Dogberry, under the direction of the sexton, examines Borachio and Conrade. Speaking directly into Borachio's ear, Dogberry accuses him and Conrade of false knavery, which Borachio denies. The first watch and Seacoal testify that they heard Borachio confess to receiving a thousand ducats from Don John for slandering Hero. The sexton announces that Don John fled after Hero was accused and refused and that Hero, upon the grief of this, suddenly died. He directs the constable to bind the men and bring them to Leonato's and leaves immediately to show the examination to the governor. About to be bound, Conrade calls Dogberry an ass. Scandalized, Dogberry wants all to remember that he is an ass, although it will not be written down.

Analysis
It is part of Shakespeare's genius to let the action of this play begin its fall with a new comic vision. Considered one of "the funniest scenes ever written" (Joseph Papp), this is where the final block of the play's action, which will resolve the polarized plots, begins.

Dogberry's opening line is, "Is our whole dissembly appeared?" We can imagine that he wears his very best judicial gown. Formal, saturnine, Conrade is immediately annoyed by him, presumably for being addressed as "sirrah' a contemptuous extension of sire, used to address inferiors. Dogberry's swearing-in ceremony would panic any lawyer:

Dogberry: Masters, do you serve God?

Conrade: Borachio. Yea sir, we hope.

Dogberry: Write down that they hope they serve God; and write God first, for God should go before such villains!

Fortunately, the sexton understands judicial procedure and moves the examination along by having the watch called as the accusers. This doesn't stop Dogberry's tangents and he keeps close watch that each word elicited is written down. As he hears the testimony of Seacoal, seemingly for the first time (which would explain why he didn't know the importance of his prisoners when he spoke to Leonato), he tells the villains, "Thou wilt be condemned into everlasting redemption for this." The sexton confirms the events the watch testified to and leaves immediately to bring the examination to Leonato. Timing is still important to the action and Leonato must be prepared to move promptly.

As Dogberry is about "to opinion" them (translation: tie up), Conrade calls him a coxcomb and he is shocked at this stab to his office. But when Conrade calls him an ass, our petit bourgeois clown is beside himself, and his world of big words collapses (74-86):

I am a wise fellow, and, which is more, an officer; and, which is more, a householder; and, which is more, as pretty a piece of flesh as any is in
Messina; and one that knows the law, go to; and a rich fellow enough, go to; and a fellow that hath had losses; and one that hath two gowns and everything handsome about him. Bring him away. O, that I had been writ down an ass!

He parodies the "much ado" of the other characters in his self-important concern for the outward trappings of status and in his inability to grasp a clear thought.

Act V, Scene 1 Summary and Analysis

Summary
The scene takes place in the street before the house of Leonato. Antonio tries to philosophize his brother, Leonato, out of his grief. Leonato says that his passion cannot be patched with proverbs and bids him to cease his counsel. Antonio advises him to make those who have harmed him suffer also, and Leonato vows to defend Hero's honor. At this point Claudio and Don Pedro cross their path. Both Leonato and Antonio challenge Claudio for the villainy of slandering Hero to death. Don Pedro tells them the charge against Hero was full of proof and refuses to listen further. Vowing that he will be heard, Leonato exits with his brother just as Benedick arrives.

Claudio and Don Pedro seek Benedick's wit to lift their spirits. Benedick challenges Claudio. Taking it as a jest, both Claudio and Don Pedro seek to enjoy their usual banter. Benedick tells Don Pedro that he must discontinue his company and repeats his challenge to Claudio. He informs them that Don John has fled Messina and that they killed an innocent lady. As Benedick exits, they realize that he is earnest. Don Pedro, in growing awareness, notes that his brother has fled.

The constables and the watch enter with Borachio and Conrade. Don Pedro recognizes them as his brother's men and asks Dogberry the nature of their offense. Finding Dogberry's answer too oblique to be understood, he questions Borachio. Borachio asks Don Pedro to let Count Claudio kill him and tells him that the watch overheard him confess his paid collusion in Don John's slander of Hero. Claudio now sees Hero in the light of the innocence he first loved her for.

Leonato and Antonio return with the sexton. Borachio declares sole responsibility for the death of Hero, but Leonato tells him that Don John, Don Pedro, and Claudio had a hand in it. Both Claudio and Don Pedro ask for a penance, claimingmistaking as their only sin. As penance, Leonato assigns them both the task of publicly mourning Hero and declaring her innocence. He assigns Claudio the further task of accepting his niece, sight unseen, in marriage the next morning. Dogberry takes this opportunity to tell Leonato that Conrade called him an ass and that the watch overheard the prisoners talk of another knave, one Deformed. Leonato thanks the watch and tips Dogberry. A thankful Dogberry humbly gives him leave to depart. As they leave, Don Pedro and Claudio promise to perform their penance. Leonato instructs the watch to bring the prisoners, then departs to question Margaret about her acquaintance with Borachio.

Analysis
Throughout the play Shakespeare has kept us informed of the truth while his characters deceive each other (at this point the sexton is on his way to Leonato's and Hero is not dead), which puts us into a somewhat removed orientation that increases the comic value of the action. In a sense, he has manipulated us into believing we're above it all. This scene opens with a grief-stricken but wordy Leonato, speaking in verse. Were his dialogue in a tragedy, we might be teary, but knowing that he will soon have proof that his daughter was slandered we are unlikely to extend him much sympathy, which tones down his indignation to a subtly comic level. Leonato refuses to be consoled by Antonio, dismissing him with (35-37):
I pray thee, peace. I will be flesh and blood;  
For there was never yet philosopher  
That could endure the toothache patiently.

This echoes Benedick's toothache speech in Act III. He will take Antonio's suggestion to seek revenge, and he gets his opportunity immediately as Don Pedro and Claudio enter. The comedy leaps forward as Antonio flaunts his courage as he joins Leonato in challenging the young swordsman, knowing full well that neither Claudio nor the prince can dishonor themselves by fighting men of their advanced age. Don Pedro breaks up the mock challenge by saying a sympathetic word to Leonato, but when Don Pedro turns a cold ear to Leonato's appeal, he leaves, determined to be heard. His brother, Antonio, gives the exit a comic flourish by insinuating another challenge to come, a kind of or else. We, the audience, know all will be reconciled when Dogberry arrives. Note the dialogue change to prose at line 110, which continues until Dogberry's entrance, when it changes to a mixture of verse and prose.

Benedick enters and we know his mind; he is in his steely fighting mode. But his friends, Claudio and Don Pedro, who were seeking out his wit to lift their exhausted spirits (isolated by the renunciation) when they came across Leonato, don't get it. They take Benedick's dignified and sober expression as a joke, a masquerade to amuse them. This forces Benedick's attempts to deliver the challenge to Claudio to escalate the comedy somewhat as he takes him aside to deliver it. Claudio hears it but again doesn't understand it, and Don Pedro attempts to rag him about Beatrice. Benedick, void of levity, is firm and gentlemanly as he departs (185-190):

My Lord, for your many courtesies I thank you. I must discontinue your company. Your brother the bastard is fled from Messina. You have among you killed a sweet and innocent lady. For my Lord Lackbeard there, he and I shall meet, and till then peace be with him.

Now they know that he is earnest. And Don Pedro, in growing awareness, says, "Did he not say my brother was fled?" which is the cue for Dogberry's entrance.

The theatrical spectacle of Dogberry and Verges parading their bound prisoners, secured by the watch, will get their attention, and Don Pedro immediately recognizes his brother's men. Of course, we know what is likely to happen when he inquires after their offense, and Dogberry does not disappoint us (211-215):

Marry, sir, they have committed false report; moreover, they have spoken untruths; secondarily, they are slanderers; sixth and lastly, they have belied a lady; thirdly, they have verified unjust things; and to conclude, they are lying knaves.

The obliqueness of his answer allows them a short interlude of amusement until they find out the truth from Borachio (227-234):

What your wisdosms could not discover, these shallow fools have brought to light, who in the night overheard me confessing to this man how Don John your brother incensed me to slander the Lady Hero, how you were brought into the orchard and saw me court Margaret in Hero's garments, how you disgraced her when you should marry her.

There is an immediate tonal change. That Borachio was so converted by news of Hero's death implies that his drunken confession in Act III was a move in conscience. Friar Francis' curative has taken hold and to Claudio's eyes returns the pristine image of the Hero he wanted to marry. Claudio owns the sin of mistaking (sin means error, mistake, wander or stray, and in Hebrew means muddy). Dogberry reminds his men to specify that he is an ass. The scene, from Borachio's statement to this point reflects the passage of St. Paul in I Corinthians, 1:27-28:
God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are.

This may be the source for the invention of the constable and his watch. Certainly, Dogberry's discovery is purely providential, perhaps the answer to Friar Francis' prayer.

Now Shakespeare brings Leonato and Antonio back, and full of dignity, Leonato asks, "[w]hich is the villain?" When Borachio comes forth to claim full responsibility, Leonato, as he promised in his exit earlier in the scene, is heard (259-264):

No, not so, villain, thou beliest thyself.
Here stand a pair of honorable men—
third is fled—that had a hand in it.
I thank you, princes, for my daughter's death.
Record it with your high and worthy deeds.
'Twas bravely done, if you bethink you of it.

Claudio is instantly positioned to ask for a penance, echoed by Don Pedro. Leonato's wisdom, which he must have to be in the position of governor now shows through as he assigns the comic penance of hanging up verses at the empty tomb in a public mourning and the practical penance of clearing Hero's name. But the real test of Claudio's repentance is his willingness to marry Leonato's fictional niece, sight unseen.

Borachio's vindication of Margaret is necessary to keep the action from swerving out of its steady course to the resolution. This is Dogberry's opportunity to tag on his tangential thoughts with: (299-302):

[м]oreover, sir, which indeed is not under white and black, this plaintiff here, the offender, did call me an ass.
I beseech you, let it be remembered in his punishment.

He goes on to share his concern with another vagrom, one Deformed, about whom he has apparently gathered an extended dossier, again parodying the much ado of the play's plot structure which was just as unreal, before saying adieu to Leonato:

I humbly give you leave to depart; and if a merry meeting be wished, God prohibit it!

Act V, Scene 2 Summary and Analysis

Summary
Benedick and Margaret meet outside Leonato's house. He bids her to call Beatrice to him and unsuccessfully attempts a sonnet. Beatrice complies with his request immediately. When Benedick toyfully marks (notes) that she comes when bidden, she bids him to tell her what has passed between he and Claudio. Benedick reports that Claudio undergoes his challenge. A witty interchange ensues as each seeks the other to tell the virtues for which they are loved and concludes with Benedick's declaration that they are "too wise to woo peaceably." Ursula appears to call them to Leonato's, with the news that Hero has been cleared, Don Pedro and Claudio were absolved, and Don John declared the villain.

Analysis
The double entendres between Benedick and Margaret that open this short prose scene serve to entertain us. This charming scene is technically important as part of the falling action of the play and prepares us for its solution and denouement as we await the findings of Leonato's judicial examination. This is Benedick's first: breath of air since the chapel scene earlier in the morning, and his first opportunity to bask in the knowledge that his love for Beatrice is requited. He sings, no matter how pitifully, William Elderton's ditty, "The God of
love/That: sits above/And knows me/And knows me," which is sure to draw a chuckle from the audience as he attempts sonnet-writing and concludes (30-41):

in loving, Leander the good swimmer, Troilus the first employer of panders, and a whole bookful of these quondam carpetmongers, whose names yet run smoothy in the even road of a blank verse, why, they were never so truly turned over and over as my poor self in love .... No, I was not born under a rhyming planet, nor I cannot woo in festival terms.

Beatrice's entrance saves him from the attempt. His short experiment with institutionalized romance completed, he will love Beatrice honestly and in his own way.

It is obvious that he is more interested in wooing Beatrice than talking about his challenge to Claudio. As their good-natured dialogue continues in explorations of nimble wit, Benedick observes, "Thou and I are too wise to woo peaceably."

Act V, Scene 3 Summary and Analysis

**Summary**
Claudio and Don Pedro, accompanied by a party of lords and musicians, arrive at the monument of Leonato to perform a public mourning for Hero. Claudio reads an epitaph which declares her innocence and then hangs it up at her tomb. Balthasar sings a hymn to Diana, patroness of chastity, entreating her to forgive Hero's slanderers. Claudio vows to do the rite yearly. At dawn the mourners leave, each going their separate way. Claudio and Don Pedro will change their garments and go to Leonato's for the wedding.

**Analysis**
The redemption scene, with its epitaph, song, and dialogue, is wholly in rhyme with the exception of the first two lines. At midnight our penitents arrive at Leonato's monument and withdraw into a world of contrition as they enter the damp tomb to experience the spiritual medicine of Friar Francis' restorative, accompanied by a silent black-robed procession with flickering tapers.

Claudio reads the epitaph to Hero, "done to death by slanderous tongues," that he has written (which requires deep-felt delivery to work), hangs up the scroll for public scrutiny, and calls for the dirge (12-21):

Pardon, goddess of the night, Those that slew thy virgin knight; For the which, with songs of woe, Round about her tomb they go. Midnight, assist our moan; Help us to sigh and groan, Heavily, heavily. Graves, yawn and yield your dead, Till death be uttered, Heavily, heavily.

While it is sung the mourners circle the tomb. The tone is solemn. They beg pardon of Diana, moon goddess and patroness of chastity and invoke midnight and the shades of the dead to assist them as they proclaim Hero's innocent death.

This scene carries an other-worldly quality and its comic element is subdued almost entirely, asking for no more than a knowing chuckle. We are convinced that Friar Francis' nostrum has taken hold when Claudio volunteers to perform the ceremony yearly, until his death, and his reformation prepares the audience to accept him as a worthy husband for Hero.

Act V, Scene 4 Summary and Analysis

**Summary**
This scene takes place in the hall in Leonato's house. Musicians are seated in the gallery. Hero, the prince, and Claudio have been declared innocent, and Margaret in some fault for the slander. Benedick is relieved that he need no longer keep Claudio under his challenge. Leonato directs Hero and the other ladies to withdraw and return, masked, when he sends for them. He directs Antonio to play the father of the bride. When Benedick
asks Leonato for Beatrice's hand in marriage and Leonato exposes the double gull, Benedick, though nonplussed at Leonato's answer, reaffirms his request and receives Leonato's blessing.

Prince Don Pedro and Claudio arrive with attendants. Claudio answers in the affirmative when asked by Leonato if he will marry his niece. While Antonio summons Hero and the ladies, Claudio attempts to tease Benedick. Benedick briskly dismisses Claudio with an insult to his heritage. Antonio returns with Hero and the ladies, who are masked. Claudio swears before the friar that he will marry Antonio's masked daughter. When Hero lifts her veil, he and Don Pedro are amazed. Leonato explains that she was dead only as long as her slander lived, which the friar promises to explain. Benedick asks the friar which of the ladies is Beatrice. Unmasking, she coyly steps forth from the line of women. Benedick asks Beatrice if she loves him and she responds "no more than reason," which he echoes, and when Beatrice asks Benedick if he loves her, they both detail the particulars of their separate gulls, at which point Claudio and Hero step forth with papers, written in their hands, which evidence their love for each other. Benedick stops the wordplay with a kiss. When Don Pedro attempts to mock Benedick as a married man, Benedick refuses the bait and declares that since he purposes to marry he will not entertain any thing against it, including his own past parodies of the state. Claudio and Benedick resume their friendship. Benedick spiritedly calls for music and dance to lighten their hearts and advises the matchmaker, Don Pedro, to "[g]et thee a wife, get thee a wife." A messenger arrives with news that Don John has been taken, and is being brought back to Messina. The play ends with Benedick's call to the pipers and an exuberant dance.

Analysis
In the denouement and resolution of the play, Shakespeare ties its loose ends up amially, rejoining the polarized plots with a reconciliation scene. He clearly indicates he will do this in Friar Francis' dialogue, "Well I'm glad all things sorts so well." He immediately tells us that the prince and Claudio have been absolved, that Margaret underwent Leonato's examination and escaped with slight censure, and that Benedick has released Claudio from his challenge. The first 90 lines of this scene are in verse, including speeches by Benedick and Beatrice, and the rest is in prose except for the messenger's two verse lines interjected at its end.

Leonato's confession of the double gull does not sway Benedick from his determination to marry Beatrice. Although he tells Leonato that his answer is "enigmatical," it is unlikely that anyone as alert as Benedick does not understand his meaning, and his comical remark serves not only to end any exploration of the matter at this time and to affirm his commitment, but also serves to advise us that Benedick has reached a new level of self-acceptance.

Both Leonato and Benedick continue their reserve with Don Pedro and Claudio until the penance is fulfilled and their dialogue is direct, shorn of ornamentation. Benedick ignores the prince's gibe about his "February face" and disposes of Claudio's crude rally with caustic severity. Claudio's insensitivity (basically a play for masculine approval and probably developed during the war), though he is well-bred, indicates the immaturity which caught him in the circumstances of the play to begin with. The inappropriateness of his remarks serve to maintain a comic element to counterpoint the other characters' reserve. Without it, the denouement of the play would flatten.

Claudio, having submitted all choice to Leonato, has mourned at the tomb and, having rejected Hero on the basis of outer appearance (hubris), must now prove himself by accepting Leonato's masked niece as his wife (nemesis). His submission assures Leonato that there will be no similar trouble in the family in the future. It is here that Shakespeare puts his greatest emphasis on the mask motif and the row of masked ladies both parallel and counterpoint the masquerade ball in Act II in which the men wore the masks.

Hero lifts her veil, after Claudio vowed before the holy friar to marry her, and we see an amazed Claudio. The benign hoax had such a salutary effect that his contrition makes it hard for him to believe that she is alive. Reunited with the reborn Hero, he is readily forgiven, in the Christian tradition, for, after all, the wrong done
to Hero was not a betrayal of love and trust but an assault on her reputation and the break-off of a desirable marriage-wrongs easily righted. The decorous dialogue, so elaborate in the exposition, is now pared to the bone, void of polite routine. All oblique references are gone, and any question promises a prompt answer. At this point, the Claudio-Hero plot is resolved as the giving of trust and the move toward faith. The suspense has ended; they will be married.

Our three-dimensional players, Benedick and Beatrice, complete their journey that began as a trial of verbal supremacy, developed as the ability to see themselves as part of the human comedy rather than clever onlookers, and now concludes with the spontaneous and loving expression of their combined, generous wit. Their dialogue has lost none of its vitality and now expresses itself in unchecked joy and merriment that springs from their new levels of inner awareness.

Beatrice continues to keep Benedick wondering by playfully hiding herself among the masked ladies, secure in the knowledge that he will seek her out, and steps forward coyly when he asks where she is. They gracefully face the truth about their courtship publicly in an articulate exchange which is the exact antithesis that matchmaker Don Pedro had looked forward to:

The sport will be when they hold one an opinion of another's dotage, and no such matter; that's the scene I would like to see, which will be merely a dumb show.

A renewed Benedick will be no man's fool when it comes to the subject of love, and he responds to Don Pedro's baiting question, "[h]ow dost thou, Benedick, the married man?" with:

I'll tell thee what, Prince: a college of wit-crackers cannot flout me out of my humor. Dost thou think I care for a satire or an epigram? No. If a man will be beaten with brains, 'a shall wear nothing handsome about him. In brief, since I do purpose to marry, I will think nothing to any purpose that the world can say against it; and therefore never flout at me for what I have said against it; for man is a giddy thing, and this is my conclusion.

So ends the fashion metaphor. Benedick is saying that a slave to convention will never be true to himself; that if he lives in fear of an epigram, he dare not marry a beautiful woman. He responds to Claudio's macho baiting by declaring his friendship for him. All defenses collapsed, Benedick insists on celebrating with music and dance and tells Don Pedro, the matchmaker, to "get thee a wife, get thee a wife."

This ends the play. Shakespeare has completed the three phases of his play: recognition of love, stress of trial, and resolution with love's confirmation. The lesson the play teaches is to learn to discriminate properly and to estimate everything at its true value. In the end, the counterplots initiated by the two princes have brought only the good result of strengthening love. Perhaps Shakespeare is saying that all of us, as Claudio claims, sin only through "mistaking".

It is not surprising that this is the only play of Shakespeare that ends with a dance because a play of such musicality as Much Ado About Nothing can only end with a dance-an exuberant dance! We have taken the emotional journey with the players, and renewed, we go our separate ways.
Given the evident centrality of the relationship between Beatrice and Benedick to the narrative line of *Much Ado*, one of the salient themes of the play necessarily revolves around gender, gender roles, and the differences between men and women. Through Beatrice and Benedick, this theme is enacted in playfully antagonistic terms. At the very start of the play, Leonato says to a messenger bringing word that Benedick will soon arrive in Messina's court: "You must not, sir, mistake my niece. There is a kind of merry war betwixt Signior Benedick and her: they never met but there's a skirmish of wit between them" (I.i.61-64). It is a duel of wits and of will that informs the relation between the two main characters of the play. Yet this is the tip of the iceberg. In Messina, there is a sharp demarcation between the respective worlds of men and women. According to the prevailing norms of Messinian society, men rule and are bound together by a quasi-military camaraderie, a male code of behavior that places high value on honor and on hierarchical rank. By contrast, women are expected to submit to men and their honor is defined in terms of its reflection upon the good repute of the closest males. Apart from this, however, as epitomized in Beatrice, the female world is compassionate and intuitive; Beatrice comes to Hero's defense without a shred of concrete evidence to rebut the charges of infidelity against her cousin. In the end, male honor seems faintly ridiculous, while female intuition is triumphant. Indeed, it is only when Benedick crosses over to Hero's side that he becomes genuinely worthy of Beatrice.

The gender roles assumed by all of the characters in the play (including Beatrice and Benedick) are poses. As such, they reinforce a second main theme of *Much Ado*, the disparity between reality and appearance. All of the main characters in the play are either deceived by others and/or take part in a plot (or plots) intended to deceive others. Misperception and "misprising" abound in *Much Ado*. A crucial instance of the gap between reality and appearance occurs at the start of Act IV, when Claudio denounces Hero and says:

O Hero, what a Hero hadst thou been,
If half thy outward graces had been placed
About thy thoughts and counsels of thy heart!
But fare thee well, most foul, most fair! Farewell,
Thou pure impiety and impious purity!
(IV.i.100-104)

At this juncture, the misled Claudio compares Hero to a "rotten orange," having only the "semblance of honor." Because the audience knows that Claudio has been hoodwinked by Don John, these words turn against the youthful suitor. Claudio's concern with how his honor appears to others (that is, to other males) imparts a cruel edge to his repudiation of Hero (which he carries out in public), suggesting that there is something rotten beneath Claudio's own skin. The devices of eavesdropping and hearsay that propel the narrative line of the play are entirely congruent with this theme. Indeed, the word "nothing" in the play's title is a homonym for "noting" which, in Elizabethan slang connoted "eavesdropping."
One of the most prominent symbolic motifs in *Much Ado* is fashion or clothing. In a world where appearance is as (or more) important than reality, clothes make the man. Beatrice recognizes this in one of her earliest jibes at Benedick when she says that he "wears his faith but as the fashion of his hat; it ever changes with the next block" (I.i.75-77). Benedick returns the slur by calling Beatrice a "turncoat" and then, in Act II, he remarks that Beatrice is an infernal Ate in good apparel. Elsewhere, Beatrice asks Don Pedro if he has a brother since "Your Grace is too costly to wear every day" (II.i.328-329), while Benedick contrasts the amorous Claudio with the man as he used to be: "I have known when he would have walked ten mile a-foot to see a good armour; and now will he lie ten nights awake carving the fashion of a new doublet" (II.iii.14-17). Indeed, attention is drawn to this motif by the relatively minor characters of Borachio and Conrade when they engage in a long, seemingly irrelevant dialogue about fashion in Act III, scene iii.

There is a pervasive hypocrisy afoot in Messina. Artificial gender roles, deception, eavesdropping, and fashion are the stuff of which Messinian society is constituted. Granted, each of these themes is a source of amusement. Yet, at the same time, Messina is a weak patriarchy in which villains like Don John remain at large, Dogberry serves as the chief law enforcement officer, and the town fathers, notably Leonato, are all too easily deceived and disposed to judgments that could have tragic consequences. What prevents this is not a change of patriarchal policy but the interventions of Beatrice and her female sensibility and of Friar Francis and his Christian (non-secular) wisdom.
Advanced Themes

The War of the Sexes
The differences between men and women—how they relate to each other, misunderstand each other, love and repel each other, is a common theme in motion pictures, comics, television comedies, and world literature. It appears throughout Shakespeare's comedies as well, and \textit{Much Ado} is no exception to the pattern. In \textit{Much Ado}, much of the conflict between the sexes concerns Beatrice and Benedick, with their relentless disdain for each other. Each tries to outduel the other in crafting the most clever and most deflating remark, and the impression is given that their sparring has a long history which precedes the action of the play. The goal of each is not to deliver the most crushing, hot-blooded blast, but to offer the most coolly disdainful remarks possible. In Act I, and in Benedick's absence, Beatrice begins by likening him to a disease: "God help the noble Claudio, if he have caught the Benedick." The war of the sexes begins in earnest with Benedick's arrival, the two fencing verbally and giving the impression that each considers the other not worth noticing. In their absence, Don Pedro and the newly betrothed Claudio and Hero decide to give the war an interesting twist by attempting to bring together Beatrice and Benedick as lovers. Their plans succeed, but upon the disgracing of Hero, love faces a cruel ordeal, turning from tenderness to heated, near-frantic rage on the part of Beatrice after Benedick hesitates at her command, "Kill Claudio." Here she turns from employing wit to questioning Benedick's manhood, calling him "Count Comfect, a sweet gallant surely!" In one of the most-often quoted sections of \textit{Much Ado}, she declares, "O that I were a man for his sake, or that I had any friend would be a man for my sake. But manhood is melted into curtsies, valour into compliment, and men are only turned into tongue, and trim ones too: he is now as valiant as Hercules that only tells a lie and swears it. I cannot be a man with wishing, therefore I will die a woman with grieving." This sentiment is one with the words of Bal-thasar's song, from Act II, scene iii: "Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more, / Men were deceivers ever / One foot in sea, and one on shore, / To one thing constant never." This song, one of the loveliest in all of Shakespeare's plays, is repeated in several places in Kenneth Branagh's 1993 film version of \textit{Much Ado}, becoming, through repetition, the play's theme.

Appearance vs. Reality
The theme of appearance versus reality has long been considered central to the play's structure and tone. As one can see from the Plot Synopsis, all of the main characters deceive or are deceived by others at some point during the play. On this theme of deception, much critical comment has surrounded the view that the very title of the play contains a key Elizabethan pun, with Shakespeare punning on nothing and noting, meaning eavesdropping. However, some critics have observed that the key to the play's unity lies in equating noting with observation; that is, we take note of a situation and make judgments based on our observations. In \textit{Much Ado}, there is a failure, some critics argue, to observe and act sensibly. While critics have often noted that the theme of appearance versus reality is articulated in most of Shakespeare's plays either by circumstances or by deliberate acts of deception by the characters, some commentators maintain that neither pattern pertains to \textit{Much Ado}, as deception and false perceptions are not undone; rather, they are characteristic of the norm of Messina society.

Critics agree that \textit{Much Ado} concerns, in great part, misunderstandings of various sorts—some deliberate, some unintentional. In terms of this play, the term "love's truth," or "love's faith," has been described by one critic as "the imaginative acting of a lover and the need for our imaginative response to it, the compulsion, individuality, and complexity of a lover's truthful realization of beauty, and distinctions between inward and outward beauty, appearance and reality, and fancy and true affection." Shakespeare's ideas about love's truth inform the structure, characterization, dialogue) and other elements of \textit{Much Ado}. Scholars have written extensively about the common device Shakespeare uses for presenting a lover's imagination, the "play-within-a-play"; and in \textit{Much Ado} this device is used often. Several significant deceptions are carried off by the play-within-a-play, notably the deception of Benedick into believing that Beatrice is in love with him.
by the play-acting Don Pedro, Leonato, and Claudio; and the tricking of Beatrice into believing that Benedick is pining for her, by the conspirators Hero and Ursula.

In each of these cases, there must be "Much Ado" in straightening out the tangled misperceptions each lover holds for the other, but, as critics have noted, it is part of Shakespeare's intent to suggest that those who engage in a quest for love's truth find that the longest course of action, involving "Much Ado," is often the only one that seems possible to them.

**Music and Dance**
Critics have long noted the significance of music in *Much Ado*, both in the text itself and in the form of the play. Balthasar's song, "Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more," has been commented upon often, in part because it is performed in a crucial point in the play, which ends with a wedding dance. Commentators have remarked on similarities between the action of the play itself and a dance, with couples engaging, turning, performing intricate movements together, and retiring.
Characters

List of Characters

Don Pedro—Prince of Aragon, courtly and conventional. Fearful of his reputation, he is easily duped by his brother's deception. He enjoys matchmaking.

Leonato—Governor of Messina and father of Hero, whose conventionality is tested by the depth of his grief

Antonio—Leonato's older brother, who tries to philosophize his brother out of his grief, only to find his own anger stirred.

Benedick—Brave, quick-witted and spirited young lord of Padua and a professed misogynist, who will prove his love for Beatrice in a most serious manner

Beatrice—Leona Leonato's niece, whose spirited and merry wit is more than a match for Benedick, and who will, in the end, accept his love and marry him.

Claudio—Young lord of Florence, who, easily swayed by outer appearances, revengefully denounces Hero as a wanton on their wedding day.

Hero—Leonato's daughter; a chaste and docile maiden, wronged by Don John's slander

Margaret and Ursula—Both gentlewomen attending Hero, Margaret is unwittingly employed in Don John's plot to slander Hero.

Don John—Don Pedro's illegitimate brother; an envious and mischief-making malcontent and author of the slander against Hero.

Borachio and Conrade—Followers of Don John who assist him in his slander; Borachio is a drunkard.

Dogberry—Illiterate master constable, whose love of high-faluting words is only matched by his misuse of them, exposes the slanderous deception, thereby saving Hero.

Verges—Headborough, or parish constable, Dogberry's elderly companion.

Sexton (Francis Seacoal)—Learned town clerk, recorder of the examination of Conrade and Borachio, who will see past Dogberry's bumbling and alert Leonato that his daughter's slanderer has been apprehended.

First Watchman and Second Watchman (George Seacoal)—Dogberry's assistants, who providentially overhear Borachio describe the details of the deception perpetrated upon Hero.

Balthasar—Singer attending Don Pedro, whose out-of-key love song sets the tone of the play.
Friar Francis—Priest at the nuptials of Claudio and Hero, who devises a plan to change the hearts of Claudio and Don Pedro and reverse the effects of the slander perpetrated by Don John.

Messenger to Leonato—Announcer of the arrival of Don Pedro and his companions.

Another Messenger—Calls Leonato to the wedding; alerts Leonato that Don John has been taken.

Attendants, Musicians, Members of the Watch, Antonio's Son and Other Kinsmen—Members of the community.
Characters Discussed (Great Characters in Literature)

Don Pedro

Don Pedro (PEH-droh), the prince of Aragon. A victorious leader, he has respect and affection for his follower Claudio, for whom he asks the hand of Hero. Deceived like Claudio into thinking Hero false, he angrily shares in the painful repudiation of her at the altar. On learning of her innocence, he is deeply penitent.

Don John

Don John, the bastard brother of Don Pedro. A malcontent and a defeated rebel, he broods on possible revenge and decides to strike Don Pedro through his favorite, Claudio. He arranges to have Don Pedro and Claudio witness what they think is a love scene between Hero and Borachio. When his evil plot is exposed, he shows his guilt by flight. He is a rather ineffectual villain, though his plot almost has tragic consequences.

Claudio

Claudio (KLOH-dee-oh), a young lord of Florence. A conventional hero of the sort no longer appealing to theater audiences, he behaves in an unforgivable manner to Hero when he thinks she is faithless; however, she—and apparently the Elizabethan audience—forgives him. He is properly repentant when he learns of her innocence, and he is rewarded by being allowed to marry her.

Benedick

Benedick (BEHN-eh-dihk), a witty young woman-hater. A voluble and attractive young man, he steals the leading role from Claudio. He spends much of his time exchanging sharp remarks with Beatrice. After being tricked by the prince and Claudio into believing that Beatrice is in love with him, he becomes devoted to her. After Claudio’s rejection of Hero, Benedick challenges him, but the duel never takes place. His witty encounters with Beatrice end in marriage.

Hero

Hero (HEE-roh), the daughter of Leonato. A pure and gentle girl, and extremely sensitive, she is stunned by the false accusation delivered against her and by Claudio’s harsh repudiation of her in the church. Her swooning is reported by Leonato as death. Her character contains humor and generosity. She forgives Claudio when he repents.

Beatrice

Beatrice (BEE-ah-trihs), Hero’s cousin. Although sprightly and witty, she has a serious side. Her loyal devotion to Hero permits no doubt of her cousin to enter her mind. She turns to her former antagonist, Benedick, for help when Hero is slandered and insists that he kill his friend Claudio. When all is clear and forgiven, she agrees to marry Benedick, but with the face-saving declaration that she does so for pity only.

Leonato

Leonato (lee-oh-NAH-toh), the governor of Messina, Hero’s father. A good old man, he welcomes Claudio as a prospective son-in-law. He is shocked by the devastating treatment of his daughter at her wedding. Deeply angry with the prince and Claudio, he at first considers trying to kill them but later consents to Friar Francis’ plan to humble them. When Hero is vindicated, he forgives them and allows the delayed marriage to
take place.

**Conrade**

Conrade (KON-rad), a tale-bearing, unpleasant follower of Don John.

**Borachio**

Borachio (boh-RAH-kee-oh), another of Don John’s followers. He is responsible for the idea of rousing Claudio’s jealousy by making him think Hero has received a lover at her bedroom window. He persuades Margaret to wear Hero’s gown and pretend to be Hero. His telling Conrade of his exploit is overheard by the watch and leads to the vindication of Hero. Borachio is much disgruntled at being overreached by the stupid members of the watch; however, he confesses and clears Margaret of any willful complicity in his plot.

**Friar Francis**

Friar Francis, a kindly, scheming cleric. He recommends that Hero pretend to be dead. His plan is successful in bringing about the repentance of Don Pedro and Claudio and in preparing the way for the happy ending.

**Dogberry**

Dogberry, a self-important constable. Pompous, verbose, and full of verbal inaccuracies, he fails to communicate properly with Leonato; hence, he does not prevent Hero’s humiliation, though his watchmen already have uncovered the villains.

**Verges**

Verges (VUR-jehs), a headborough. An elderly, bumbling man and a great admirer of his superior, the constable, he seconds the latter in all matters.

**Margaret**

Margaret, the innocent betrayer of her mistress, Hero. She does not understand Borachio’s plot and therefore is exonerated, escaping punishment.

**Ursula**

Ursula (UR-sew-luh), a gentlewoman attending Hero. She is one of the plotters who trick the sharp-tongued Beatrice into falling in love with Benedick.

**First Watchman**

First Watchman and

**Second Watchman**

Second Watchman, plain, simple-minded men. Overhearing Borachio’s boastful confession to Conrade, they apprehend both and take them before the constable, thereby overthrowing clever malice and radically changing the course of events.

**Antonio**
Antonio, Leonato’s brother. He plays the role of father to Leonato’s supposed niece (actually Hero), whom Claudio agrees to marry in place of his lost Hero.

**Balthasar**

Balthasar (BAL-theh-zahr), an attendant to Don Pedro.

**A sexton**

A sexton, who serves as recorder for Dogberry and the watch during the examination of Conrade and Borachio.
**Character Analysis**

Beatrice (Character Analysis)

Beatrice is the play's witty heroine. Much of her memorable character is original with Shakespeare rather than found in plot sources. She is mainly noted for her firm opposition to marriage and for her verbal dueling with Benedick. Her first comment is a question directed to the messenger about Benedick's welfare. Her asking a series of questions about him reveals an interest which she herself may be unaware of. Also, once Benedick and the other soldiers arrive, Beatrice makes a comment at the end of their first exchange of wit warfare that indicates that perhaps they knew each other before in some romantic way. Benedick's own comment about her appearance suggests that she would be considered very attractive were she not so sharp-tongued. Beatrice's good spirits are commented on by her uncle, who says that she is "never sad but when she sleeps" (II.i.343). He quotes Hero as saying that when she has had a dream of unhappiness, she "waked herself with laughing" (II.i.345-46).

Indeed, her comments at Leonato's party radiate out in many directions. She gives a negative review of Don John's sour looks and personality. She laughs about bearded and beardless husbands. Beatrice dances with Benedick, recognizing him beneath his mask, and ridicules his wit and personality, commenting that "he is the prince's jester: a very dull fool" (II.i.137-38). She is also aware of practicality and social niceties of behavior, as is shown in her prompting of Claudio to be other than a mute in his engagement to Hero.

She has a keen insight into everyone's character. For example, she correctly identifies Claudio's silent behavior at the party as a signal of his mistaken jealousy of Don Pedro. Even late in the play, she refers to Claudio as Count Comfect, a sweet or sugary count in terms of manners and behavior. Another example of her insight is her certainty regarding her cousin's innocence. She is also aware of Don Pedro's stature and public importance, so she tactfully rejects his proposal of marriage.

Despite Beatrice's perceptiveness regarding other people, she appears to either be unaware of or disguising her romantic feelings toward Benedick. Several comments early in the play suggest that Beatrice and Benedick have already been known to each other in an unsuccessful romantic context. Yet, Beatrice shows that she is open to the opinions of others. She hears the criticisms made of her by Hero and her gentlewomen, and she vows in a brief soliloquy to change her behavior. In the next scene in which she appears, in Hero's room on the morning of the wedding, she shows herself vulnerable like all people who have undergone a change and are a little unsure of themselves. She is sensitive to the comments and apparent double meanings of the other women, especially when they say she needs some "distilled Carduus Benedictus" (III.iv.73-74) for her case of jumpy nerves.

She shows her real strength of character in the scene in which Hero is shamed. She is steadfast in her belief in Hero's innocence. She ministers to her fainting cousin. Then, when all except Benedick leave, she and Benedick are able to declare their love for each other. She convinces Benedick, on the basis of his sworn love for her, to kill Claudio. The apparent cruelty of this request is softened by Beatrice's admission of her crying quietly throughout the shaming scene.

In the last act of the play, Beatrice and Benedick seem much more at ease with each other, but they are still engaged in mild forms of wit play. Beatrice and Benedick each ask the other what quality made them fall in love with the other. Her caring for her cousin is displayed again in the final act when she says again, after banter with Benedick, that she and Hero are both not well. Just before the wedding in the last scene, they learn that the other is not about to die for love, though Beatrice still maintains that she marries Benedick partly to save his life.

Benedick (Character Analysis)
Benedick is a soldier returning from war. He is from Padua, a city in northern Italy and part of the Republic of Venice during the Italian Renaissance. He is the main male character in the play, even though his marriage is not the initial focus of the plot. Throughout the play, he displays his quick wit, loyalty, honorable nature, and his periodic lack of self-knowledge.

When the audience first hears a reference to Benedick, it is via Beatrice's scornfully posed question intended to conceal her interest: "I pray you, is Signior Mountanto returned from the wars or no?" (I.i.30-31). Beatrice does not even say his name, perhaps for fear of giving away too much to a messenger about her interest in Benedick. Yet even this nickname, taken from fencing, suggests something about Benedick—that he is skilled with a sword. Indeed, the messenger says Benedick "hath done good service, lady, in these wars" (I.i.48-49).

When the entire party of returning soldiers arrives at Leonato's and dismounts, Beatrice and Benedick immediately single each other out for an exchange of witty barbs. Just as Beatrice has a name for Benedick ("Signior Mountanto" [I.i.30]), so he has one for her ("Lady Disdain" [I.i.118]) and another later ("Lady Tongue" [II.i.275]). Benedick seems to get the best of Beatrice, which leads her to say that she knows him from before and that he always ends with a trick. This and other comments suggest a prior knowledge and perhaps even a mutual romantic interest.

Nevertheless, Benedick vows in the opening scene to live and die a bachelor and declares himself a "professed tyrant" (I.i.169) to women. Benedick's comments indicate that the basis for his attitude is a belief that women render men foolish in their behavior, turning them into sighers and balladmakers, and eventually domesticating them into husbands who are like hired horses with signs around their necks standing and waiting for their lady's bidding.

Benedick's ability to get the best of the situation varies. At Signior Leonato's party, he is chagrined to find himself labeled by Beatrice the "prince's jester: a very dull fool" (II.i.137-38) during a masked dance with Beatrice. During the famous gulling scene, he seems completely taken in, simply because the "white-bearded fellow" (II.iii.118-19), meaning Leonato, is part of the duping.

Benedick shows a strong, vigorous imagination at Leonato's party. After he is angered by Beatrice's comments about him, he asks to be sent on various fantastical missions to get away from Beatrice. He talks of going on services for the prince from one end of the world to the other, from the Antipodes, from the Mongols, from the Pygmies—anywhere Beatrice is not.

Yet when Benedick is alone at the beginning of the gulling scene, he turns his fertile imagination to the qualities in a woman which would please him. First he meditates on the changes in his friend Claudio, who used to like a soldier's music, armor, and plain speech, who is now turned into the lover. He himself would like a woman who is rich, wise, virtuous, fair (meaning attractive), mild-natured, noble, of good discourse (conversation), an excellent musician, and of any color hair that pleases God. Benedick's wit is perhaps at one of its sharpest moments in this scene of concealment. He refers to Claudio as Monsieur Love. When Leonato, the prince, and Claudio enjoy a song, Benedick comments on how a dog howling like the singer would have been hung.

Benedick began the scene by fearing that love would turn him to an oyster—something flaccid, soft, and spineless. By the end of the scene, he is convinced of the truth of what has been said about Beatrice's affection for him by the seriousness of the conversation, by the presence of the respected Leonato, and perhaps by his own interest in Beatrice. When Beatrice calls him in to dinner, he turns her impertinent approach into something laden with positive double meanings flattering to himself. Benedick's self-deception is engaging because it is such a change from his previous adamant stand against love. He disarmingly says that he has changed because he did not realize he would live long enough to be a married man.
He is the object of some jokes by his friends after the gulling scene. They make fun of his newly shaved face, of his use of civet perfume, and of his wearing of various attention-getting clothes which replace his plain soldier's garb. Yet Benedick still has some repartee in his command, allowing him to disengage himself from the others and step aside with Leonato, possibly to begin some discussion of a change in his view of Beatrice.

In other areas of his character, Benedick is constant, sensible, loyal, and sound in his judgment. Benedick is loyal to Claudio through all manly offices and activities. For example, when he is asked by Claudio his opinion of Hero, he is fully ready with a clever retort making Hero seem not so unusual. This is not a reflection on Hero but on Benedick's concept of what love-sickness does to a man's head. When Claudio thinks too quickly that the prince has wooed Hero for himself, Benedick says sharply to him, "But did you think the prince would have served you thus?" (II.i.195-96).

During the shaming scene, Benedick shows compassion for the fainting Hero and tries to calm the outraged Leonato. He asks Beatrice whether she was Hero's bedfellow last night, thus looking for evidence rather than emotion as a basis for response. In an insightful comment, he defends the honor of the prince and Claudio and suspects that they have been misled by Don John, "whose spirits toil in frame of villainies" (IV.i.189). He counsels Leonato to take the friar's advice, and he swears himself to secrecy. When he is alone with Beatrice, he shows care for her sorrow, owns his love for her, and says "Surely I do believe your fair cousin is wronged" (IV.i.259-60). Though he defends Claudio to Beatrice, his love for her and his conviction that Hero has been wronged finally prompt him to agree to challenge Claudio to a duel.

When Benedick challenges Claudio, he shows himself to be focused and set on his purpose. He does not waste words and does not wish to jest with his friends. He has a mission, and he keeps it uppermost in mind.

Benedick's whimsicality, or odd humor, is shown in the garden scene near the end of the play when he has turned into the lover and tries to compose a love song. His love song is a bit pitiful, and so is the whole idea of finding him in the posture of the conventional lover. Yet Benedick has not been rendered a total oyster. He says to Beatrice, "Thou and I are too wise to woo peaceably" (V.ii.72). Even at his wedding, things threaten to dissolve when Benedick asks Beatrice if she loves him. Harmony is restored by the community of friends, and Benedick's summary comment that "man is a giddy thing" (V.iv.108) applies well to the action of the play as a whole.

Claudio (Character Analysis)

Claudio is a young soldier returning from war. He is originally from Florence, a city in northern Italy noted for culture during the Italian Renaissance. His mind has been dominated by thoughts of war. After his return, however, his thoughts have turned in a new direction. He is smitten immediately by Hero, Leonato's daughter. Her looks and gentle behavior have won him over very quickly, almost prior to any conversation or acquaintance with her. He is a conventional lover and, as most critics agree, without much depth or complexity in his character.

Despite his apparent lack of complexity, Claudio demonstrates his capacity for friendship in that he is well-liked by Benedick, the central male character in the play. Also, he is capable of reciprocating friendship. He enters into the scheme originated by Don Pedro to help convince Benedick that Beatrice is in love with him. This helpful plot allows Benedick to realize, express, and act on his feelings. Claudio even displays a sense of humor and love of play in this scene.

Claudio proves himself to be a somewhat jealous and gullible man. When Don Pedro woos Hero on behalf of Claudio, the latter readily believes Don John's deceitful claim that Don Pedro is wooing Hero for himself. More seriously, Claudio falls for the window trick in which Borachio and Margaret, whom Borachio calls "Hero" in this scene, have an "amiable encounter" (III.iii.151-52).
Claudio's capacity for anger and wounded pride is demonstrated in his shaming of Hero. During the wedding ceremony, Claudio answers the friar's questions with irony and building anger until he then publicly and vehemently denounces and humiliates Hero, calling her a "rotten orange" (IV.i.32), an "approved wanton" (IV.i.44), and "a common stale [whore]" (IV.i.65). He even questions Leonato's friendship for him in offering him damaged goods in the form of an unvirginal daughter.

Finally, Claudio's capacity for repentance is shown by his willingness to perform observances at Hero's tomb. He hangs an epitaph at her tomb, and he also consents to marry, sight unseen, Leonato's niece. Only at the closing wedding ceremony is Hero unveiled to a chastened and subdued Claudio.

Perhaps the summarizing comment about Claudio is the one made by Beatrice early in the play. "The Count is neither sad, nor sick, nor merry, nor well; but civil count, civil as an orange, and something of that jealous complexion" (II.i.293-95). Beatrice's pun on civil/Seville, a Spanish city known for its oranges, points out a central truth about Claudio—he is bland and smooth, lacking depth or multiple dimensions.

Dogberry (Character Analysis)
Dogberry is the constable of Messina. This title is a British usage and refers to a police officer or official in charge of keeping the peace. This part was originally written for a famous comic actor in Shakespeare's day, Will Kemp. Kemp's name appears before Dogberry's spoken parts in the Quarto edition printed in 1600. This is one piece of evidence used in establishing the date of composition of this play, because Will Kemp left the Lord Chamberlain's men in 1599.

Dogberry's name refers to an ordinary hedgerow bush or shrubbery, and is perhaps suggestive of the constable's intelligence level. Dogberry's notable characteristics include his flagrant misuse of language, his pride in who he is and his official position in town, his reckless disregard for actually doing his job according to a reasonable standard of performance, and his overly literal insistence on setting the record straight about being called an ass by Conrade.

Examples of Dogberry's misuse of language abound in scenes in which he appears. He inquires of the watchmen who among them is "the most desartless man to be constable" (III.iii.9-10). By "desartless" he means deserving. When George Seacoal is identified as the proper man, Dogberry interrupts Seacoal in midsentence, as befitting a higher authority figure addressing a lower, and gives him a lantern as a symbol of authority. His charge, or set of directions to the watch, show the ineptitude of his peace-keeping mission. He states the watch's charge as follows: "you shall comprehend all vagrom men; you are to bid any man stand, in the prince's name" (III.iii.25-26). When Dogberry is questioned by the watch about how to carry out their duties, he answers each possible situation with his own logic of how to proceed. For example, those who will not stop when told to do so should be let go, for they are knaves. Those who won't leave taverns to go home to bed should be left there until they are sober. Thieves should be allowed to steal away, thereby showing what they really are. After all, if the watchmen try to stop a thief, they will be tainted by the contact. The watchmen are told to be especially careful in keeping an eye on Leonato's door. Dogberry's final instruction to them is to be "vigilant" (III.iii.94), meaning vigilant.

In III.v, Dogberry attempts to tell Leonato about the arrests of Conrade and Borachio, but is unable to get to the point quickly enough for Leonato. Later, when Dogberry and Verges and the criminals are assembled before the sexton for an official writing up of the case against the arrested men, Dogberry again shows his pride and ineptitude. He goes so slowly about the statement of the case and the instructions to the sexton as to what should be written down that even the sexton tells him that he is not doing the examination correctly. He does more name-calling and labelling than stating of the plain facts of the case. When Conrade, in utter exasperation, calls him an ass, Dogberry responds with a full assessment of this evaluation. He insists four times that he be written down as an ass. He also states the basis of his self-satisfaction: he is wise, an officer, a householder, as handsome as any in Messina, knowledgeable in the law, rich, and an owner of two gowns.
In the scene in which he leads the arrested men, he shows his choicest logic by his ability to divide a subject into parts and communicate it to Don Pedro. He jumps from first and second, to sixth and third. When Leonato gives him money for his efforts, he departs from the company of authorities with full, flattering, and garbled phrases. Dogberry is often a favorite among audiences due to his comic ineptitude.

Hero (Character Analysis)
Hero, depicted as a virtuous and mild young woman, proves to be loving, affectionate, and dutiful to her father, her cousin, and to her fiancé. Claudio describes her as a jewel, and in appearance she is fair, young, short, and dark-haired. She is referred to by other characters in the play as being gentle and modest. Her answer to Don Pedro's attempt to get her to join their conspiracy to trick Beatrice shows her goodness and stands in contrast to Don John's villainy. She says that she "will do any modest office to help [Beatrice] to a good husband" (II.i.375-76). During the trick, she does as much to instruct Beatrice in her deficiencies in being so joking and critical as she does to deceive Beatrice about Benedick.

On the morning of her wedding, Hero has an unexplained sadness but shows an interest in her wedding gown, in the perfumed gloves sent her by Claudio, and in her cousin Beatrice. She reproves Margaret for a mild jest about the wedding night. At her wedding, she blushes at the accusations made against her, asks very brief questions, denies her accuser, and finally faints. At this point, she supposedly dies and is entombed. In accordance with Friar Francis's plan, this ruse will allow the rumors about her to die down and Claudio to grow remorseful. She appears in the final scene, masked until Claudio agrees to marry whoever it is behind the mask. True to her character throughout, her words are mild, but they now have a potential, though unrealized, tragic dimension. Because the friar's plan worked, she did "die to live" (IV.i.253) rather than suffer the fate of Shakespeare's tragic heroine, Juliet, who actually dies in the last act of Romeo and Juliet. Hero has been wrongfully accused but is utterly powerless to defend herself. Only through the work, however incompetent, of others (such as Dogberry and Verges), the steadfast belief of Beatrice and Benedick, and the plan of Friar Francis, is her name finally cleared.

Audiences may view Hero as shallow and one-dimensional, defined by her relationships to others, especially male figures in the play. However, there is another aspect to her character, which is more hinted at than fully portrayed. Hero has a firm sense of goodness and does not do or say more or other than what is fair and just. For example, about Don John she simply says that he seems to have a melancholy disposition. In the scene in which Beatrice is tricked, she has a definite interest in seeing some curbing of Beatrice's unrestrained wit. She is all maidenly modesty in contrast to Margaret's chatter about wedding gowns and mildly vulgar punning about the wedding night. In the final scene of the play, Hero helps to repair a threatened breech in Benedick's and Beatrice's wedding plans by producing a poem taken from Beatrice's pocket.

Leonato (Character Analysis)
Leonato is the governor of Messina, a city in northeastern Sicily in Italy. He is the father of Hero, a daughter eligible for marriage. He is a genial host who immediately invites the returning soldiers to stay in Messina. He is concerned with making his guests as comfortable as possible and their stay as pleasant as possible. He seeks to provide music for their rest, dinners for their nourishment, and parties for their diversion. He is also an able though not a superb wit who jests in turn with Benedick about Hero's parentage and Beatrice about her marriage prospects. Early in the play he does not seem susceptible to gossip, questioning the source of what soon proves to be an erroneous report his brother delivers him from a conversation overheard by a servant. He is gracious to Claudio as his future son-in-law and tells the impatient youth that a week is needed to prepare adequately for such an event. He shows insight into his niece Beatrice's character, when he says of her that she is not ever really sad, even when asleep. He willingly enters into the scheme to trick Benedick into believing Beatrice is in love with him; though as a basically honest man, he is at first a little slow in inventing proofs of Beatrice's affection for Benedick for the sake of the eavesdropping Benedick. However, once he fully enters into the jest, his made-up evidence is exaggerated and absurdly funny. Though his patience can be tried, he is ever courteous, accustomed as he is to his role as governor and head of an important household. When
Dogberry and Verges go to see him on the morning of the wedding, he tells them that they are being tedious but still offers them a glass of wine before their departure from his house. Because he is in a hurry to get to the wedding, he instructs them to take the evidence from the apprehended criminals.

At the wedding, his behavior is partially consistent with the type of person he has been shown to be thus far. He shows the same readiness of wit at first and the same courtesy that goes with a person in a position of authority. When Claudio questions Hero's virtue, Leonato at first seeks a clarification of Claudio's meaning and intent and then asks Don Pedro to speak. After their full disclosure of the window scene, however, he gives a long, angry speech in which he wishes that the fainted Hero were dead. He finally listens to Friar Francis, who calms him and invents a plot to allow time to do some good.

In the final act of the play, he is a grieving father who suspects that Hero has been wrongly accused, so much so that he baits and tries to challenge Claudio to a duel. Claudio does not take him seriously, and he leaves. When he returns, everyone has just learned of the plot led by Don John. Leonato uses an uncustomary ironic tone in his comments to the captured men and then demands a show of remorse and submission from Claudio, who willingly yields. He plans to investigate Margaret's role in the plot and finally seems back to himself. He seems unwilling at the end to blame Claudio and Don Pedro, instead saying that they, too, were victims of a plot initiated by Don John and participated in unwillingly by Margaret.

Pedro (Character Analysis)
Don Pedro, a nobleman and soldier, is the Prince of Arragon (Aragon), a region of eastern Spain. He is referred to by Leonato as "your Grace" (I.i.100) and indeed his behavior throughout much of the play is gracious and courtly. When the audience first meets Don John, who is Don Pedro's brother, it hears of Don Pedro's gracious behavior to his rebellious brother.

Don Pedro's actions throughout the play display his power and influence as well as his good humor. He has the power to confer honors for valor on the soldiers in his company and has done so to Claudio just before the beginning of the play. He speaks for his company of men to Leonato. He goes back to call the privately conferring Benedick and Claudio to their duties to Leonato, their host. He also agrees in a separate conversation with Claudio to intervene for him in marriage negotiations with Hero. He says he will disguise himself as Claudio, reveal his affections, and then speak of the matter to Leonato.

Don Pedro announces Claudio's and Hero's successfully negotiated wedding, both to Claudio and to their circle of friends. When he proposes on his own behalf to Beatrice and is rejected, he takes Beatrice's reply in good humor, appreciating her merry nature. He proposes the plot of tricking Benedick, both to pass the time until Claudio's wedding and to challenge Cupid at his own love game. He shows his own playful humor during the gulling scene and also reveals again his own interest in Beatrice. Additionally, he shows an interest in conveying to Benedick that some of his behavior needs mending.

When Don Pedro and Claudio are privately confronted by Don John with a false report about Hero, Don Pedro is at first skeptical. However, he agrees with Claudio's desire to publicly disgrace Hero if the evidence works out against her.

Don Pedro's gracious and good-natured behavior is temporarily displaced when the evidence against Hero is presented. At the wedding, Don Pedro shows concern for his honor and his friend's honor and none at all for Hero's reputation. He reports the evidence to the assembled company, in temperate but definite terms. In the encounter with Leonato, he seems in a hurry and refers to Leonato as "good old man" (V.i.50) or simply "old man" (V.i.73). He continues in a light jesting vein when Benedick comes to challenge Claudio and only slowly recognizes that Benedick is serious. Once Borachio's plot is revealed, Don Pedro immediately suspects his brother as being the instigator of the plot. His continuing loyalty to Claudio is shown in his accompaniment of Claudio to Hero's tomb to hang the epitaph and mourn. Don Pedro's graciousness is once
more his leading characteristic as he greets the assembled company at the final wedding. He in turn is told by Benedick to get a wife and is described at the end as looking "sad" (V. iv. 122), or serious.

Other Characters (Descriptions)

**Antonio**
Antonio is Leonato's brother. Antonio is described in the Dramatis Personae as an old man. Ursula mentions that he has a dry hand, a feature associated with old age, just as a modern audience would associate wrinkles or liver spots with old age. He is a minor character, but his relationship to Leonato stands as a model of a good fraternal relationship in contrast to that between Don Pedro and Don John.

He is an advisor and confidant to his brother. When a servant tells him of an overheard conversation between Don Pedro and Claudio, he relays the information to Leonato. He is present at Leonato's party and dances with one of Hero's gentlewomen.

At the end of the play, he counsels patience to his brother and a moderating of his grief. Also, like a loyal brother and uncle, he utters defiant words to Don Pedro and Claudio. He challenges Claudio to a duel and calls them both a series of insulting names. In fact, in his turn, he has to be counseled to patience by Leonato. Finally, he is asked to give Hero away at the wedding as his own daughter and does so willingly.

**Antonio's Son**
He does not have a speaking part. He provides music and perhaps helps in other ways in Leonato's busy household, especially during the soldiers' visit. Leonato addresses him briefly in Act I.

**Attendants**
The attendants do not have speaking parts, but various editors mention attendants at the wedding in Act IV and then again at the weddings at the end of the play. By the fact that their greater numbers make more witnesses to the action, the attendants make the drama of the shaming scene more intense and then by contrast the closing weddings more festive. Three or four attendants carrying candles go with Claudio and Don Pedro to Hero's tomb, contributing to the somber mood.

**Balthasar**
Balthasar is an attendant on Don Pedro. He sings a Shakespearean lyric at the beginning of the gulling of Benedick. The song advises women that men are "deceivers" (II. iii. 63) and that women should not sigh over them but let them go.

**Borachio**
Borachio is a follower of Don John. He is an experienced spy and villain. When he first appears, he brings news of the impending marriage between Hero and Claudio to Don John. He obtained the news by working as a perfumer of rooms in Leonato's house and hiding behind an arras (a tapestry wall hanging) to overhear the conversation between Don Pedro and Claudio about the planned wooing. Borachio is a master at thinking up deceitful and covert activities. He attempts to mislead Claudio at Leonato's party about the wooing done by Don Pedro on Claudio's behalf. He also plants the thought in Claudio's mind that Hero is not his equal in birth. He devises the plan of appearing with Margaret at Hero's chamber window and making it look to those below that Hero is a "common stale" (IV. i. 65), meaning a whore. He even thinks of arranging for Hero to be gone from the room that night. Don John offers him a fee of a thousand gold coins for his plan. The plan is foiled because Borachio cannot stop himself from bragging about it to Conrade during the night. They are overheard by the watch and arrested. During the investigation, his answers are very brief. When he is brought before the prince, he freely and honestly confesses his crimes and asks for "nothing but the reward of a villain" (V. i. 243-44), namely whatever punishment the law requires. He defends Margaret as being always "just and virtuous" (V. i. 302) in her dealings. He also takes responsibility for his deeds. Finally, he speaks one of the most insightful lines in the play to the prince and Claudio. "What your wisdoms could not discover, these
shallow fools have brought to light" (V.i.232-34).

**Boy**
This character fetches a book for Benedick when Benedick is alone in Leonato's orchard just before his friends come to trick him.

**Conrade**
Conrade is a follower of Don John. It is noted that Conrade was born under Saturn. The Renaissance interest in horoscopes and planetary influences on personality would suggest that Conrade is sour or gloomy in disposition. He advises Don John not to display the full range of his bad humor until he can do so without consequences. He also suggests that Don John make use of his discontent. He declares his loyalty to Don John to the death. There is some suggestion that Conrade is inexperienced in villainy. Conrade becomes impatient with the pace and logic of the interrogation which takes place in front of the sexton, and he calls Verges a coxcomb (fool) and Dogberry an ass.

**Don John**
See John

**Don Pedro**
See Pedro

**Friar Francis**
See Francis

**Francis (Friar Francis)**
Friar Francis is the clergyman who is scheduled to perform the wedding ceremony between Hero and Claudio. He begins the ceremony with traditional questions about impediments to the marriage, when Claudio answers at first ironically and then attacks Hero furiously. During the shaming, the friar is at first silent and then speaks calmly, proposing a plan to diffuse the chaos.

The friar seems confidant, having observed Hero's blushing and modest face, that she is innocent and that some mistake has been made. He refers to the seriousness of his profession as a priest and to his experience as a confessor and asks for Leonato's trust. He speaks with kindness and gentleness to Hero when he asks her who she is accused of spending time with. Then he suggests the plan of a feigned temporary burial in order to attain a higher good. His says that his plan will achieve various goals: 1) it will change accusations to sorrow; 2) Hero's absence will make Claudio appreciate her more; 3) Claudio will mourn and repent her loss; 4) time will allow the truth to come out; 5) Hero's supposed death will stop the gossip. If his plan does not succeed, the friar suggests that Hero can be quietly put in a convent away from gossip. When Benedick prevails on Leonato to listen to the friar, the friar once again expresses confidence that his plan will work and that the wedding day is only postponed.

The friar ends with the satisfaction of being able to say to Leonato that he was sure Hero was innocent. He also performs the weddings at the end of the play and plans to explain about Hero's death to the amazed Claudio after the wedding in the chapel.

**John (Don John)**
Don John is the play's villain. Sometimes young audiences find his attempted spoiling of the marriage of Claudio and Hero extremely confusing and unaccountable. His choice of this method to attack his brother's credibility and reputation seems quite indirect and ineffectual in conception, if not in execution.
Don John is largely an unmotivated villain. In addition to his attempt to destroy his brother's reputation, he also attacks Hero's honor and happiness. He describes himself as having an anti-social nature that will not try to fit in with others. He won't laugh at someone else's jokes or eat at someone else's meal time but, rather, will do things as he pleases, when he pleases.

Don John operates by will. What he wishes is what he will do, undirected and unrestrained by others. He admits as much to his followers, several disaffected men who attach themselves to this rebellious outsider. Thus, although Hero says he seems to suffer from melancholy, often the melancholic personality is inactive, and this is not an accurate description of Don John. Prior to the action of the play, he had revolted against his brother, who forgave him. Ungratefully, he spends his time in this play looking for ways to hurt his brother. Another action that shows he is not the passive, melancholic type is that when the news about Hero and the plot against her is announced, at the same time Don John's sudden fleeing of Messina is also discovered. This hasty escape when the plot is discovered is an index to his overall character of cowardice and sneakiness. At the end of the play, he faces the certainty of "brave punishments" (V.iv.128) the day after the concluding weddings.

Lord

An unnamed lord identifies Leonato's monument for the penitent Claudio. He speaks only four words.

Margaret

Margaret is a gentlewoman attending on Hero. Hero likes and trusts her and refers to her as "good Meg" (III.iv.8). Margaret helps Hero dress for her wedding. She compliments Hero's wedding gown and calls the Duchess of Milan's wedding gown a "night-gown" (III.iv.18) in comparison to Hero's. She provides an interesting, detailed description of a high society wedding gown of the time period: cloth with gold and silver thread, sleeves trimmed with pearls, multiple sleeves, skirt trimmed with bluish tinsel. In addition to Margaret's interest in female fashions, she also enjoys speaking in puns with hidden sexual meanings. She speaks to both Hero and to Beatrice this way on the morning of Hero's wedding. She also speaks in a franker way along this line with Benedick later in the play. Margaret's behavior in this play is somewhat mysterious. She entertained Borachio at Hero's chamber window the night before the wedding, allowing him to call her Hero. When Hero is accused at her wedding of disloyalty, Margaret is not mentioned in the list of characters present and never says anything. Yet she is present at the play's end among the dancers.

Messenger

A messenger is mentioned three different times in the play. In the opening scene of Act I, a messenger brings Leonato news that the soldiers are returning from a war. He conveys news of the brave battle performances of Claudio and of Benedick. At the end of Act III, a messenger brings Leonato word that the wedding party is waiting for him. At the end of Act V, a messenger brings word to Don Pedro that his brother has been captured and returned to Messina.

Musicians

Leonato has musicians to provide entertainment for his visitors. For example, there is dancing at Leonato's party. Balthasar's song is accompanied by musicians. Claudio's song at Hero's tomb is also accompanied by music. The instruments for social occasions include the lute, the tabor, and the pipe.

Sexton

The sexton's name is Francis Seacole (he is not the same as the man named George Seacole in the watch), and he is a town clerk. Sometimes the word sexton refers to a church official in charge of a churchyard and a gravedigger.

The sexton writes down the testimony against the defendants. The testimony takes place in a hearing-room in Messina, probably in the same building as the jail. The sexton has been referred to by Dogberry as a "learned
writer" (III.v.63). He demonstrates by his short, logical speeches that he is, unlike Dogberry, experienced and knows what he is doing. He asks to see the malefactors, i.e., the offenders, and he knows what his words mean as he uses them. Unlike the prisoner, Conrade, he controls his responses to Dogberry but does tell Dogberry directly that he is not doing the examination correctly and instructs him to call forth the watch. He skillfully prompts the watch to disclose the information they possess.

**Ursula**
Ursula is a gentlewoman waiting on Hero. She is present at Leonato's party and dances with Antonio. She helps Hero in the scene in which Beatrice is fooled into thinking Benedick is in love with her. Ursula follows Hero's lead in the scene, mainly directing questions and follow-up questions to Hero about the truth of the report. She calls Hero to go to the church for her wedding. She also announces to Beatrice and Benedick the revelations about Don John's plot against Hero.

**Verges**
Verges is head borough (a petty constable) and assistant to Dogberry. He appears in the four scenes in which Dogberry appears. He also abuses language and shares Dogberry's logic about how the watch should conduct itself. He swears mild old-fashioned oaths such as "By'r lady" (III.iii.83), for "By Our Lady." He does not talk nearly as much as Dogberry does. Dogberry suggests that Verges is old and not as witty as he himself is. However, he is Dogberry's sidekick and takes his cues from his partner. He seems to admire Dogberry and says, "You have been always called a merciful man, partner" (III.iii.61-62).

**Watch**
This group is composed of the night watchmen. Some editions of the play show two and some show three watchmen. If a play editor shows three night watchmen, then it is usually because one is specifically identified as George Seacoal. The basis for this is that the first watchman refers to several able watchmen fit to be the head night constable on the basis of their ability to read and write. The two he names are Hugh Oatcake and George Seacoal. Dogberry specifically calls forth George Seacoal in giving the directions for the night watch.

The watchmen were local citizens whose job it was to protect the citizens of the town from fires, robberies, and other crimes. In addition, the watch were to prevent noises at night which would bother residents. This group of watchmen fit in well with Dogberry and Verges. They say they would "rather sleep than talk" (III.iii.37). They intend to stay in one place, sitting on the church bench, until two and then go home. Fortunately, they overhear Borachio and Conrade and hide to hear the whole story. Although they misunderstand some references to fashion, they do understand the main outlines of the plot against Hero. When it looks as though Dogberry might fail to say anything sensible against Conrade and Borachio, the watch give important testimony before the sexton.
Sample Essay Outlines

The following paper topics, each with a sample outline, are designed to test your understanding of Much Ado About Nothing.

Each deals with the play as a whole and requires analysis of important themes and literary devices.

Topic #1
Shakespeare interweaves two love stories in Much Ado About Nothing, the Claudio-Hero plot and the Benedick-Beatrice plot. Write an analytical essay on the ways in which they parallel or counterpoint each other in characterization, in dialogue, and in plot structure.

Outline
I. Thesis Statement: The Claudio-Hero and the Benedick-Beatrice love stories are interwoven in Much Ado About Nothing through a series of parallels and contrasts in characterization, in dialogue, and in plot structure.

II. Characterization

A. Parallels

1. Hero and Beatrice are kinswomen and good friends and Claudio and Benedick are comrades-in-arms and good friends

2. Both couples knew each other in the past

3. Both couples are learning to discriminate properly and to estimate each other's true value

4. Both couples' ability to love will be tested

B. Contrasts

1. Claudio and Hero are slaves to convention and Benedick and Beatrice are free spirits

2. Claudio seeks a wooing intermediary and Benedick woos directly

3. Claudio and Hero rely on knowledge, and Benedick and Beatrice rely on their intuition.

4. After professing their love, Claudio and Hero are easily derailed, but nothing will stop Benedick and Beatrice
III. Dialogue
A. Parallels
1. Both couples are educated aristocrats
2. Both couples talk about marriage
3. Both Claudio and Benedick speak about their fears of cuckoldry
4. Both couples will learn to speak more directly

B. Contrasts
1. Claudio and Hero usually speak inverse and Benedick and Beatrice usually speak in prose
2. Claudio and Hero comply with social superior's voices and Benedick and Beatrice challenge social superior's voices
3. Benedick and Beatrice radically change their speech patterns and Claudio and Hero do not

IV. Plot structure
A. Harmony of plots
1. The Claudio-Hero plot and the Benedick-Beatrice plot are harmonized because they are friends
2. The Claudio-Hero plot and the Benedick-Beatrice plot are harmonized because they are both love stories
3. The Claudio-Hero and the Benedick-Beatrice plot are both harmonized by their gaiety until crisis occurs

B. Polarization of plots
1. The polarization of the plots begin when reflective Benedick will no longer play court jester for Claudio and Don Pedro
2. The crisis in the Claudio-Hero plot, the refusal and accusal of Hero, precipitates an extended crisis in the Benedick-Beatrice plot
3. The crisis in the Benedick-Beatrice plot, Beatrice's demand that Benedick kill Claudio, accelerates the polarization between the two plots
4. The two plots are completely polarized when Benedick agrees to, and then challenges, Claudio

C. Reconciliation of plots
1. The Claudio-Hero plot is reconciled with the Benedick-Beatrice plot when Benedick releases penitent Claudio from his challenge
2. The Claudio-Hero plot is reconciled with the Beatrice-Benedick plot as both couples prepare for their double-wedding

V. Conclusion: Shakespeare uses parallels and counterpoints to interweave two love stories, one based on convention, the other on invention, in a pattern that begins in harmony, splits in crisis, and resolves in reconciliation. Sample Analytical Paper Topics 109
Appearance versus reality is the major theme in Much Ado About Nothing and the lesson of the play is to learn to discriminate properly and to estimate everything at its true value. Write an analytical essay on misnotings that take place in this play, as well as the way in which they are resolved; include the motifs, imagery, dialogue, and theatrical devices that Shakespeare employs to explore this theme.

Outline
I. Thesis Statement: In Much Ado About Nothing, Shakespeare explores the theme of appearance versus reality and its lesson—proper discrimination and true value estimation—through a series of deceptions, emphasized by mask motifs and fashion imagery, which are resolved as the characters are willing to perceive the truth.

II. Appearance versus reality brought about by a series of deceptions

A. Benign deceptions

1. The servant of Antonio overheard a conversation that concerned his master's niece and he shared it with him

2. The friends of Benedick and Beatrice gulled them into believing each loved the other

3. Friar Francis suggested that Leonato tell everyone his daughter Hero died until her name was cleared

4. Leonato tests Claudio's contrition with the penance of mourning at the tomb and marrying his niece, sight unseen

B. Malicious deceptions

1. Don John deceived Claudio into believing that his friend Don Pedro wooed Hero for himself

2. Don John and Borachio deceived Claudio and Don Pedro into believing that Hero was a wanton

III. Appearance versus reality emphasized with mask motifs

A. Social masks

1. The pointed wordspar between Benedick and Beatrice is a mask for their real feelings for each other

2. The decorus language of the aristocrats masks their real feelings and thoughts, which are hidden beneath their words

3. Dogberry uses high-faluting words he doesn't understand to impress others

B. Actual masks

1. The men wear actual masks at the masquerade ball to purposefully deceive each other

2. Margaret wears Hero's clothing to pretend she is Hero

3. The women wear masks in the denouement to hide their identities from their future husbands
IV Appearance versus reality stressed with fashion imagery A. Dialogue
1. Beatrice uses fashion imagery to describe Benedick
2. Benedick uses fashion imagery to describe Beatrice
3. Claudio and Don Pedro use fashion imagery to describe Benedick
4. Borachio uses fashion imagery to introduce his tale of villainy to Conrade
5. Benedick uses fashion imagery to describe his freedom from another man's opinion
B. Costumes
1. Claudio is dressed as a groom although he intends to renounce Hero
2. Dogberry is dressed as a magistrate for his examination of the prisoners although he has not studied law
V. Appearance versus reality is resolved through recognizing the truth
A. Proper discrimination
1. Claudio recognizes his error of mistaking, and Hero recognizes she was wronged only as long as she was slandered
2. Benedick and Beatrice both recognize the depth of their feelings for each other
B. Estimating true value
1. Claudio and Hero recognize that their relationship must begin with trust and faith
2. Benedick and Beatrice recognize that their love for each other has more value than their friends' opinions of them
VI. Conclusion: Willingness to see the truth gives the proper discrimination and estimation of true value to see past deceptions, and is emphasized in Much Ado About Nothing with mask motifs and fashion imagery.

Topic #3
In Much Ado About Nothing, Benedick and Beatrice explore an unconventional path of love. Write an analytical essay on the lovers' journey in awareness, and the way in which Shakespeare uses syntactic structures to reflect this movement.

Outline
I. Thesis Statement: Benedick and Beatrice explore an unconventional path of love; a journey in awareness which is reflected in their syntactic expression.

II. Unconventional path of love
A. Refuse to comply
1. Benedick and Beatrice are contemptuous of convention
2. Benedick and Beatrice are marriage-bashers B. Follow their ideals

1. Benedick and Beatrice spontaneously explore their relationship
2. Benedick and Beatrice commit to a true union III. Journey in awareness

A. Point of departure

1. Benedick and Beatrice mask their feelings
2. Benedick and Beatrice have an adversarial relationship
3. Benedick and Beatrice are locked in past memories
4. Benedick and Beatrice are negatively obsessed with each other

B. Change of course

1. Benedick and Beatrice recognize their true feelings for each other
2. Benedick and Beatrice recognize their faults and resolve to mend their ways
3. Benedick and Beatrice see each other with a fresh viewpoint
4. Benedick and Beatrice are truly concerned about each other

C. Arrival

1. Benedick and Beatrice express their feelings and confess their love for one another
2. Benedick and Beatrice work in harmony
3. Benedick and Beatrice openly explore each other
4. Benedick and Beatrice unite and their joy flows out to others

IV. Syntactic change of expression

A. Begins

1. Benedick and Beatrice camouflage their feelings with clever banter
2. Benedick and Beatrice wordspar for intellectual supremacy
3. Benedick and Beatrice speak elaborately for oblique rhetorical effect on others

B. Changes

1. Benedick and Beatrice restrain themselves during their parallel gulling scenes
2. Benedick and Beatrice, in soliloquies, change their speech patterns as they change their intentions toward each other

C. Ends

1. Benedick and Beatrice express their feelings
2. Benedick and Beatrice good naturedly tease each other and harmonize their wit:
3. Benedick and Beatrice are true to themselves and speak directly from their hearts

V. Conclusion: Benedick and Beatrice's unconventional path of love took them on a journey in which they recognized and surrendered their false verbal masks and found their true voices.

Topic #4
Shakespeare uses offstage action in the plot structure of Much Ado About Nothing. Write an essay, analyzing the types of offstage action employed and its value to the play.

Outline
Thesis Statement: Shakespeare employs valuable types of off stage action in his play, Much Ado About Nothing.

II. Types of off stage action
A. Conversations
1. Antonio's servant overhears Claudio and Don Pedro
2. Benedick and Beatrice begin their conversation before we hear their dialogue at the masked ball

B. Actions
1. Don John, Claudio, and Don Pedro witness the staged deceit to slander Hero
2. Leonato conducts a formal examination of persons involved in the slander

III. Value of off stage action
A. Information
1. Shakespeare keeps us informed of truths the players are not privy to
2. Shakespeare keeps our imaginations working so that we participate as active observers

B. Movement of action
1. Shakespeare dynamically uses off stage action to condense the action of the play
2. Shakespeare economically uses off stage action for emphasis
3. Shakespeare uses off stage action for tonal changes

IV. Conclusion: The different types of off stage action that Shakespeare uses in Much Ado About Nothing are necessary for information and movement of action.
Suggested Essay Topics

Act I, Scene 1
1. Contrast the forms of language used by Leonato, Don Pedro, and Claudio with that of Benedick and Beatrice. Why did Shakespeare give them differing forms of expression? What do these forms tell you about the nature of the characters and the probable direction the play will take? Who are the least predictable and most predictable characters and why?

2. Shakespeare has introduced the concept of masks, or deception, at the onset of the play. Cite the use of this concept. What information does this give us about the theme of the play?

3. Beatrice masks her concern for Benedick with her wit. What does the dialogue suggest about their prior encounters and future encounters? Use the text to explain.

4. When Claudio asks Benedick about Hero's modesty, Benedick responds by asking whether Claudio wants an honest response or his customary macho response. What does this tell you about Benedick's awareness of his own nature? Using the text, discuss Benedick's answer to Claudio's question.

Act I, Scene 2
1. In the text, Leonato refuses Antonio's offer to send for the eavesdropping servant. Why? Does he not wish to enlarge on the report? Does he not wish to seem over-anxious? Does he trust his brother implicitly? Explain.

2. In a town where news travels quickly, who else might the servant tell his report to? Might the town now have two rumored suitors for Hero's hand? What kinds of gossip would this lead to? Compare the way news travels in Messina to the ways in which news travels in your community. Are they similar or different?

Act I, Scene 3
1. Today, unlike the time about which Shakespeare writes, illegitimacy is accepted. Do you think that Don John has a right to resent the world for being born a bastard? Can you think of any argument that would bring about a change of mind in him? Why do you think Conrade advises him to be patient and to practice flattery?

2. Borachio is revealed as an informer who will aid Don John. What kind of a man do you think he is? Ironically, he accidentally obtained his information while employed as a perfumer at Leonato's house. Why do you suppose this is the method Shakespeare used to convey this information to Don John? How is the word odor used in terms of reputation? Explain.

Act II, Scene 1
1. Why is Claudio so easily deceived by Don John and Borachio? How does he respond to the deception? What does his soliloquy tell you about his character?

2. Using the text, explain what happened off stage during Benedick's dance with Beatrice? How do we know this happened? What effect did this have on Beatrice?

3. What effect did his dance with Beatrice have on Benedick? Does Beatrice know him and not know him? Is there any truth in her statement that he is Don John's court jester? How does he respond to Beatrice afterward? How do you think he'll respond to her in the future? Explain, citing lines from the text.

4. Don Pedro considers Beatrice a good match for Benedick, while Leonato thinks they'll talk themselves to death in a week. Who do you agree with? Why? Use the text to defend your position.
Act II, Scene 2
1. Who designed and is directing the slander against Hero? What is the plan? How will it be brought about? What roles have been assigned and to whom? Cite the text to explain.

2. Do you think Borachio's plan will succeed? What do you think the responses of Don Pedro and Claudio are likely to be? Would you fall for such a hoax? Explain.

3. What are the motives of the plotters? Are they the same or different? Can any motive ever justify slander? What values does a slanderer lack? Explain.

Act II, Scene 3
1. Why do you think Shakespeare chooses the moment of Benedick's gulling to remind us of the title of the play? Why does he use flattery to ensnare Benedick? Is Benedick actually misled by the gull or does the gull offer him the opportunity to own a part of himself he had denied? Explain.

2. Compare Benedick's two soliloquies. Do they reveal a change in consciousness? Describe the change in consciousness, citing the text.

3. How are Benedick's speeches, before and after the gulling, handled stylistically? Do they have theatrical value? Explain, citing specific passages from the play. How do you imagine an actor would play this role? Describe specific stage business the actor would employ.

Act III, Scene 1
1. Why does Beatrice accept the gull so willingly? Why is she able to surrender her faults so freely? What does this tell you about the true nature of her character? Explain.

2. What does Beatrice mean when she says that "others say thou [Benedick] doest deserve, and I believe it better than reportingly"? What is a better evidence than mere report? Where is it found? Why is this evidence more reliable for Beatrice? Explain.

3. If you were directing this play, how would you manage this scene? What stage business would you give to Beatrice, Hero, and Ursula? What would be the overall tone? Explain fully.

Act III, Scene 2
1. What does the change in Benedick's dialogue and demeanor tell us about Benedick? Why will he no longer play the fool? What few words does he wish to have with Leonato? What does this indicate about the stance his character will take in the future?

2. Why was Don John so easily able to plant suspicion about the chastity of Hero in the minds of Don Pedro and Claudio? What does this tell us about their characters? What do you imagine will be their reaction when they see the staged deceit? Describe the probable scene.

3. Stylistically, what syntactic pattern does Shakespeare use to trap Don Pedro and Claudio in Don John's deceit? What does this pattern tell you about the character's thinking habits? Why was it effective? Explain.

Act III, Scene 3
1. Explain the comedic value of the watch. How do they move the action of the play forward? Why do you think they are given to such outrageous misuse of language? Despite their lunacy, are they effective? Why?

2. Why did Conrade confess his villainy? Was it only the effect of liquor? Was there some other reason? If so, what was it? Why do you think so? Explain.
3. Shakespeare has placed the staged deceit off stage. Why? Is this effective? Explain.

**Act III, Scene 4**

1. Why does Margaret wargspar with Beatrice? Would you say that she is somewhat imitative of Beatrice? How is her style, and her language different from Beatrice? Do you think she could ever win a match with Beatrice? Explain.

2. What is the purpose of this scene? How does it prepare us for the scene that is to follow? What tonal value does it have? Explain.

**Act III, Scene 5**

1. How does this scene serve to move the action of the play forward? How necessary is it to the plot of the play? Would the play make any sense if this scene were cut out by a director? What would have happened to the action of the play if Leonato understood what Dogberry and Verges were talking about? Explain.

2. Why do Dogberry and Verges speak in such a tangential manner? What does their syntax tell you about their thinking processes? Do you think Leonato understood them at all? What did he understand? Cite the passages. If Leonato were not in a hurry to leave, would he have asked them to draw out the exact purpose of their visit? Explain.

**Act IV Scene 1**

1. Claudio and Don Pedro have publicly shamed Hero. Discuss the impact of this serious action on Hero and her kinsmen. Do you think they will ever forgive Claudio and Don Pedro? Cite specific dialogue from the text to support your position.

2. How does Leonato respond to the slander? What does his response tell you about his character? Why is he so easily swayed by the opinions of others? What do you suppose his next action will be? Why?

3. What is the wisdom of the priest? What faculty does he employ to see Hero's innocence. What kind of knowledge is the basis of his plan? Do you think his strategy will work? Cite the text to explain.

4. What moves Benedick to challenge Claudio? Do you think that Beatrice was right to ask him to kill Claudio? Defend your position.

**Act IV, Scene 2**

1. Why did Shakespeare put this broad comic scene directly after the crisis? What effect does this have on the audience? In what way does it move the action of the play forward? Explain.

2. Do you think this is the first time that Dogberry has examined a prisoner? Why is Dogberry unable to keep to the point? What is his mind preoccupied with? What would this examination have been like, had the sexton not intervened? What is Shakespeare telling us about the constabulary of his time and their use of the legal system?

3. What prompts Conrade to call Dogberry an ass? Why does Dogberry perserve about being called an ass? Is he an ass? Cite passages from the text to defend your position.

**Act V, Scene 1**

1. Why do Don Pedro and Claudio seek Benedick to cheer them? Does their jocularity seem strange in light of the fact that they know Hero is dead? Why did they assume that Benedick was jesting? What did it take to sober them to the point of feeling anything for Leonato and Hero? What are they willing to own up to? What does this tell you about their characters? Use their dialogue to explain.
2. Borachio wishes to be killed for his villainy. Does this surprise you? Why does he protect Margaret and claim sole responsibility for killing Hero? What do these acts tell you about his character, and how did the action of the drama affect him? Interpret and explain.

3. For the penance requested by Claudio and Don Pedro, Leonato assigns them both the task of publicly mourning Hero and declaring her innocence. He assigns Claudio the further task of accepting his niece, sight unseen, in marriage. What wisdom does Leonato show in the assignment? Is it fair? What effect do you expect the performed penance to have on Claudio, Don Pedro, and the public? Give a detailed explanation.

**Act V, Scene 2**
1. What does Benedick mean when he tells us he was not born under a rhyming planet? What does he mean when he says he cannot woo in festival terms? Does this mean he is a bad lover? How do you think he will love Beatrice? Explain.

2. Benedick tells Beatrice that they are too wise to woo peaceably. Is this true? Do you think less wise people woo any more peaceably than they do? Explain, citing examples from the text.

**Act V, Scene 3**
1. Claudio vows to perform this rite of mourning to Hero yearly. Does this vow indicate a change in consciousness? Explain the rite of passage Claudio has gone through while performing his penance, detailing each inner action of conscience as you see it in your mind's eye.

2. Why does Shakespeare place this action during the night in a tomb, lit only by candles, and end it at the break of dawn? What does this symbolize? What theatrical effect does this have on the audience? Would this scene, though a public mourning, have worked as well in full sunlight? Explain.

**Act V, Scene 4**
1. Why does Hero readily forgive Claudio for accusing and refusing her? Do you think this is a typical reaction? What do you think their marriage will be like? Explain.

2. As Benedick's values change during the play, so do his musical allusions. In this scene, it is Benedick who wants music, and specifically, pipers—even before the wedding! What does this indicate to you? Citing specific passages, compare this scene with his previous responses to music and discuss how they indicate his growing response to love.

3. Benedick tells Prince Don Pedro, the matchmaker, to get himself a wife. What kind of wife would he require? Would he invite his brother, Don John, to the wedding? Do you think he is ready for marriage? Why? Explain.
Criticism

Overview
Barbara Everett

[In an excerpt from a general essay on Much Ado, Everett illustrates the development by Shakespeare, in his comedies, of certain feelings and attitudes which are a constituent part of his entire dramatic canon, and which tend to be most clearly expressed by the female characters. From Shakespeare's women, the critic argues, come the clearest expressions of humane principle, generous nature, and constancy.]

Much Ado About Nothing is not, I think, among Shakespeare's most popular comedies. It lacks many of those perpetuating devices that we look for to give us a sense of timeless pleasure, of a "holiday" that is at once a sportive release and also, through lyricism, gives the faintest air of holiday blessedness and calm. It contains no sunlit or moonlit wood where every Jack finds his Jill. No heroine leaps happily into hose to find the sexless and timeless liberty of intellectual sport. There is no "play within a play" to strengthen the artifices that surround it with the solvity of comparative reality, and so to give their happy ending the stamp of truth. If "we did keep time, sir, in our snatches," it is not a snatch of perpetuity that is given in the songs of the play—no Journeys end in lovers meeting, nor It was a lover and his lass, nor When daisies pied and violets blue—but an omen of change: Men were deceivers ever. The play appears to present, by contrast, a world rather for "working-days" than for "Sundays"; a world that is as formal, and potentially as harsh, as the comic world that probably preceded it, that of The Merchant of Venice. But the moneyed, legalistic, and formal world of Venice resolves at last into moonlit Belmont, from which one can see

the floor of Heaven
Thick inlaid with patines of bright gold.

The equally and beautifully formal Portia, in whom "The will of a living daughter is curbed by the will of a dead father" ceases to be a "Daniel come to judgment" and becomes a Diana in love, her homecoming heralded by Lorenzo and Jessica with lyrical myths and fables, and herself drawn into a dream from which she "would not be awaked."

Much Ado About Nothing is a play cut off from such pleasant natural resources. It is essentially "inland bred," and relies only on the natural forms of a great house where

Ceremony's a name for the rich horn.
And custom for the spreading laurel tree.

"Nature lovers" are offered only the flowers of rhetoric, the pleached arbour of wit, and the "dancing star" of human individuality. Not only the courteous, but the customary, matters in this play: not only the urbane, but the mundane: in fact, it is the unusual fusing of these into one world that is one of the individual characteristics of the play. The chief fact that makes this play unusual and individual (though there are other characteristics, which I shall discuss later, that develop straight out of earlier comedies) is the manner in which "time and place" do not "cease to matter," but matter very greatly.

It is not merely that the props of an urban or domestic existence—the window, the arras of a musty room, the church, the tomb, the wedding dress, the night-watchmen's staves, even the barber's shop—are important "props" in the world of this play. Nor is it merely that "time and place" have a crucial importance in the action:
What man was he talked with you yesternight
Out at your window betwixt twelve and one?
Now if you are a maid, answer to this.

It is rather that the play concerns itself with what can only be called the most mundane or "local" fact in that world of love, in all its forms, that the comedies create: that is, that men and women have a notably different character, different mode of thinking, different system of loyalties, and, particularly, different social place and function. Not only this; but this is the first play, I think, in which the clash of these two worlds is treated with a degree of seriousness, and in which the woman's world dominates.

This is a rash generalisation and objections spring to mind. . . .

Since The Merchant of Venice is the first play in which there appears a comic heroine who is also a great lady, one watches with interest to see what part the dominating Portia will play, how she will handle her subjection to the "will of a dead father," and whether she will prove to "fit her fancies to her fathers will" better than does Hermia. She and Bassanio equally "give and hazard all they have"; but it is, at least nominally, a man's world that they give themselves up to:

her gentle spirit
   Commits itself to yours to be directed,
   As from her lord, her governor, her king.
   Myself and what is mine to your and yours
   Is now directed.

Portia is the salvation of the play; her wealth, her wits, and her pleading of a feminine quality of mercy—deeply Christian in its language and connotation, but allied too to that quality of compassion that is reserved for the women in the comedies—defeat the harshly logical and loveless intellectualism of Shylock. But they do so in masculine disguise, in a masculine court of law, and at the service of a chivalric friendship between men whose values Portia and Nerissa gaily, but seriously, at the end of the play. They lose, as women, the rings they have gained as men; the loyal and unhappily solitary friend Antonio is the peacemaker, being "bound again, His soul upon the forfeit" for the marriage, and is still in some sense master of the play.

It is here that the world of Much Ado About Nothing begins. There is no symbolic Antonio to keep the balance; the situation works itself out on its own resources. It does this by the characteristic of the play which has been sometimes regarded as a most happy accident of careless genius—the displacement of Claudio and Hero by Benedick and Beatrice as the play's dominating figures, in the course of what is "logical and necessary" in its action. This is brought about by allowing, more distinctively and fully than in any earlier comedy, a dance and battle—(a "merry war" in which not every "achiever brings home full numbers") of two worlds, which it is a gross, but serviceable, generalisation to call the "masculine" and the "feminine" worlds. And this in itself is achieved by the creation of a peculiarly social and domestic context—rarified, formal, and elegant, but still suggesting a social reality that makes the character of the sexes distinct. The sense of place, in its importance to the play, I have mentioned earlier; the sense of time has also an unusual function. One need only reflect on the obvious difference of age between Claudio and Hero, and Benedick and Beatrice—who play lightly with the idea of an obstinate, and therefore time-tried, celibacy; and ask oneself in what earlier comedy there is any differentiation other than that of Youth and Age. One can contrast, also, the references to past and future time that occur in earlier comedies with those in Much Ado About Nothing. "A killed your sister," in Love's Labour's Lost, or Helena's memory of "schooldays' friendship, childhood innocence", or Titania's memories of the sport on the Indian shore—all quoted above—have all, to varying degrees, an exquisite stylisation, an emblematic quality, that prevents their giving another temporal dimension to the play; they are an inset, not a perspective; an intensification of or contrast with the present, not an evocation of the past. But the causal, continual and colloquial harking-back in Much Ado About Nothing has a
quite different effect.

O, he's returned, and as pleasant as ever he was . . .

He set up his bills here In Messina, and challenged Cupid at the fight; and my uncle's fool, reading the challenge, subscrib'd for Cupid, and challenged him at the birdbolt . . .

They never meet but there's a skirmish of wit between them . . .

In our last conflict four of his five wits went halting off . . .

Indeed, my lord, he lent it me awhile; and I gave him use for it, a double heart for his single one...

I have heard my daughter say she hath often dreamt of unhappiness, and waked herself with laughing . . .

One can, if one likes, play the same game with references to the future, contrasting Love's Labour's Lost's

You shall this twelvemonth term from day to day
Visit the speechless sick, and still converse
With groaning wretches . . .

with Much Ado About Nothing's

O Lord, my lord, if they were but a week married, they would talk themselves mad . . .

I will live in thy heart, die in thy lap, and be buried in thy eyes; and, moreover, I will go with thee to thy uncle's. . . .

This easy, humorous, and conversational manner, that refers to a past and future governed by customary event and behaviour, and that carries a sense of habitual reality in a familiar social group, gives the play the quality that it would be certainly unwise to call "realism"; it is an atmosphere easier to feel than to define. It is one of ennobled domesticity, aware of, touched by, and reflecting events in the outside world, but finally providing its own rules and customs: it is, in fact, a world largely feminine in character.

Into this world, at the beginning of the play, come the warriors, covered with masculine honours, cheerful with victory, and heralded importantly by a messenger. They even bring their own style of figured public rhetoric with them:

He hath borne himself beyond the promise of his age, doing in the figure of a lamb the feats of a lion. . . .

The fashion of the world is to avoid cost, and you encounter it. . . .

I had rather be a canker in a hedge than a rose in his grace; and it better fits my blood to be disdained of all than to fashion a carriage to rob love from any. . . .

The "most exquisite Claudio," the "proper squire," is the flower of such a world; the plot that concerns him, and that seems at first to dominate the play, can be seen as the survival of all that is most formal, and least flexible, in the earlier comedies: a masculine game of romantic love with a firm—and sensible—business basis,
the whole governed by an admirable sense of priorities in duty:

I look'd upon her with a soldier's eye . . .
But now I am return'd, and that war-thoughts
Have left their places vacant, in their rooms
Come thronging soft and delicate desires,
All prompting me how fair young Hero is,
Saying I lik'd her ere I went to wars. . . .

If modern sentimentalism makes one dislike the foundation to Claudio's case—female good looks plus paternal income—it is as well to remember that it is an attitude embedded in all the comedies to date, whenever they touch on realism, and shared not only by Bassanio but—even though half-mockingly—by Benedick: "Rich she shall be, that's certain . . . fair, or I'll never look on her."

The beginning of the play, then, presents, in a social context, a company of young bloods, headed by the noble Don Pedro, who all hold together with a cheerful masculine solidarity. The "sworn brothers" are companions-in-arms, and if one deserts, there is cause for lamentation: "I have known when he would have walked ten mile afoot to see a good armour, and now will he lie ten nights awake carving the fashion of a new doublet." If Claudio dramatically distrusts Don Pedro at first-

Let every eye negotiate for itself,
And trust no agent; for beauty is a witch
Against whose charms faith melteth into blood. . . .

then the discovery of his mistake only strengthens his later trust in, and solidarity with, Don Pedro; and this trust is implicit even in the terms of his first doubt, which still postulates a male world of "negotiation" and "agents," against the hypnotic and possibly devilish enemy, Woman. Claudio's world, and Claudio's plot, are never "reformed"—in a dramatic, or moral sense—because they neither can nor need be changed; the simple course of loving, mistaking, and winning again, written from a specifically masculine point of view (again using the word masculine in its idiosyncratic sense here) that is half romance and half business, is a necessary backbone to the play, and holds the comedy together:

Look, what will serve is fit: 'tis once, thou lov'est;
And I will fit thee with the remedy.

And though Hero is in the course of it "killed, in some senses," as Dogberry might have said, she also gets her place in the world, and all is well. A comedy of romance needs something stable, limited, and circular, in which ends match beginnings, and in Claudio it gets this:

Sweet Hero, now thy image does appear
In the rare semblance that I loved it first . . .
Another Hero!
Nothing certainer. . . .

But, if this world is not "reformed," it is to a large extent displaced; and the moment of that displacement is not hard to find:

Don Pedro: Myself, my brother, and this grieved Count
Did see her, hear her, at that hour last night
Talk with a ruffian at her chamber window . . .
Exeunt Don Pedro, Don John, and Claudio.

Benedick: How doth the lady?

Left on stage we have a fainting and dishonoured girl; her wholly doubting and wretched old father, held to her only by paternal obligation; a wise and detached old Friar; and the dishonoured girl's cousin, in a rage of loyal devotion that is familial, sexual, and instinctual. One cannot help asking what the young, witty and independent soldier Benedick is doing in that gallery. He has broken the rules of the game, and entered upon a desertion far more serious than Claudio's ever appeared: he is crossing the boundaries of a world of masculine domination. How serious the desertion is, is indicated by his comic—but only partly comic—exchange with Beatrice, at the centre of their professions of love, that follow immediately on the church scene:

Benedick: Come, bid me do anything for thee.

Beatrice: Kill Claudio.

Benedick: Ha! Not for the wide world.

Beatrice: You kill me to deny it. Farewell.

"Kill Claudio" has become such a famous line that perhaps something of its importance, underlying its comic gesture of an unfeasible rage, has been lost. A pacific, sensible and level-headed bachelor is being forced toward a decision of alarming significance; and he accepts it. Beatrice's taunt "You dare easier be friends with me than fight with mine enemy" colours the whole of the end of the play, and produces the peculiar dramatic and psychological complexity of the sense of the challenge. In it, three characters, once a joint group of young men exchanging cheerful and witty backchat, begin to speak and think in two different worlds. Don Pedro's and Claudio's return to the old game between themselves—perfectly in place an hour earlier—becomes curiously embarrassing by the degree to which it can take no account of the dramatic change in Beatrice and Benedick's status, their siding with what the audience knows to be truth, or rather, a truer game than Don Pedro's and Claudio's:

Don Pedro: But when shall we set the savage bull's horns on the sensible Benedick's head?

Claudio: Yea, and text underneath, there dwells Benedick the married man?

Benedick: Fare you well, boy: you know my mind. I will leave you now to your gossip-like humour; you break jests as braggarts do their blades, which God be thanked, hurt not. My lord, for your many courtesies I thank you. I must discontinue your company. Your brother the bastard is fled from Messina. You have among you killed a sweet and innocent lady. For my Lord Lackbeard there, he and I shall meet; and till then, peace be with him. (Exit).

Don Pedro: He is in earnest . . . What a pretty thing man is when he goes in his doublet and hose and leaves off his wit!

It is not sufficient to say simply that this effect is gained by some "change" in Benedick's—the witty Benedick's—character. It is rather that our own attitude has changed in the course of the play, so that something developing under the agency of the "important" characters has relieved them of their importance. Certain qualities, certain attitudes that have been found, in the earlier comedies, mainly confined to the women's and fools' parts, have here come into their own.
The plays have such artistic continuity that it is almost impossibly difficult to distinguish certain attitudes and feelings, and call this a specifically "feminine" attitude, or that, one belonging to a "fool" or "clown"; and the more mature the play, the more danger of falsifying there is. Perhaps it is merely possible to indicate certain speeches of Beatrice which do cohere into an attitude that utilises a "fool's" uncommitted wit and detached play of mind, together with a clown's grasp of earthy reality, yet committed in such a new way that they are given the effect of a female veracity against a masculine romanticism or formality.

Yes, faith; it is my cousin's duty to make curtsy, and say 'Father, as it please you.' But yet for all that, cousin, let him be a handsome fellow, or else make another curtsy and say, 'Father, as it please me.'

The whole game of romantic passion was never glossed more conclusively than by her foreboding "I can see a church by daylight"; nor the silliness of romantic jealousy than by her sturdy description of Claudio as "civil as an orange, and something of that jealous complexion"; nor the game of formal, courteous and meaningless proposals—(Don Pedro's "Will you have me, lady?") than by her: "No, my lord, unless I might have another for working-days: your Grace is too costly to wear every day." (Certainly, Don Pedro does prove to be a costly guest, since he all but causes the death of his host's daughter.) The beautiful and formal scene that the men have arranged for the uniting of Claudio and Hero—"his Grace hath made the match, and all Grace say amen to it!" begins to be disarranged by Beatrice's detached sense ("Speak, Count, 'tis your cue") and she hastily has to give her "merry heart" the fool's harmless part in the play: "I think it, poor fool, it keeps on the windy side of care." But the rising flight of her impertinence, which provokes Leonato to bustle her off the scene ("Niece, will you look to those things I told you of?") is not unacquainted with "care" Don Pedro's kindly and polite.

out of question, you were born in a merry hour

is met by her

No, sure, my lord, my mother cried; but then there was a star danced, and under that was I born.

However light the reference, one goes back to the lamenting Adriana, out of place in a play of brisk farce; or the surprising seriousness of the reference in Love's Labour's Lost to Katharine's sister-

He made her melancholy, sad and heavy, And so she died . . .

or the equally surprising seriousness of Titania's loyalty:

But she, being mortal, of that boy did die . . . And for her sake I will not part with him. . . .

The liaison of Claudio and Hero draws the "fools" Benedick and Beatrice into the play; and it is Beatrice who first here begins to show in her apparently detached wit, only partially revealed in her sparring with Benedick, the depth that the occasion demands. Marriage is seen here not as a witty dance of "wooing, wedding and repenting," but as the joining of Beatrice's "cousins," and her remarks have greater and more dangerous point. It is not surprising that on her exit Don Pedro sets afoot his second piece of matchmaking, since Beatrice patently needs a master. "We are the only love-gods."

It is only at the crisis of the play, in the church scene, that this dogged, loyal, and irrational femininity that characterizes Beatrice comes into its own. The still hesitating and just Benedick is swept into her degree of
belief simply by her obstinate passion of loyalty:

Is 'a not approved in the height a villain that hath slandered, scorned, dishonoured my kinswoman? O that I were a man! What! bear her in hand until they come to take hands, and then with public accusation, uncovered slander, unmitigated rancour— O God that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the market-place.

Certainly her storms are comic; nevertheless our own sense at the end of the play of the limitations of the romantic background, and critics' unanimous conviction that Benedick and Beatrice "take over the play," is largely summed up by her own "Talk with a man out at a window! A proper saying!" and the comparative shallowness of the romanticism of the main plot very neatly and adequately summed up in her voluble harangue:

Princes and Counties! Surely, a princely testimony, a goodly count, Count Comfect; a sweet gallant, surely! O that I were a man for his sake! or that I had any friend would be a man for my sake! But manhood is melted into curtsies, valour into compliment, and men are only turned into tongue, and trim ones too. He is now as valiant as Hercules that only tells a lie and swears it. I cannot be a man with wishing, therefore I will die a woman with grieving.

This is simultaneously a remarkable picture of a woman in a state of outraged temper, and an excellent piece of dramatic criticism. For Benedick, this is "Enough. I am engaged." The fools of the play have become the heroes.

To use the word "fools" is perhaps incautious: since, for one thing, Benedick's and Beatrice's speeches are characterised by a degree of sophistication and self command; and for another, the play itself has an excellent collection of clowns who do, noticeably, help to bring about the denouement and save the day. But if one is attempting to explain the feeling of maturity and development that Beatrice and Benedick bring into the play, then it becomes apparent that a part of their strength comes from Shakespeare's drawing on resources or feeling expressed, in earlier comedies, as much by witty jesters and innocent clowns, as by the kind of sophisticated commentators that one finds in Berowne and Rosaline. The sense of wisdom that they give is best glossed, perhaps, by Blake's "If the fool would persist in his folly, he would become wise. . . ."

Benedick and Beatrice are a delightful lesson in how the fool can "Serve God, love me, and mend." This they do by "persisting in their folly," in order to "become wise."

Their attitude at the beginning of the play is the comic stance of self-consciousness. Both gain dignity by an intellectual independence—by "sitting in a corner and crying Heigh-ho!" while they watch "everyone going to the world." This intellectual independence is largely a full and mocking knowledge—especially, at first, on Beatrice's side—of the physical realities underlying romantic aspirations. "But, for the stuffing . . . well, we are all mortal." Over and over again, "my uncle's fool" takes the place of Cupid. "Lord! I could not endure a husband with a beard on his face: I had rather lie in the woollen . . . ." Mars as well as Cupid falls: the heroic warrior, who has done good "service" is "a very valiant trencherman; he hath an excellent stomach . . . (and is) a good soldier—to a lady." Yet the very intellectual detachment that gives a jester his dignity is the power to see general truths; and what is true of "mortals" must therefore be true also of Benedick and Beatrice, who are intellectually and dramatically joined to the hero and heroine of the main plot, by being friend and cousin to them, and by understanding—therefore sharing—their folly. Benedick's ubi sunt for bachelors derive their humour from the steadily-increasing knowledge that he is, like Barkis, going out with the tide: "In faith, hath not the world one man but he will wear his cap with suspicion? Shall I never see a bachelor of three score again? . . . Like the old tale, my lord: It is not so, nor 'twas not so, but indeed, God forbid it should be so!" Like Falstaff, Benedick is comic by being both actor and critic, and knows which way "old tales" go; and though he may cast himself as bachelor, "he never could maintain his part but in the force of his will."
Benedick and Beatrice are "fooled" and "framed" by the dramatist even before they are "fooled" by the trick played on them by Don Pedro and the others; their detached intelligence is, by definition, an understanding of the way their "foolish" desires will go. "Shall quips and sentences and the paper bullets of the brain awe a man from the career of his humour? No: the world must be peopled."

Thus, when Benedick and Beatrice do "run mad," they suffer—like Falstaff in love—a loss of dignity the more marked by contrast with their intellectual detachment earlier. Benedick searching for double meanings, and Beatrice nursing a sick heart, a cold in the head, and a bad temper, are as "placed" within the others' play as are the clowns in *Love's Labour's Lost* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, attendant on the critique of their superiors. It is, of course, the church scene, and all that follows, that changes this, and shows their double "folly" coming into its own. Beatrice is loyal to Hero simply by virtue of an acquaintance with common sense physical realities—"Talk with a man out at a window! A proper saying!"—and by a flood of intuitive, irrational, and "foolish" pity and love, that instinctively recognizes the good when it sees it—good in Benedick, or in Hero; and Benedick is drawn to her, here, through very similar feelings. "Lady Beatrice, have you wept all this while?" In the professions of love that follow Benedick's opening, there are touches of great humour; but the scene is a serious one, nevertheless. Both Benedick and Beatrice gain a new and much more complex equilibrium and dignity; both pledge themselves by their "soul" to Hero's cause, and hence to each other. To be intelligent is to be aware "that we are all mortal"; and to be mortal is to be a fool; and therefore intelligent men are most fools; but to be a fool, in a good cause, is to be wise. This is an old paradox that echoes through and through Shakespeare's comedies, and after.

Because Beatrice and Benedick are "too wise to woo peaceably," they continue to bicker comfortably through the rest of the play, as though enjoying the mutual death of their individuality:

Two distincts, division none.

Like Theseus' hounds, the quarrels of all the players grow, finally, into:

Such gallant chiding . . .
So musical a discord . . .
Matched in mouths like bells, each under each.

An unlyrical play grows into a new and interesting harmony, as all the forms of folly in the play find "measure in everything, and so dance out the answer":

Come, come, we are friends. Let's have a dance ere we are married, that we may lighten our own hearts and our wives' heels.

We'll have dancing afterwards.

First, of my word; therefore play, music.

Though the play can be summed up by the image of the dance, it is also a battle, in which certain things are lost. Hero's "death" is an illusion, but other things do seem to die out of the comedies: part of an old romantic ideal, and a sense of easy loyalty between young men. Rosalind's "Men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love . . ." and Antonio's bitter, though mistaken, reflections on friendship, both represent a kind of feeling that can be seen to emerge with some clarity in *Much Ado*. Some more important things take the place of what is lost, all perhaps developing out of the sense of that loss: a wisdom, balance, and generosity of mind and feeling, largely expressed through the women's roles.
This paper has itself probably been unwise, unbalanced and ungenerous in all that it has omitted. I have concentrated only on certain elements in *Much Ado About Nothing* that interest me, and may have distorted them in the process. My intention has not been to present Shakespeare as an earnest—though early—leader of the feminist movement, but only to suggest the development, through the comedies, of certain feelings and attitudes which are a constituent part of the plays as a whole, but which do tend to be most clearly expressed through the women in them. In Messina, Arden, and Illyria the expression of humane principle, of generous and constant feeling, comes principally from the women—whether we choose to see them as symbols merely of an area of the mind possessed by both sexes in common, or whether we see Shakespeare creating a world in which some kind of distinctively female rationale is able to have full play, and to dominate the action. When, in tragedy, the action moves on to the battlements of civilisation, and beyond, the difference of the sexes becomes of minor importance, and the role of the women diminishes; they become little more than functions confined largely to the women in the "mature" comedies; the values that are proved by their success in the comedies come to stand the proof of failure in the tragedies. Something of the tragic heroes' passionate constancy and painful knowledge, and something of the sane and honourable happiness that is felt most sharply in the tragedies by its absence, is first developed in the secure limitations of the "mature" comedies, and is chiefly expressed through the talkative and intelligent women who guide events and guard principles. So *Much Ado About Nothing* can be seen to have a certain aptness of title. The small world that it presents with such gaiety, wit, and pleasurable expertise, is perhaps relatively a "nothing" in itself; but a certain amount of the interest and delight it produces comes from the awareness that much can be held in little, and that in "nothing" can "grow . . . something of great constancy."


John Crick

*[In the following excerpt, Crick offers a general discussion of *Much Ado*, focusing upon the characters, theme, and language of the play. He depicts the play as one concerned primarily about the potential for evil existing in people who have become self-absorbed in a society that reflects and supports that self-absorption.]*

"The fable is absurd," wrote Charles Gildon in 1710, and most of us would agree. Yet there is the effervescent presence of Beatrice and Benedick and the engaging stupidity of Dogberry and Verges to assure us that all is not dross. Coleridge was convinced that this central interest was Shakespeare's own, his motive in writing the play, and the "fable" was merely a means of exhibiting the characters he was interested in. This may have been the attitude of audiences in Shakespeare's time: as early as 1613, the play was referred to as "Benedictie and Betteris." Can we summarize the play in this way: a few good acting parts standing out against the unsatisfactory background of a preposterous Italian romance? I think not.

Most of the play's critics have seized on the apparent absence of any unifying dramatic conception: the play fluctuates uneasily, it is said, between tragedy, romance, and comedy and never establishes a convincing dramatic form for itself. In these circumstances there are too many inconsistencies of plot and character and, in particular, in the presentation of Claudio and Hero: they begin as the hero and heroine of a typical italianate romance and, under the growing dominance of Beatrice and Benedick in the play, become—rather unconvincingly—the perpetrator and victim respectively of a nearcriminal act. Beatrice and Benedick throw the play off its balance.

It is a truism criticism should be concerned with what a work of art is, and not with what it ought to be. In the case of *Much Ado*, however, it is one worth remembering, for preconceptions about form, plot, and character, and the other components of a play, have so often obscured what is unmistakably there, and shows itself in the very first scene of the play: the precise delineation of an aristocratic and metropolitan society. This is done
with a thoroughness and depth which is beyond any requirement of a romantic fable in the tradition of Ariosto and Bandello, and beyond the demands of a plot merely intended to exhibit the characters of Beatrice, Benedick, Dogberry and Verges, in the way that Coleridge suggested.

The opening scene of the play establishes for us the characteristic tone of Messina society. Don John's rebellion has been successfully put down and the victors are returning to Messina with their newly-won honours. It is significant that, in spite of the fact that Don John still exists to cause trouble, there is no serious discussion of the reasons for or consequences of the rebellion. War is regarded as something that might deprive society of some of its leading lights—Leonato asks the messenger "How many gentlemen have you lost in this action?"—and enhance the status of others, The messenger informs us that no gentlemen "of name" have been lost, and Claudio and Benedick have fought valiantly and achieved honour. War is a gentlemanly pursuit, a game of fortune—nothing more.

This first conversation of the play has a studied artificiality which seems to bear out this reading of the situation. The language is sophisticated and over-elaborate, as if it has been cultivated as an end in itself, and not as a vehicle for the discussion of serious matters. Leonato's sententiousness may be that of an old man; yet it fits naturally into the play's elaboration of words:

A victory is twice itself when the achiever brings home full numbers. 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 at weeping!

Even the messenger—a person of humble origin, we presume—has caught the infection and uses euphuistic phraseology:

He hath borne himself beyond the promise of his age, doing, in the figure of a lamb, the feats of a lion: he hath indeed better bettered expectation than you must expect of me to tell you how.

I have already delivered him letters, and there appears much joy in him; even so much that joy could not show itself modest enough without a badge of bitterness.

This initial impression—of ornate language as the normal conversational mode in upper-class Messina society—is confirmed by the rest of the play: there is an abundance of antitheses, alliterations, puns, euphuisms, repetitions and word-patterns. The imagery has a similar artificiality and tends to consist of the prosaic and the conventional, rather than the striking. Prose, rather than verse, is the natural medium for conventional talk and ideas, and it is therefore not surprising that there is far more prose in Much Ado than is normal in a Shakespearean comedy.

In such a society, Beatrice and Benedick are naturally regarded as prize assets. They, too, relish talking for effect—although they do it with far more wit and vigour than the others, whose speeches are usually lifeless and insipid. If Don John's rebellion has not been taken seriously, as we suspect, it is probably because the "merry war" between Beatrice and Benedick is of far more interest to a fashionable society which, as such societies do, regards a war between the sexes as a subject of perennial fascination. Beatrice, as Benedick says, "speaks poniards" and "every word stabs"; and yet no harm is done. No Messina gentleman is likely to be deprived of his life by "paper bullets of the brain." Yet, one of the play's ironies is that it leads us to doubt this: considerable damage is done by the mere power of words. (It is another of the play's ironies that Beatrice's "Kill Claudio"—an unusually straightforward command—is motivated by charitable feelings.) Hero—the main victim—comments on this power: "one doth not know How much an ill word may empoison liking. . . ."
Where Messina conventions are fallible—and Beatrice as a woman, in a predominantly masculine ethos of
courtship, games and war, is particularly qualified to speak here—is in questions of love, marriage, and the
relationship between the sexes. Beneath her raillery, Beatrice shows a realistic and discriminating attitude to
the subjects. She won't accept the choice of others for a husband, ironically remarking, "Yes, faith; it is my
cousin's duty to make curtsy and say, 'Father, as it please you.' But yet for all that, cousin, let him be a
handsome fellow, or else make another curtsy, and say 'Father, as it pleases me'; she rejects romantic notions
of the opposite sex—"Lord, I could not endure a husband with a beard on his face"; and, by implication, she
won't accept a business marriage. (Benedick's attitude to marriage is similarly realistic—"the world must be
peopled"). Hers is a sane perspective on events, an application of generosity and sympathy in a society
dominated by ultimately inhumane standards. Her feminine charity triumphs, as Portia's mercy does in The
Merchant of Venice. Benedick becomes acceptable to her when he symbolically joins his masculine qualities
to her feminine principles by taking up, however reluctantly, her attitude to Claudio, and thus shows himself
to be, in her eyes, of a finer "metal" than the average Messina male. Ironically, the plotting which separated
Claudio and Hero brings them together, their true feelings breaking through their conventional jesters' roles,
and it is Beatrice's clear-sightedness which triumphs over all the pattern of misunderstandings, deceptions,
and self-deceptions which make up the play. (This patterned and stylized aspect of the play is very marked in
the plot, characterization, and language: consider, for example, the balancing of the two scenes in the church;
the characterization in pairs: the artificiality of the masque and the mourning scene; and the rhetorical devices
of most of the language.)

The incapacity of Messina society is also exposed, at another level, by Dogberry and Verges. Dogberry, like
his superiors, adopts the mode of language and behaviour he conceives to be fitting to his position. When it
comes to a real-life drama, he is as patently useless as Claudio. He displays condescension towards Verges
and all the pompousness of authority: "I am a wise fellow, and, which is more, an officer, and, which is more,
a householder. . . ." Claudio, too, has "every thing handsome about him." Dogberry has caught the Messina
infection of pride and self-centredness, that self-centredness which makes Leonato—the perfect host at the
beginning of the play—wish Hero dead because of the way in which she has shamed him. (Isn't there
something more than just a resemblance of name between him and Leontes and Lear?)

Essentially, the play is, I believe, about the power for evil that exists in people who have become
self-regarding by living in a society that is closely-knit and turned in on itself. The corruption is usually that
of town and city life. (Significantly, Shakespeare's story does not fluctuate between town and country as
Bandello's does.) A moral blindness is generated that, if not evil itself, is capable of evil consequences. The
agency of evil in this play is not outside, but within. The ostensible villain of the piece—Don John—is a mere
cardboard figure who, excluded from a world of flatteries and courtesies, has resorted to "plain-dealing"
villainy. He may be an early sketch for Iago and Edmund but he lacks their intelligence and flair, and
Shakespeare has wisely kept him within the narrow bounds appropriate for comedy. The real origin of the
crime is not jealousy, sexual or otherwise, but blind, consuming egotism which expresses itself in a studied
artificiality, and at times flippancy, of both language and attitude. Later, Shakespeare was to take the same
theme and mould it into tragedy. In the world of Othello, Lear, and Gloucester, the consequences of pride and
self-centredness are catastrophic. The ultimate is perhaps King Lear—another "much ado about
nothing"—where Lear, like Claudio, could say "Yet sinned I not but in mistaking."


Kenneth Muir

[In the following excerpt, Muir offers a general historical and literary assessment of Much Ado.]

The date of Much Ado About Nothing can be fixed with unusual accuracy. It was performed while Kemp (who
played Dogberry) was still a member of Shakespeare's company, but too late for Francis Meres to know of its
existence when he listed Shakespeare's plays in *Palladis Tamia*. So 1598 was the date of its first performance; and it was printed, probably from Shakespeare's manuscript, two years later.

It is hardly anyone's favourite comedy and it is not so frequently performed as *As You Like It* or *Twelfth Night*, doubtless because the main plot is so much less interesting than the underplot. The Hero-Claudio plot, written mainly in verse, is combined with the Beatrice-Benedick plot, written mainly in prose. In our degenerate days it is natural for audiences to prefer prose to verse, but it is possible that Shakespeare, towards the end of the sixteenth century, went through a phase when he thought that the increasing subtlety of his actors demanded a style nearer to colloquial speech—some of Shylock's best speeches, all of Falstaff's, most of Beatrice, Benedick and Rosalind are in prose.

The plots are linked together in various ways. The bringing together of Beatrice and Benedick is a means of passing the time between the day of Hero's betrothal and her marriage; Benedick is chosen by Beatrice to avenge her cousin's honour; and Benedick is a close friend of Claudio's, so that Beatrice's demand poses a favourite problem—posed earlier in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*—of Love versus Friendship.

The play is also unified by imagery. As in *Macbeth*, the dominating image is one of clothes, and the most frequent figure of speech is antithesis. Clothes are used as a symbol of the difference between appearance and reality, and hence of hypocrisy. In the first scene, for example, Beatrice says that Benedick "wears his faith but as the fashion of his hat"; Benedick calls courtesy a turncoat; in the second act Benedick says that Beatrice is the infernal Ate in good apparel; and Beatrice asks if Pedro has a brother since "Your Grace is too costly to wear every day." Benedick contrasts the amorous Claudio with the man as he used to be:

> I have known when he would have walk'd ten mile afoot to see a good armour, and now will he lie ten nights awake carving the fashion of a new doublet. (II.iii.18ff.)

Pedro has a speech in Act III on Benedick's fancy for strange disguises. Borachio has a long dialogue with Conrade, apparently irrelevant to the matter in hand, on the subject of fashion:

*Borachio*: Thou knowest that the fashion of a doublet, or a hat, or a cloak is nothing to a man.

*Conrade*: Yes, it is apparel.

*Borachio*: I mean the fashion.

*Conrade*: Yes, the fashion is the fashion.

*Borachio*: Tush, I may as well say the fool's the fool. But seest thou not what a deformed thief this fashion is ... Seest thou not, I say, what a deformed thief this fashion is, how giddily 'a turns about all the hot bloods between fourteen and five and thirty, sometimes fashioning them like Pharaoh's soldiers in the reechy painting, sometime like god Bel's priests in the old church window, sometime like the shaven Hercules in the smirched worm-eaten tapestry, where his codpiece seems as massy as his club?

*Conrade*: All this I see; and I see that the fashion wears out more apparel than the man. But art not thou thyself giddy with the fashion too, that thou hast shifted out of thy tale into telling me of the fashion?

*Borachio*: Not so neither. (III.iii.108ff.)
The climax of the many references to appearance and reality is the scene in church, when Claudio repudiates his bride. Hero is compared to a rotten orange, "but the sign and semblance of her honour," blushing like a maid, although she is immodest:

O, what authority and show of truth
Can cunning sin cover itself withal!
Comes not that blood as modest evidence
To witness simple virtue? Would you not swear,
All you that see her, that she were a maid
By these exterior shows? But she is none.
Out on thee! Seeming! I will write against it:
You seem to me as Dian in her orb,
As chaste as is the bud ere it be blown;
But you are more intemperate in your blood
Than Venus, or those pamp'red animals
That rage in savage sensuality.
(IV.i.34-9, 55-60)

In a later speech Claudio drops into the favourite figure of antithesis, a figure most apt for the contrast between appearance and reality:

O Hero, what a Hero hadst thou been,
If half thy outward graces had been placed
About thy thoughts and counsels of thy heart!
But fare thee well, most foul, most fair!
Farewell, Thou pure impiety and impious purity!
(IV.i.99-103)

The two plots are linked together in another way. It has often been observed that the over-all theme of the play (as Masefield put it) is "the power of report, of the thing overhead, to alter human destiny." It is true that the complications of the play are all due to overhearing, although it could be argued that Claudio might, even without the detective work by the watch, have learnt his mistake, and Beatrice and Benedick might have allowed their unconscious love for each other to rise into consciousness. But there are at least seven examples of rumour in the course of the play:

1. In the second scene Antonio tells Leonato:

   The Prince and Count Claudio, walking in a thick-pleached orchard, were thus much
   overhead by a man of mine: the Prince discovered to Claudio that he loved my niece your daughter, and meant to acknowledge it this night in a dance.

   In this case, the servant had misheard, for Pedro had offered to pretend to be Claudio, to woo Hero for him.

2. In the next scene Borachio has overheard, correctly, that Claudio hoped to marry Hero, and that Pedro was going to woo for him.

3. In the scene of the dance there are a whole series of misunderstandings, partly owing to the fact that the characters are masked:

   (a) Hero, instructed by her father, apparently thinks that Pedro is wooing for himself, but it is not explained what her reactions are when he pretends to be Claudio, as this takes place off stage.
(b) Don John, for reasons which are never explained, thinks that Pedro woos for himself.

(c) Benedick thinks that Beatrice does not recognize him, and she calls him the Prince's Fool.

(d) Borachio pretends that Claudio is Benedick, and tells him that Pedro is wooing Hero for himself; and this, in spite of their previous arrangement, is forthwith believed by Claudio.

(e) Benedick, who is not aware of the arrangement between Pedro and Claudio, naturally believes that Pedro has wooed for himself.

The purpose of all these confusions—and their improbability is not so apparent in performance, is to soften up the audience, so that they are willing to accept as plausible Don John's deception of Pedro and Claudio.

4. In the third scene of Act II, Benedick overhears that Beatrice is dying of love for him, and he promptly decides that her love must be requited.

5. In the first scene of Act III, Beatrice hidden by the woodbine coverture, overhears that Benedick is in love with her. She forthwith decides to return his love:

   What fire is in mine ears? Can this be true?
   Stand I condemn'd for pride and scorn so much?
   Contempt, farewell! and maiden pride adieu!
   No glory lives behind the back of such.
   And Benedick, love on; I will require thee,
   Taming my wild heart to thy loving hand;
   If thou dost love, my kindness shall incite thee
   To bind our loves up in a holy band;
   For others say thou dost deserve, and I
   Believe it better than reportingly.
   (III. i. 107-16)

She uses, as Petruchio does, the image of the tamed hawk.

6. Borachio is overheard making love to Margaret, whom the watchers think is Hero; and Borachio, telling the tale of his deception of Pedro and Claudio to Conrade, is overheard by the Watch. This leads to his arrest, and the acquittal of Hero.

7. On the Friar's advice, a report is circulated that Hero is dead, so as to cause Claudio to feel remorse. This remorse becomes overwhelming when it is proved that she was falsely accused. But it is typical of Claudio's self-centredness that when he hears that Hero was innocent he is more concerned about his own feelings than about her supposed death. And when he agrees to marry her cousin he has the significant lines:

   I do embrace your offer; and dispose
   For henceforth of poor Claudio.

The plots, then, are linked together structurally, imagistically and thematically, so that complaints about lack of unity have little justification. There remains the feeling of many readers that the two plots don't really harmonize since the main plot is largely conventional—depending on the convention employed by Shakespeare in *Othello* and *Cymbeline* that the calumniator of female chastity is *always* believed, though in real life he would not be—and the sub-plot is much more realistic. Moreover, Hero is a nonentity and Claudio is a cad; whereas Beatrice and Benedick (though absurd) are attractive figures to whom an audience warms.
There are several possible answers to these complaints. The first answer is one that has to be made over and over again to Shakespeare's armchair critics: that his plays were meant to be acted, not read, and that the test we should apply should be a theatrical one—Does it work in the theatre? The convention of the calumniator believed always does seem to work. We may think Claudio is a credulous fool, but Pedro's equal credulity prevents us from having too harsh an opinion of him.

Nor is it unusual in Shakespeare's plays for him to present his characters on different levels of reality. It has often been noticed that Katherine and the scenes in which she appears are much more vital than those relating to the wooing of Binaca. Just as in painting, an artist will relegate some figures to the background, and just as a photographer will keep his central theme in sharp focus, while the rest of his composition may be comparatively blurred, so the dramatist can vary his treatment of characters in the same play.

The characters in this play range from the purely conventional to the purely human. Don John (for example) announces himself as a villain, a true example of motiveless malignity, who does evil for the sake of evil. Although we could (I suppose) ascribe his villainy to the results of his bastardy, it is not really possible to regard him as anything but a conventional stage villain. Or consider Margaret. At one point in the play she is apparently the mistress of the debauched Borachio, who for some unexplained reason is willing to pretend she is Hero, and call Borachio Claudio (unless this is a textual error). At another point in the play, she is a witty lady-in-waiting, on almost equal terms with Beatrice and Hero. She cannot be present in the church scene—if she had been she would have exposed Borachio's plot—though it is quite unnatural that she should not be present. When Leonato says that Margaret was hired to the deed by Don John, Borachio protests that she is completely innocent:

No, by my soul, she was not;
Nor knew not what she did when she spoke to me,
But always hath been just and virtuous
In anything that I do know by her.
(V.i.286-9)

In the next scene, she engages in a witty exchange with Benedick; and at the end Leonato says (in relation to the slander of Hero)

But Margaret was in some fault for this,
Although against her will, as it appears.

Leo Kirschbaum, in Character and Characterisation in Shakespeare, argues that psychologically the two Margarets are completely incompatible. She is a flat character; but in the course of performance we do not notice the discrepancies, and Shakespeare was not troubled by the difficulties his readers might encounter.

Hero and Claudio are more realistically presented, but they are still conventional figures, and this prevents us from being too involved emotionally at Hero's distresses. Indeed, the audience is never in doubt that things will come right in the end. The very title of the play Much Ado About Nothing tells them as much. The chief song has as its refrain,

Converting all your sounds of woe
Into hey nonny-nonny.

Borachio, moreover, has been arrested by the watch before the church scene; and it is only the loquaciousness of Dogberry which prevents the slander from being exposed before the marriage scene. So the audience knows that Hero's name will eventually be cleared.
Dogberry is, indeed, a masterly character, one which is beautifully functional, but which is much more than functional. He has to be pompous, loquacious, fond of long words, very much on his dignity, semi-literate, and a bungler; otherwise he would get at the truth much sooner, and Leonato would not hasten to get rid of him on the morning of the marriage. On the other hand, he has to have some glimmerings of intelligence, or he would not have eventually arrived at the truth. On this functional basis, Shakespeare creates a wonderful portrait of a Jack-in-office, much less competent than Verges, whom he bullies and despises. He is the true ancestor of Mrs. Malaprop, but much more plausible than her, who having been brought up as a lady would not be likely to make such absurd mistakes. All Dogberry's mistakes, taken individually, are the sort of mistakes one still hears from local politicians in England. Dogberry uses desartless for deserving, senseless for sensible, decerns for concerns, odorous for odious, aspicious for suspicious, comprehended for apprehended. Shakespeare may have known such a man; but he had probably read a book by his acquaintance William Lambard, on the duties of constables, so that one gets a curious mixture of Elizabethan practice with the wildest fantasy. Funny as the Dogberry scenes are, they are best played without too much farcical business; for as with all the best comic characters, there is an element of pathos about Dogberry, as when he is called an ass by one of his prisoners:

Dost thou not suspect my place? Dost thou not suspect my years? O that he were here to write me down an ass! But, masters, remember that I am an ass; though it not be written down, yet forget not that I am an ass. No, thou villain, thou art full of piety, as shall be proved upon thee by good witness. I am a wise fellow; and, which is more, an officer; and, which is more, a householder; and, which is more, as pretty a piece of flesh as any is in Messina; and one that knows the law, go to; and a rich fellow enough, go to; and a fellow that hath had losses; and one that hath two gowns, and everything handsome about him. Bring him away. O that I had been writ down an ass! (IV.ii.69ff.)

For a modern audience, the rejection of Hero in church makes it difficult to retain any sympathy for Claudio. Prouty seeks to defend him by suggesting that it was merely a marriage of convenience. Since Hero was not a virgin, her father had broken a contract, and a public exposure was therefore permissible. This is all very well. But there is one line only in Claudio's part to suggest that he was thinking of Hero's dowry. His first question to Pedro, when he reveals that he is thinking of the marriage is "Hath Leonato any son, my lord?" Otherwise Claudio is presented as an abnormally shy, sentimental lover.

Shakespeare had to have a public repudiation. There were theatrical necessities for it—one has only to think what the play would be like without this climactic scene. There were also perfectly good dramatic reasons for a public repudiation. Claudio's action has to seem so atrocious that Benedick—his bosom friend—is willing to challenge him to a duel. The repudiation, and the following scene between Beatrice and Benedick, are a means of showing the innate good sense of Beatrice, her warm-heartedness and intuitive understanding; and they are a means of precipitating the confession of love.

The Mueschkes make the good point that the theme of the play is Honour: "Honour is the warp of the three hoaxes [perpetrated in the course of the play], hearsay is the weft, and illusion spins the web." They go on to suggest that

The repudiation scene, examined with the courtly code or honour in mind, is much more than a coup de theatre. In terms of Renaissance mores, it is a scene of poignant disillusionment and despair. In the conflict between appearance and reality, between emotion and reason, tension increases when lover turns inquisitor and father turns executioner. Here, in a conflict between good and evil, truth clashes with error in a charged atmosphere of contradictory moods and shifting relationships while the outraged moral sense oscillates between absolute praise and absolute blame. Here, when malice triumphs, shame so submerges compassion and slander, mirage, and perjury are accepted as ocular and auditory proof. Incensed by defiled
honour, men argue in absolutes shorn from any rational mean, and under the aegis of the courtly code act and react with prescribed cruelty.

In other words, Shakespeare's aim is to criticize the accepted code of honour; and (it may be argued) when Beatrice demands that Benedick should challenge Claudio she also is enslaved by the conventional code. For if Benedick kills Claudio, it will prove only that he is a more accomplished swordsman; and if Claudio kills Benedick it will do nothing to prove the guilt of Hero. It is the dim-witted watch, and the pompous self-important Dogberry who restore Hero's reputation. As St. Paul says: "God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are."

The behaviour of Claudio—and, indeed, of Pedro—in the scene of the challenge exhibits once again the limitations of the code. Their treatment of Leonato is bad enough, but their light-hearted ragging of Benedick shows a callousness to the memory of Hero, and cannot quite be expiated by the ritual mourning which follows the revelation of her innocence.

Beatrice and Benedick are obviously the two characters who are most vital and real—the ones who are the least conventional. Least conventional in a double sense: in the way they are drawn, and in their reacting against the romantic conventions of the society in which they live. They alone, of the characters in the play, are three-dimensional.

Superficially, it might seem that Beatrice and Benedick who detest each other are tricked into loving each other by overhearing that each is dying for love of the other. But it is fairly obvious that they are in love with each other from the start: that is the reason why they are continually attacking each other. Beatrice and Benedick have several reasons for not admitting to their love. Both (it is clear) are unwilling to make themselves ridiculous, and they are too intelligent and unsentimental to indulge in the gestures of conventional romantic love. It is possible (as Prouty suggests) that they are equally in revolt against marriages of convenience. Beatrice, moreover, thinks of Benedick as a philanderer. When Pedro says "you have lost the heart of Signior Benedick," Beatrice replies:

> Indeed, my lord, he lent it me awhile; and I gave him use for it, a double heart for his single one; marry, once before he won it of me with false dice, therefore your Grace may well say I have lost it.

The speech is rather obscure; but it seems to imply that Benedick at one time had made love to Beatrice, and she felt his intentions were not serious. Both are proud and apparently self-sufficient. Benedick boasts, not very seriously, of the way women fall in love with him; but he declares to others that he will die a bachelor, and to himself:

> One woman is fair, yet I am well, another is wise, yet I am well, another virtuous, yet I am well; but till all graces be in one woman, one woman shall not come in my grace.
> (II.iii.31ff.)

Beatrice similarly says:

> He that hath a beard is more than a youth, and he that hath no beard is less than a man; and he that is more than a youth is not for me, and he that is less than a man I am not for him. Therefore I will even take sixpence in earnest of the berrord, and lead his apes into hell.

Leonato: Well, then go you into hell?
Beatrice: No; but to the gate, and there will the devil meet me, like an old cuckold, with horns on his head, and say "Get you to heaven Beatrice, get you to heaven; here's no place for you maids." So deliver I up my apes and away to Saint Peter for the heavens; he shows me where the bachelors sit, and there live we as merry as the day is long.

(II.i.31-41)

It was speeches like this that so shocked Gerard Manley Hopkins that he called Beatrice vain and unchaste. Beatrice does not talk like a mid-Victorian lady, but there is not the faintest suggestion in the play that she is unchaste, and few will agree with Hopkins's epithet "vile." Nor, I think, is Beatrice vain; but she is proud. It has been suggested that Hero's lines describing her cousin—

Nature never framed a woman's heart
Of prouder stuff than that of Beatrice.
Disdain and scorn ride sparkling in her eyes,
Misprising what they look on; and her wit
Values itself so highly that to her
All matter else seems weak. She cannot love,
Nor take no shape nor project of affection,
She is so self-endeared—

(III.i.49-56)

are based on a character representing pride in *The Faerie Queene*. But we must remember that Hero is deliberately exaggerating, as she knows that Beatrice is overhearing her. The lines cannot be taken as an accurate portrait. Yet both Beatrice and Benedick are absurd in their self-sufficiency. *Much Ado About Nothing* may be regarded as a subtler version of *The Taming of the Shrew*, transposed from farce to high comedy—and, of course, Benedick needs to be tamed as well as Beatrice. As we have seen, Kathenna's violence is at least partly due to the fact that she hates equally the artificialities of romantic love and the humiliations of marriages of convenience, in which she is bound to suspect that the suitor is after her fortune—as indeed Petruchio admits from the start. But the struggle between the Shrew and her tamer is carried out in terms of farce. In *Much Ado*, Beatrice, instead of being physically violent, is aggressive with her tongue, and she chooses as her victim the man she really loves. She is cured and tamed, not by physical violence and semi-starvation, but by hearing the truth about herself, and about Benedick. The irony is that Hero and the others who talk about Benedick's love for her think they are lying, although they are telling the truth; and Pedro and Claudio think they are lying when they speak of Beatrice's love for Benedick.

By the end of the play we realize that all the characters in the play, except the Friar, have been laughed at: the watch for their stupidity, Dogberry for his self-important illiteracy, Leonato for being more concerned with his own honour than with his daughter's life, Claudio and Pedro for their credulity in being deceived by an obvious villain, for the cruelty of their code of honour, and for their failure to recognize that Beatrice and Benedick are in love; Beatrice and Benedick for their pride and self-sufficiency. It is not only Dogberry who should ask to be writ down as an ass.

Bernard Shaw has pointed out how much the witty repartee depends on style. The passage occurs in a review of a performance of the play in 1898:

Shakespear shews himself in it (sc. *Much Ado*) a commonplace librettist working on a stolen plot, but a great musician. No matter how poor, coarse, cheap, and obvious the thought may be, the mood is charming, and the music of the words expresses the mood. Paraphrase the encounters of Benedick and Beatrice in the style of a bluebook, carefully preserving every idea they present, and it will become apparent to the most infatuated Shakespearian that they contain at best nothing out of the common in thought or wit, and at worst a good deal of
...vulgar naughtiness...Not until the Shakespearean music is added by replacing the paraphrase with the original lines does the enchantment begin. Then you are in another world at once. When a flower-girl tells a coster to hold his jaw, for nobody is listening to him, and he retorts, 'Oh, you're there, are you, you beauty?' they reproduce the wit of Beatrice and Benedick exactly. But put it this way. 'I wonder that you will still be talking, Signor Benedick: nobody marks you.' 'What! my dear Lady Disdain, are you yet living?' You are miles away from costerland at once. When I tell you that Benedick and the coster are equally poor in thought, Beatrice and the flower-girl equally vulgar in repartee, you reply that I might as well tell you that a nightingale's love is no higher than a cat's. Which is exactly what I do tell you, though the nightingale is the better musician.

Shaw, of course, exaggerates, because he was campaigning for Ibsen. It was only in his later years, after all his plays had been written, that he confessed that his own masters were Verdi, Mozart and Shakespeare; and by a curious irony his own plays are being performed now, not for their ideas, but for their style.

In all love comedies the union of the hero and heroine must be delayed by obstacle of one kind or another. 'The course of true love never did run smooth.' The obstacles can be external, as for example the opposition of parents who have other plans for their children. Or they may be psychological, the unwillingness of one or other to marry. In Congreve's masterpiece, *The Way of the World*, Millamant is afraid that (as so often in her society) marriage will destroy his love for her. And when she is finally cornered, she tells her lover:

> I shall expect you shall solicit me, as though I were wavering at the gate of a monastery, with one foot over the threshold...I should think I was poor if I were deprived of the agreeable fatigues of solicitation.

Then she lays down an elaborate list of conditions for her surrender, including the provisos that she shall not be called such names as 'wife, joy, jewel, spouse, sweetheart, and the rest of that nauseous cant in which men and their wives are so fulsomely familiar...Let us be very strange and well bred, as strange as if we had been married a great while, and as well-bred as if we were not married at all.' Millamant, like Beatrice, uses her wit as a shield, because she is in fact very vulnerable and sensitive. In a great modern comedy, Shaw's Man and Superman, it is the woman who chases the man, chases him halfway across Europe in a motorcar; in *Much Ado* both the hero and the heroine apparently wish to remain single, and the marriage at the end is a satisfactory one because it fulfills their unconscious wishes. A modern dramatist has written a sequel to *Much Ado* in which Beatrice and Benedick, after their marriage, continue to fight each other as they had done before. But the continuation of the merry war (as Shakespeare calls it) does not mean that their marriage would not be a success. They will enjoy the wise-cracks, and us them as a private method of courtship, long after Claudio and Hero have exhausted the pleasures of romantic hyperbole. (Indeed, if one were to treat the matter realistically—indeed it would be perverse to do so—one could imagine Hero reminding Claudio too often of the way he repudiated her in church.)...

The Climactic scene in the play is the one in which Benedick and Beatrice first confess their love for each other. Hero has been repudiated in church by the man she was to marry. Hero faints. In this situation the behaviour of Beatrice and Benedick is contrasted with that of the other characters. Whereas Leonato behaves like an hysterical old fool, first believing that Hero is guilty and wishing that she would die, and later uttering threats against the Prince and Claudio, Beatrice and Benedick are concerned for Hero. Beatrice knows instinctively that she is innocent, and Benedick asks some of the questions which the audience are waiting to be asked. (No one, however, seems to realise that Don John's story of a thousand secret encounters can scarcely be true, since Beatrice and Hero, until this last night, have shared a bed.) The Friar puts forward his plan of pretending that Hero has died, and suggest that the wedding-day is but postponed. Benedick naturally suspects that Don John is at the bottom of the plot to defame Hero, since Claudio and Pedro are honourable men.
Everyone leaves the church, except Benedick and Beatrice, who is still weeping for her cousin.

Since they learned that they were loved by the other, Beatrice and Benedick have not met in private, and the audience have been waiting for their meeting for about half an hour of playing-time. In the scene which follows, Benedick is forced to choose between love and friendship. After he has promised to do anything in the world for Beatrice, and she asks him to kill Claudio, he first exclaims 'Not for the wide world.' When John Gielgud and Peggy Ashcroft appeared on Broadway, one of the critics regarded the production as a failure—though it was the best I have ever seen—because the audience laughed at this point. The critic thought the audience laughed because it was obvious that Gielgud's Benedick would not hurt a fly, let alone his friend. But although the scene as a whole is a poignant and dramatic one, there are several lines which are intended to be funny, and this is surely one of them. It is right that the audience should laugh when Benedick offers to do anything that Beatrice wants and refuses the very first thing she asks.

Appearance Vs. Reality

The theme of appearance versus reality has been deemed central to the structure and tone of *Much Ado*. Reflecting on the numerous instances of deception in *Much Ado*, Barbara K. Lewalski has observed, "mistake, pretense, and misapprehension are of the very substance of life in Messina." Reflecting on the numerous instances of deception in *Much Ado*, John Dover Wilson has asserted, "Eavesdropping and misinterpretation, disguise and deceit—sometimes for evil ends, but generally in fun and with a comic upshot—such are the designs in the dramatic pattern of *Much Ado.*" While critics have often noted that the theme of appearance versus reality is articulated in most of Shakespeare's plays either, by circumstances or by deliberate acts of deception by the characters, Elliot Krieger has maintained, "*Much Ado about Nothing* fits neither pattern, for the series of deceptions that compose the plot, although created by the characters, are lived through *en route* to other deceptions, and are not overcome; false perception characterizes rather than disrupts the norm of the society depicted in the play." All of the main characters deceive or are deceived by others at some point during the play, and critics agree that the successful resolution of the play, to a great extent, concerns the stripping away of illusions that otherwise distort characters' knowledge of themselves and reality. Michael Taylor has addressed the theme of the out-of-balance self-image in *Much Ado*, a work in which the individual who insists upon self-autonomy—Don John—is defeated by the allied "forces of social stability," represented by Dogberry, Verges, the Watch, Hero, and her friends.

In essays on *Much Ado*, the term "love's truth," or "love's faith," refers to the ability of a lover's imagination to transform the surface appearance of a loved one's words or character to recognize and embrace the true inner being. Of the scholars who have written about love's truth in the play, John Russell Brown has written one of the key short studies. Brown and other scholars—notably Charles Cowden Clarke, Harold C. Goddard, Walter N. King, Janice Hays, and Arthur Kirsch—have written extensively about the common device Shakespeare uses for presenting a lover's imagination, the "play-within-a-play"; in *Much Ado* this device is used several times. Several notable deceptions are carried off in these plays-within-a-play, including the false conversations by Claudio, Leonato, and Don Pedro which lead Benedick to believe Beatrice is in love with him; and the meant-to-be-overheard conversation between Hero and Ursula which leads Beatrice to believe Benedick loves her. In both of these cases, there is "much ado" in straightening out the tangled misperceptions each lover holds for the other; but, as Brown demonstrates in the excerpted essay below, "to those who are engaged in the quest for love's truth, the longest course is often the only one which seems possible to them. It will ever be 'Much Ado.'"

John Russell Brown

[In the following excerpt of his commentary on "love's truth," originally published in 1957, Brown argues that one major idea—the ability of a "lover's imagination" to "amend" mere appearances and "recognize inward truth and beauty"—informs and controls the separate plots, characterizations, and relationships of *Much Ado*. Significantly, in light of this central theme, Brown reconsiders Claudio as not a weak character, but one who]
"is interesting—and actable—in his own right." He adds that "unless we 'imagine no worse' of Claudio than he is represented as thinking of himself. . . Much Ado will never be for us the lively and human comedy which Shakespeare intended."

Shakespeare's ideas about love's truth—the imaginative acting of a lover and the need for our imaginative response to it, the compulsion, individuality, and complexity of a lover's truthful realization of beauty, and the distinctions between inward and outward beauty, appearance and reality, and fancy and true affection—are all represented in Much Ado about Nothing; they inform its structure, its contrasts, relationships, and final resolution; they control many of the details of its action, characterization, humour, and dialogue. Indeed, in fashioning these elements into a lively, dramatic whole, Shakespeare achieved his most concerted and considered judgement upon love's truth.

His device for presenting a lover's imagination, the play-within-the-play, is used repeatedly in Much Ado; almost every development of the action involves the acting of a part and an audience's reaction to it. The relationship of Benedick and Beatrice (the outstanding characters by whose names the play was sometimes known) is radically altered by two such play-scenes. First Pedro, Leonato, and Claudio simulate a concern for Beatrice whom they represent as pining for love of Benedick, and then Hero and Ursula "play their parts" (III. ii. 79), simulating a like concern for Benedick and his "cover'd fire" (III. i. 77) of love for Beatrice. These two performances are far from convincing to our eyes—at one point Leonato seems to "dry" in his performance—but nevertheless they convince their intended audiences. At the close of the first, Benedick seriously announces "This can be no trick," and brings our laughter on himself (II. iii. 228-9); we have seen Claudio's amused relish in his own performance, and yet to Benedick "the conference was sadly borne" (II. iii. 229). Beatrice, likewise, feels a "fire" in her ears, and believes the fiction "better than reportingly" (III. i. 107-16). The "shadows" have been accepted as "truth" because they have had audiences whose imaginations were ready to "amend" them.

This response is surprising to the characters concerned and perhaps to their audience, for hitherto Shakespeare has presented Benedick and Beatrice as gay, light-hearted critics of every illusion. Benedick delights in being an "obstinate heretic in the despite of beauty" (I. i. 236-7) and when Claudio affirms that Hero is the "sweetest lady," he coolly replies:

I can see yet without spectacles and I see no such matter. (I. i. 191-2)

Beatrice likewise takes pleasure in distinguishing good parts from ill in Benedick, Don John, the prospect of Hero's marriage, and in marriage itself; and when she is complimented for apprehending "passing shrewdly" she thanks her own wit:

I have a good eye, uncle; I can see a church by daylight. (II. i. 85-6)

Both are convinced of the folly of love on proof of their own observation; for Beatrice men are clearly made of earth and it is therefore unreasonable to "make an account" of oneself to a "clod of wayward marl" (II. i. 62-6), and for Benedick man is clearly a fool when he "dedicates his behaviours to love" (II. iii. 7-12).

But there are some signs which might prepare us for the double volte-face. Although Beatrice professes to scorn Benedick, he is the first she inquires after when news comes of the soldiers' return, and in the masked dance they are drawn together, recognizing each other behind visors. For his part, Benedick is strangely insistent about the outward beauty of Beatrice; if she were not 'possessed with a fury' she would excel Hero as the "first of May doth the last of December" (I. i. 193-5), and again, using clothes as a symbol for mere appearances, she is the "infernal Ate in good apparel" (II. i. 263-4). To say truth, these wise ones—in spite of sharp eyes and shrewd tongues, in spite of challenging Cupid and scorning matrimony—these wise ones have failed to see or understand their own inward qualities. To see everything except the force of a lover's
imagination, to understand everything except the reason why women will make account of themselves and men will become fools, is to be blind in the affairs of love; without this insight, a good eye, even if its owner distinguishes outward from inward beauty, can only see love as the "silliest stuff."

After the two play-scenes, Shakespeare causes the seemingly irrational power of their imaginations to be manifested beyond all doubt. The eyes, understanding, and tongue of the "sensible" Benedick are all affected; he no longer thinks that Beatrice is possessed of a fury but sees "marks of love" in her manner and "double meanings" in her curtest message (II. iii. 254-71). When he is taunted by those to whom he had previously boasted of his wisdom, he finds that his tongue dare not speak that which his "heart thinks" (III. ii. 14 and 73-5); his old role will not answer the truth of his newly awaked imagination. Beatrice also feels that she is out of all good "tune," but the mere name of Benedick can cause her to disclose, unintentionally, her heart's concern (III. iv. 43 and 77-8). At the beginning of the play we may have laughed with Benedick and Beatrice at their own witticisms and the absurdities of other people; now we laugh at Benedick and Beatrice themselves, at the same time as we feel for them; we laugh at their over-confidence and subsequent surprise and discomfiture.

The pattern of the play as a whole becomes clearer when these two lovers are compared with Claudio and Hero. Whereas Benedick thinks he sees and understands everything, Claudio is afraid to trust his judgement and must, to his own embarrassment, ask others for confirmation. Conditions are against certainty; he had noticed Hero on his way to the wars but it is only when he sees her for a brief moment on his return that he feels "soft and delicate desires," all prompting him "how fair young Hero is" (I. i. 299-307). His "liking" is sudden and seems to be "engender'd" solely "in the eyes," to be "fancy" and not the affection of "true" love. Because of the attraction of Hero's outward beauty he can say "That I love her, I feel," but since he can only guess at her inward beauty he is unable to add "That she is worthy, I know" (I. i. 230-1). Hero is to be a "war bride"; Claudio must trust his eyes and sudden intuition.

His lack of certainty is not only contrasted with Benedick's confidence but also with Don Pedro's; although he scarcely knows that Hero is Leonato's daughter, this prince forcefully affirms her worth and readily—perhaps too readily, for he is not asked to do so much—offers to assume Claudio's part in "some disguise" and woo her in his name. Immediately after this proposal, Claudio's uncertainty is still further contrasted with Antonio's ready certainty; this old man quickly concludes, from events that merely "show well outward" (I. ii. 8), that Pedro intends to woo on his own account.

Pedro's wooing of Hero in Claudio's name is another of the "plays" within this play, and those who overhear it react in significantly varied ways. Benedick is convinced that Pedro woos for himself—he has not yet felt the force of a lover's imagination and could not be expected to distinguish true from false fire. And on the malicious suggestion of Don John and his followers, Claudio comes to think so too. If he had relied on his own eyesight he might have distinguished Pedro's assumed manner from "love's truth," but his uncertainty leads him to accept another's interpretation and to give way to his fears:

'Tis certain so; the prince woos for himself. . . .
Therefore all hearts in love use their own tongues;
Let every eye negotiate for itself
And trust no agent; for beauty is a witch
Against whose charms faith melteth into blood . . .
(II. i. 181ff.)

By means of this play-scene Shakespeare has ensured that, when Pedro drops his disguise and the matter is cleared up, we know that Claudio realizes the deceitfulness of appearances and yet dares to marry Hero on the evidence of his eyes alone.
At this stage we know as little about Hero as Claudio does, but at their betrothal it seems as if her modesty matches his. Unlike Benedick, Claudio will not readily trust "mere words," and so when Beatrice urges him to speak his happiness, he excuses himself with:

Silence is the perfectest herald of joy: I were but little happy, if I could say how much (II. i. 316-18).

Hero, likewise, needs to be prompted by Beatrice, and then speaks in private to Claudio alone.

The contrast between the two pairs of lovers is now clear: Benedick and Beatrice think that they know everything and consequently misjudge in the affairs of love; Claudio and Hero believe they know very little and consequently they are hesitant. Claudio's fears have caused him to misjudge once, but nevertheless he is prepared to venture.

Immediately this main contrast has been established, the action of the comedy quickens and yet another play-within-the-play is prepared. In the wars which had brought the young men to Messina Don Pedro had defeated his bastard brother, Don John, and now one of John's followers, Borachio, conceives a plan to dishonour the victor. The plan is approved and Borachio undertakes to persuade Margaret, Hero's waiting-gentlewoman, to impersonate her mistress and talk with him at the bride's chamber window—there shall appear such seeming truth of Hero's disloyalty that jealousy shall be called assurance and all the preparation overthrown. (II. ii. 49-51)

We do not see this played upon the stage but we know that Claudio must witness Hero's "chamber-window entered, even the night before her wedding-day" (III. ii. 116-17). He will not know that it is Margaret's for he is only sure of the outward beauty of Hero and this Margaret may simulate by her clothes. Nor can he judge the performance by the "truth" of its action, for the situation it portrays presupposes that Hero does not know a lover's imagination; Margaret's action will be convincingly false. Against such testimony Claudio knows no defence; it answers his worst fears and seems to offer outward proofs where most he lacked them.

When he is assured that Hero will be proved dishonest he swears

If I see any thing to-night why I should not marry her tomorrow, in the congregation, where I should wed, there will I shame her. (III. ii. 127-30)

He chooses to denounce her at the wedding ceremony because there mere words are to stand for deepest thoughts and bridal garments for inward beauty: it will enable Claudio to say effectively that which he can scarcely think. His choice is not due to heartlessness as Beatrice too readily assumes, but to the uncertainty he had always striven against, to the purity of his ideal, and to the blind, destructive rage of his disappointment in which he can pity but not feel for Hero.

In the event Claudio can scarcely bring himself to say the necessary words. When he is asked by the friar if he comes "to marry this lady," he can only answer "No," and he does not say even this forcefully; Leonato takes it as a jest and lightly corrects the friar, "To be married to her: friar, you come to marry her." The ceremony proceeds and, when Hero has formally avowed her intention, the friar asks an inescapable question:

If either of you know any inward impediment why you should not be conjoined, I charge you, on your souls, to utter it. (IV. i. 12-14)

But once more Claudio evades the issue with "Know you any, Hero?", and when Hero replies "None, my lord" he still hangs back. The friar has to ask directly "Know you any, count?", and even then Claudio is
silent. At this *impasse* Leonato speaks for him: "I dare make his answer, none," and with confident assertion Claudio breaks his reserve and blurts out his passion, exclaiming not against Hero, but against treacherous appearances and false confidence. So haltingly and indirectly he comes, with Pedro's support, to his true theme, and in quickly enflamed language renounces and shames Hero:

... Would you not swear,  
All you that see her, that she were a maid,  
By these exterior shows? But she is none;  
She knows the heat of a luxurious bed;  
Her blush is guiltiness, not modesty.  
(11. 32-43)

He is hardly to be understood and Hero asks how she had ever "seem'd" otherwise than sincere and loving. On this cue Claudio is more explicit, exclaiming on the outward beauty that had deceived him:

Out on thee! Seeming! I will write against it:  
You seem to me as Dian in her orb,  
As chaste as is the bud ere it be blown;  
But you are more intemperate in your blood  
Than Venus, or those pamper'd animals  
That rage in savage sensuality.  
(11. 57-62)

He catechizes Hero only to receive further proof of her guilt and he leaves the church resolving never to listen to imagination and never to think that outward beauty can betoken grace.

To examine Claudio's denunciation in detail is to realize part of the judgement lying behind this play. It is basically the same as that presented with tragic intensity in Othello's denunciation of the "fair devil," Desdemona; both lovers know the "chaos" which comes when they may no longer look for agreement between inward and outward beauty, and as Othello's forced politeness breaks down in a cry of "goats and monkeys," so Claudio only finds his voice to denounce the hidden, "savage sensuality" (IV. i. 62). But not having Othello's confidence in his own power, Claudio does not wish to destroy Hero; he leaves her in impotency and sorrow. The details of Claudio's denunciation—the fearful hesitancy with which he begins, and the remembrance and honour for Hero's outward beauty with which he continues and concludes—are surely meant by Shakespeare to be signs of his great inward compulsion and of his sorrow; it is strange and "pitiful" to see a lover helplessly vilifying the "Hero" whom he loves.

When Hero swoons even her father believes that she is guilty, but Beatrice, who in friendship trusts inward promptings, and the Friar, who is greater in experience and wisdom, both believe her innocent. At length they all agree to hide her away from "all eyes" (1. 245), and, saying that she is dead, to maintain a "mourning ostentation." The Friar believes that by these means Claudio's intuitions of her inward beauty will grow in power and outlast the mere "fancy" engendered by her outward beauty:

When he shall hear she died upon his words,  
The *idea* of her life shall sweetly creep  
Into his study of *imagination*,  
And every lovely organ of her life  
Shall come apparell'd in more precious habit,  
More moving-delicate and full of life,  
Into the *eye and prospect of his soul*,  
Than when she lived indeed; ...
If Claudio has truly loved, he will, in due time, believe this inward vision, even against firm outward evidence of her guilt.

In order to compare the two stories of this comedy still further Shakespeare boldly followed these scenes with a dialogue between Benedick and Beatrice. When these lovers are alone together they do not abate one jot of their accustomed sagacity and wit; they are, as they learn to say later, "too wise to woo peaceably" (V. ii. 73-4). Benedick avows his love for Beatrice and in the same breath asks if that is not "strange" (IV. i. 269-70). Beatrice likewise confesses that she is stayed in a happy hour for she was "about to protest" that she loved him (11. 285-6). But words, even riddling ones like these, are the easier part of their love. Beatrice, believing that Hero has been wronged, takes Benedick's offer of service at face value and bids him "Kill Claudio." She makes this terrifying request in few words but when she is refused she vents her scorn of mere words in many:

... manhood is melted into courtesies, valour into compliment, and men are only turned into tongue, and trim ones too: ...

At length Benedick can put a solemn question, asking

Think you in your soul the Count Claudio hath wronged Hero?

and he receives as solemn an answer:

Yea, as sure as I have a thought or a soul. (11. 331-3)

If Benedick truly loves he must—as Claudio must—believe his lady's "soul" against all outward testimony; he had called her inward spirit a "fury," but, if he has truly looked upon her with a lover's imagination, he will have seen the beauty of that spirit and will now trust and obey—and will challenge Claudio. The twin stories of Much Ado about Nothing turn on the same point; the very wise and the very uncertain must both learn to trust inward qualities, mere nothings to some other eyes; through a lover's imagination each must recognize inward truth and beauty, and must speak and act from a convinced heart.

These scenes in the church might have been unbearably pathetic had not Shakespeare already informed us that Borachio's plot had already been discovered. The device used to this end, the introduction of Constable Dogberry and the men of his watch, also contributes to presenting and widening the underlying theme of the whole play. Dogberry is a great respecter of words—of long words, defaming words, and the phraseology of official regulations—but he respects them only with respect to himself; he interprets the regulations for his own peace of mind and uses words for the little that they mean to himself not for what they mean to others. His watch are "most senseless and fit" men (III. iii. 23), self-respecting like himself but without his pretensions. By a stroke of irony Shakespeare has directed that Borachio, "like a true drunkard," tells all to Conrade within their hearing. There is no play-acting in this scene; Borachio tells how the "fashion of a doublet ... is nothing to a man" (11. 125-6) and how the "appearance" of Hero's guilt has deceived the prince and Claudio. When hidden truth is made so plain, the action of the play must seem as good as over, but Dogberry goes with the news to Leonato, and between the one's busy concern to prepare for his daughter's wedding and the other's happy concern to speak in polite and noble words, the message is never truly delivered. It is still further delayed when Leonato asks Dogberry to act as Justice of the Peace and examine the villains in his place. The Constable's pleasure in his new and elevated role almost perverts justice, but the sexton prompts him in his part and is soon running to inform Leonato.

The comedy moves towards its close but several threads of its pattern are yet to be drawn into place. In his grief Leonato protests that counsel is "profitless As water in a sieve" (V. i. 4-5); a man who has suffered
inwardly as he has suffered must needs rage in his grief, although at other times he may have "writ the style of gods" (V. i. 37). When Don Pedro and Claudio enter, he and Antonio pretend that Hero is dead indeed and so over-act their parts—it is a fiction they come close to believing—that they nearly involve themselves in a duel. But the prince and Claudio wish to avoid all speech and contact with them; they do not rage in their grief, but having lost all hope and confidence are "high-proof melancholy." They welcome Benedick's company so that his wit may beat away their care, but witty words no longer "suit" their thoughts and the jests go awry, and, before leaving them, Benedick challenges Claudio to a duel for Hero's honour. When Dogberry enters with his prisoners Pedro has the patience and assumed good humour to hear him, but he is cut short by Borachio's confession:

I have deceived even your very eyes: what your wisdoms could not discover, these shallow fools have brought to light. . . . (V. i. 238ff.)

At this point the focus returns to Claudio. Borachio's words run "like iron" through his blood; he is silent as he remembers Hero's true beauty, but his heart is overcharged and must be uttered in soliloquy:

Sweet Hero! now thy image doth appear
In the rare semblance that I loved it first.
(11. 259-60)

This image springs to his mind from the knowledge of Hero's innocence, not from the sight of her outward beauty, but it is important to notice that the image is identical with the beauty he had seen at first. Dramatic interest is forcefully focused on Claudio by his silence and then by his abrupt soliloquy; by these means Shakespeare emphasizes an important turning-point in the action of the play; Claudio realizes that his love for Hero had been true affection all the time, not mere fancy.

Claudio still believes Hero is dead and when he is again confronted by Leonato he knows "not how to pray his patience"; yet he "must speak," asking penance for his sin which lay entirely in "mistaking" (V. 1. 281-5). He is asked to write an epitaph for Hero and next morning to marry Leonato's niece. Here again Shakespeare introduces a daring contrast, for Benedick is also writing verses—to Beatrice. He who had been so sure of his tongue is now at his wits' end to fit his lover's imagination to the "even road of a blank verse" (V. ii. 34). On the other hand, Claudio now seems uncritical of his own utterance, presenting his finished, but not very polished, verses at Hero's tomb, and trusting that they will speak for him when he is "dumb" (V. iii. 10).

The comedy is now at its end. Claudio is so hopeless of seeing beauty in love again that he swears to accept the "penance" of his unseen bride "were she an Ethiope" (V. iv. 38), and is thereupon, beyond all his hopes, reunited with Hero. Benedick and Beatrice, at the very door of the church, are unwilling—be it through shame or lack of confidence—to assume their "unreasonable" roles in public. But when Beatrice is shown verses written by Benedick, and Benedick others written by Beatrice, the unreasonable imagination of their love is made evident; their own handwritings appear as strange evidence "against" their hearts (V. i. 91-2). To prevent yet more ado, Benedick "stops her mouth" with a kiss; he is now confident in his new role:

since I do purpose to marry, I will think nothing to any purpose that the world can say against it; . . . for man is a giddy thing, and this is my conclusion. . . . (11. 106-11.)

The joy of the lovers is so complete that it must be expressed forthwith in the harmony of a dance, before the marriage ceremony, and certainly before they spare a thought for Don John, whose deceit was the occasion of so much of their trouble.

Much Ado has been more adversely criticized for its structure than any other of Shakespeare's comedies. This has been largely due to critics who, judging by the "humanity" of individual characters, have thought that
Shakespeare lost interest in the Claudio-Hero story in order to enjoy creating Benedick and Beatrice. But *Much Ado* is, in fact, the most intellectually articulated of the comedies and will not betray its secret to this piece-meal criticism. Its structure depends almost entirely on one central theme, a theme which had already influenced parts of earlier comedies, that of appearance and reality, outward and inward beauty, words and thoughts—in short, the theme of love's truth. When this theme is recognized, the relationships and contrasts between the two main stories, which Shakespeare has been at pains to establish, are at once apparent and the play's structural unity vindicated. Then Claudio is seen as a purposeful contrast to Benedick and a character who is interesting—and actable—in his own right.

The theme of *Much Ado* may be simply stated, but its presentation is so subtle that the width and wisdom of Shakespeare's vision can only be suggested. This may best be done, in this comedy as in others, by relating the various characters to each other as the action of play directs. Leonato is one who ordinarily is "no hypocrite, but prays from his heart" (I. i. 152-3), but he is not always patient enough to disentangle the words and actions of others, and, in sorrow, becomes ludicrously pathetic as the man who can only talk. Margaret, the young waiting-woman, is one who takes pleasure in assuming more apprehension than her experience can lay claim to. Don Pedro is rightly confident in judging Hero's inward worth, but his readiness to speak for Claudio is misjudged and his confidence in assessing the scene acted by Margaret and Borachio is probably culpable, for only a lover who could recognize Hero's inward qualities could possibly judge rightly.

Dogberry's self-concerned respect for mere words and for his new and dignified role painfully prolongs the misunderstandings of others; yet he has the wit not to "like" Borachio's look (IV. ii. 46-7) and blunderingly justice is done. The watch discover the malefactors by chance, but their simple good sense not to trust the words of those who have confessed themselves to be villains—they command them "Never speak" (III. iii. 188)—prevents still further deceit. Benedick and Beatrice, trusting their eyes, judgements, and power of speech too much, are taught, through the good offices of their friends, to recognize and give sway to their imaginations; so Benedick is "converted" (II. iii. 23) and finds beauty where he had previously seen a "fury" and Beatrice learns to look as "other women do" (III. iv. 92). But even when they are brought, through mutual trust of their own "souls," to admit their love to each other, it again needs the offices of friends before they will admit the folly of their love to the world. Claudio, fearing, with good enough reason, to trust his eyes alone, is an easy prey to his prince's enemies, and accepts outward proof of inward guilt. In so doing he brings suffering on his lady and on himself, but in the end their love is justified by his imaginative recognition of the "sweet idea" of Hero's true beauty. Both pairs of lovers take a long road to the same conclusion; in retrospect easier ways recommend themselves, but it is part of Shakespeare's wisdom to suggest that, to those who are engaged in the quest for love's truth, the longest course is often the only one which seems possible to them. It will ever be "Much Ado."

It is, perhaps, also a part of Shakespeare's wisdom that the success of *Much Ado* should depend largely on the way in which we receive it, that it should be capable of different, and sometimes destructive, interpretations. The acceptance of "love's truth" always depends on the imagination of its audience, and the "truth" of this play is no exception. Even the realization of the main theme of appearance and reality can only explain the dramatic structure, it cannot ensure the play's success. Unless we "imagine no worse" of Claudio than he is represented as thinking of himself, unless we have the readiness and imagination to "amend" the shadows of love's truth which are presented on the stage, *Much Ado* will never be for us the lively and human comedy which Shakespeare intended. But given this imaginative response, the implicit judgement of the play and the wisdom of the ideals informing it will, even in our delight, shape our own beings and bring to them something of the life-enhancement inherent in this work of art.


Music and Dance
Critics have long noted the presence of music in Much Ado, both in the text itself and in the form of the play. The play concludes with a dance; and Balthasar's song, "Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more," has been commented upon often, in part because it is performed in a crucial point in the play. (Balthasar's song was, in fact, assigned a prominent, recurring role in Kenneth Branagh's film adaptation of the play.) Several important critics have written about the importance of music in Much Ado, including Bernard Shaw, W. H. Auden, and Paul N. Siegel; while composer Hector Berlioz based one of his most accomplished works on the play. Of music in Much Ado, Shaw wrote sourly that "comparatively few of Shakespeare's admirers are at all conscious that they are listening to music as they hear his phrases turn and his lines fall so fascinatingly and memorably; whilst we all, no matter how stupid we are, can understand his jokes and platitudes, and are flattered when we are told of the subtlety of the wit we have relished, and the profundity of the thought we have fathomed."

Writing fifty years after Shaw, Auden seeks to show how Balthasar's song contributes to the dramatic structure of Much Ado, while Siegel illustrates the affinities between the plot of Much Ado and the movements of a formal dance.

W. H. Auden

[In the following excerpt from an essay originally published in Encounter in 1957, Auden (a major twentieth-century poet) demonstrates how Balthasar's song in Act II, Scene iii of Much Ado contributes to the dramatic structure of this work in two ways; by marking the moment when Claudio's "pleasant illusions about himself as a lover are at their highest"; and by suggesting to Benedick, through the song's message, an image of Beatrice as well as a dark sense of "mischief" ahead.]

The called-for songs in Much Ado About Nothing . . . illustrate Shakespeare's skill in making what might have been beautiful irrelevancies contribute to the dramatic structure.

Much Ado About Nothing

Act II, Scene 3.

Song. Sigh no more, ladies.

Audience. Don Pedro, Claudio, and Benedick (in hiding).

In the two preceding scenes we have learned of two plots, Don Pedro's plot to make Benedick fall in love with Beatrice, and Don John's plot to make Claudio believe that Hero, his wife-to-be, is unchaste. Since this is a comedy, we, the audience, know that all will come right in the end, that Beatrice and Benedick, Claudio and Hero will get happily married.

The two plots of which we have just learned, therefore, arouse two different kinds of suspense. If the plot against Benedick succeeds, we are one step nearer the goal; if the plot against Claudio succeeds, we are one step back.

At this point, between their planning and their execution, action is suspended, and we and the characters are made to listen to a song.

The scene opens with Benedick laughing at the thought of the lovesick Claudio and congratulating himself on being heart-whole, and he expresses their contrasted states in musical imagery.

I have known him when there was no music in him, but the drum and the fife; and now had he rather hear the tabor and the pipe. . . Is it not strange that sheeps' guts should hale souls out of men's bodies?—Well, a horn for my money when all's done.
We, of course, know that Benedick is not as heart-whole as he is trying to pretend. Beatrice and Benedick resist each other because, being both proud and intelligent, they do not wish to be the helpless slaves of emotion or, worse, to become what they have often observed in others, the victims of an imaginary passion. Yet whatever he may say against music, Benedick does not go away, but stays and listens.

Claudio, for his part, wishes to hear music because he is in a dreamy, lovesick state, and one can guess that his petit roman as he listens will be of himself as the ever-faithful swain, so that he will not notice that the mood and words of the song are in complete contrast to his daydream. For the song is actually about the irresponsibility of men and the folly of women taking them seriously, and recommends as an antidote good humor and common sense. If one imagines these sentiments being the expression of a character, the only character they suit is Beatrice.

She is never sad but when she sleeps; and not even sad then; for I have heard my daughter say, she hath often dream'd of happiness and waked herself with laughing. She cannot endure hear tell of a husband. Leonato by no means- she mocks all her wooers out of suit.

I do not think it too far-fetched to imagine that the song arouses in Benedick's mind an image of Beatrice, the tenderness of which alarms him. The violence of his comment when the song is over is suspicious:

I pray God, his bad voice bode no mischief! I had as lief have heard the night-raven, come what plague could have come after it.

And, of course, there is mischief brewing. Almost immediately he overhears the planned conversation of Claudio and Don Pedro, and it has its intended effect. The song may not have compelled his capitulation, but it has certainly softened him up.

More mischief comes to Claudio who, two scenes later, shows himself all too willing to believe Don John's slander before he has been shown even false evidence, and declares that, if it should prove true, he will shame Hero in public. Had his love for Hero been all he imagined it to be, he would have laughed in Don John's face and believed Hero's assertion of her innocence, despite apparent evidence to the contrary, as immediately as her cousin does. He falls into the trap set for him because as yet he is less a lover than a man in love with love. Hero is as yet more an image in his own mind than a real person, and such images are susceptible to every suggestion.

For Claudio, the song marks the moment when his pleasant illusions about himself as a lover are at their highest. Before he can really listen to music he must be cured of imaginary listening, and the cure lies through the disharmonious experiences of passion and guilt.


Paul N. Siegel

[In the following essay, Siegel illustrates the affinities between Much Ado and "a formal dance in which couples successively part, make parallel movements and then are reunited." The critic demonstrates how love itself, within the context of this play, might he likened to a dance, in which there is an unending succession of dancers who complete their movements with each couple united as they ought as the musicians strike up music for a new dance, the wedding dance.]

Much Ado About Nothing is like a formal dance in which couples successively part, make parallel movements and then are reunited. Although some of the figures performed in this dance have been noted, the dance as a
whole, with its various advances, retreats, turns and counter-turns, has not been described.

As the music strikes up in the dance scene of the second act, Beatrice says to Benedick, "We must follow the leaders," but she adds, "Nay, if they lead to any ill, I will leave them at the next turning" (II. i. 157-160). Beatrice and Benedick repeat the steps of Hero and Claudio in the dance of love which Beatrice describes with light-hearted gaiety (II. i. 72-84), but with variations of their own. Don Pedro not only presides over the dance and directs it, but he also offers to woo Hero for Claudio and suggests the stratagem to make Beatrice and Benedick fall in love with each other. If they succeed in this stratagem, he says, "we are the only love-gods" (II. i. 403). His brother Don John, however, is an opposing force which seeks to get in the way of the dancers and to disturb the harmony of the dance. As Don Pedro leaves the stage, telling Leonato, Claudio and Hero how he will bring about the match between Benedick and Beatrice, Don John, sick with hatred in the presence of the happiness of Claudio and Hero, about to be married, enters and says to his tool Borachio, "Any bar, any cross, any impediment will be medicinable to me. . . . How canst thou cross this marriage?" (II. ii. 4-8). Although both Don Pedro and Don John use the language of plotters—they will "practice on" Benedick, says Don Pedro to his confederates (II. i. 399), and Don John tells Borachio (II. ii. 53-54) "Be cunning in the working this"—Don Pedro's plot is benevolent while Don John's is malevolent.

Each succeeds, but there is a greater force at work which reunites Claudio and Hero in a strengthened unity at the conclusion of the play, when they join Benedick and Beatrice—ironically brought together by Don John's plot as well as by Don Pedro's—in the dance that signalizes the close. Don John's plot not only fools Don Pedro and Claudio but almost causes bloodshed when Leonato and Benedick disregard Friar Francis' wise advice. Instead of letting time and remorse work on Claudio, as this man of God suggests, they challenge him; it is not until foolish Dogberry exposes Don John and his accomplices that they realize their error. In setting right their blunders, Dogberry furthers the purpose of nature, which is itself animated by love—the love of God pervading creation—and which is engaged in a cosmic dance.

Benedick and Beatrice have followed in the steps of Claudio and Hero in falling in love, but in their preliminary estrangement they have also set a pattern. The "skirmish of wit" (I. i. 64) in which they engage in the masked dance scene causes some real wounds. Probably since Hero, informed of Don Pedro's intention to woo her, knew him despite his mask and since Ursula recognized Antonio as well, Margaret and Beatrice, in keeping with the method of repetition so noticeably employed in the play, should also be portrayed as recognizing the masked gentlemen speaking to them in much the same way that the queen and her ladies are aware of the identities of the masked gentlemen in a similar scene in Love's Labor's Lost. When Beatrice is informed by Benedick that a gentleman whom he refuses to name has charged her with being disdainful and with having borrowed her wit from a collection of humorous tales, she surmises that the unnamed gentleman is Benedick. When her interlocutor professes not to know Benedick, she replies, it would seem with veiled irony, "I am sure you know him well enough" (II. i. 138) and charges Benedick in turn with being the Prince's fool, with his only gift consisting of "devising impossible slanders" (II. i. 142-143). This gift of devising impossible slanders seems to be an allusion to what he has just said about her. So Benedick also tells himself a little later that her statement that he is the Prince's fool is a slander emanating from "the base (though bitter) disposition of Beatrice" (II. i. 214-215). In the fencing match between them, that is, the sword dance which is a feature of this masque, each is wounded by an identical thrust. Jest as Benedick may, he has been hurt: "She speaks poniards, and every word stabs" (II. i. 149-256). The hurt inflicted by the words of each is a prefiguration of the much more grievous hurt inflicted by Claudio, who "killed" Hero "with his breath" (V. i. 272). "Sweet Hero, she is wronged, she is slander'd, she is undone," bitterly exclaims Beatrice (IV. i. 314-315), bidding Benedick fight her "enemy." So Don Pedro tells Benedick after the dance, "The Lady Beatrice hath a quarrel to you. The gentleman that danced with her told her she is much wronged by you" (II. i. 243-245). Benedick is later to act as Beatrice's champion in her quarrel with Claudio, but now he announces, "I would not marry her though she were endowed with all that Adam had left him before he transgressed" (II. i. 260-262). So Claudio publicly refuses to marry Hero, the heiress of her wealthy father, returning to Leonato what he calls with bitter irony the "rich and precious gift" (IV. i. 27) he has received.
from him. Following the suggestion of Don John that "it would better fit your honor to change your mind" (III. ii. 118-119), Claudio is revenging himself by this public disgrace of Hero; similarly Benedick, ruminating over Beatrice's slur upon him, had exclaimed, "Well, I'll be revenged as I may" (II. i. 217-218).

Claudio's misapprehension that Hero has been unfaithful to him has been prefigured by his misapprehension that the Prince has deceived him by wooing Hero for himself; both false appearances and the instigation of Don John have misled him in each instance. His first misapprehension comes in the masked dance scene, his brief separation from his partner coinciding with the disengagement of Benedick and Beatrice. Benedick jests at the sulking of the jealous Claudio—"Alas, poor hurt fowl! Now will he creep in sedges" (II. i. 209-210)—but immediately reveals his own hurt: "But, that my Lady Beatrice should know me, and not know me! The Prince's fool! Ha!"

When Claudio, however, rejoins Hero after his brief separation from her, Benedick and Beatrice remain apart. "Come, lady, come," says Don Pedro (II. i. 285-286), as Benedick leaves upon Beatrice's entrance, you have lost the heart of Signior Benedick." "Indeed, my lord," replies Beatrice, "he lent it me awhile, and I gave him use for it, a double heart for a single one. Marry, once before he won it of me with false dice; therefore your Grace may well say I have lost it" (II. i. 287-291). Her words have been mystifying to the commentators. Is she saying that Benedick had once wooed her and gained her heart? This would be contrary to everything we learn of the two of them in the play, for the whole point of Don Pedro's efforts to make a match between them is that it seems impossible that they fall in love with each other. Is she merely speaking "all mirth and no matter" (II. i. 344)? It would appear that her joking must have some subject. Perhaps the suggestion that she is referring to a game played with cards and dice is the most acceptable.

In any event it is significant that her reference to a previous exchange of hearts, however lightly uttered, parallels Claudio's recital of how taken he was by Hero before he went to war and is echoed immediately afterwards in Claudio's statement that Hero has whispered to him that he is "in her heart" and in his words to her, "Lady, as you are mine, I am yours. I give away myself for you and dote upon the exchange" (II. i. 319-320). The repetition of motifs is continued in the conversation which follows. When Beatrice, looking at the happy couple, gayly exclaims, "Good Lord, for alliance! Thus goes everyone in the world but I, and I am sunburnt. I may sit in a corner and cry 'Heigh-ho for a husband!'" Don Pedro responds in the same vein, "Lady Beatrice, I will get you one." So had he got Hero a husband. When Beatrice turns his statement around with "I would rather have one of your father's getting. Hath your Grace ne'er a brother like you?" Don Pedro replies, "Will you have me, lady" (II. i. 330-338)? His question, laughingly asked to minister to her wit, repeats his wooing of Hero on behalf of Claudio, which had been mistaken for a wooing for himself.

Don Pedro does get Beatrice a husband. Benedick and Beatrice go as goes everyone in the world, more specifically as Claudio and Hero have gone. In response to Benedick's question in the opening scene "But I hope you have no intent to turn husband, have you?" Claudio had replied, "I would scarce trust myself, though I had sworn the contrary, if Hero would be my wife" (I. i. 197-198). Benedick retorted with a scoff at those who give up their bachelorhood, but he himself, although he indeed swore the contrary, came to do the same. In his very scorn for Claudio's blindness, he revealed the inclination which, like Claudio, he had felt before going to the wars, but which he is resisting: "There's her cousin, and she were not possessed with a fury, exceeds her in beauty as the first of May doth the last of December" (I. i. 192-195).

The comedy lies in Benedick's repeating Claudio's behavior immediately after he laughs at it. "I do much wonder," he says (as we await with gleeful expectation the plot against him) "that one man, seeing how much another man is a fool when he dedicates his behaviors to love, will, after he hath laughed at such shallow follies in others, become the argument of his own scorn by falling in love; and such a man is Claudio" (II. iii. 7-12). Undoubtedly, he is to make a marked pause after the phrase "falling in love" so that the audience may mentally supply his name before he applies his observation to Claudio. He mocks at Claudio, who had previously enjoyed only martial music, for being entranced by the music of the lute— "Is it not strange that
sheep's guts should hale souls out of men's bodies?" (II. iii. 59-60)—but he himself will soon yield to the sweet
harmony of love, composing songs, albeit, since he was "not born under a rhyming planet," (V. ii. 40-41)
halting ones. So too he follows Claudio's behavior in paying new attention to his personal appearance and in
mooning about in the melancholy induced by love.

Repetitive as their behavior is, however, there is variation. Claudio is the tongue-tied, timid lover who needs
the Prince to do his wooing for him. There are no love scenes between him and the demure Hero. Each can
speak well enough with others, Claudio engaging in repartee with Benedick and Hero joining in the fun at the
expense of Beatrice, but in each other's presence they are mute. When Don Pedro informs Claudio that he has
won Hero for him, Claudio can only say "Silence is the perfectest herald of joy. I were but little happy if I
could say how much" (II. i. 318-319). Beatrice pushes the overwhelmed Claudio and the modest Hero into
their proper positions. "Speak, Count, 'tis your cue," she tells Claudio and then, having elicited from him his
few fervent words of love, she turns to Hero, saying, "Speak, cousin; or (if you cannot) stop his mouth with a
kiss and let not him speak neither" (II. i. 316, 321-323).

Benedick and Beatrice, a highly loquacious pair, do not love in this fashion. Benedick, who, after having been
taken in by Don Pedro's plot, resolved "I will be horribly in love with her," (II. iii. 244) is as extravagant in his
professions of love as he had been in his professions of misogyny. Beatrice, for her part, is as witty as ever,
although now she fences with a buttoned foil. Her progress of love parallels his. As he had revealed an
inclination toward her, she had revealed an inclination toward him in her eagerness to make him the subject of
conversation and in her Freudian slip in the dance scene, "I am sure he is in the fleet; I would he had boarded
me" (II. i. 148-149); "board" not only means "accost," with the implication that she would have repulsed him,
but is also capable of a sexual significance. She, as he did, eavesdrops on a conversation whose participants
tell each other gleefully in asides that the plot is working and make use of the same figures of the trapped bird
and the hooked fish. With comic repetition, each, formerly high-spirited, becomes woebegone in the pangs of
love, he pretending to the Prince and Claudio that he has a toothache, she pretending to Hero and Margaret
that she has a cold. "I shall see thee, ere I die," Don Pedro had said to Benedick, "look pale with love" (I. i.
249-250). It was more true than Leonato's "You will never run mad, niece" after Beatrice had said of
Benedick, "He is sooner caught than the pestilence, and the taker runs presently mad" (I. i. 87-88). "No, not
till a hot January," had replied Beatrice. She might better have said not till the springtime, the season for the
madness of love, that "ecstacy" (II. iii. 157) from which Leonato is to state she is suffering.

Beatrice duplicates not only Benedick's behavior. Just as Benedick repeats Claudio's actions, she repeats those
of Hero, who, lessoned by her father, had replied to Don Pedro's wooing in proper decorous fashion, making
light of it, as a lady should, only to accept the suit he had pressed on behalf of Claudio. So Beatrice, after
keeping up her defenses, permits herself to be won, although protesting to the end that she is unwounded and
unyielding. Margaret, it may be said, takes Beatrice's place in the dance. Struck by Margaret's jests, flying
thick as arrows, Beatrice asks her caustically how long it has been that she has professed herself a wit. "Ever
since you left it," retorts Margaret. "Doth not my wit become me rarely?" (III. iv. 69-70). Thus the dance of
love is an unending succession of dancers in which the erstwhile jester becomes the subject of fresh jests by
one who is as yet heart-whole and able to cavort gaily around the disconsolate lover.

As Beatrice is in the dumps, Hero is getting dressed for the marriage ceremony. Unexpectedly, however,
Beatrice has the company of Hero in her melancholy, as Benedick had found himself hurt at the same time as
Claudio. "God give me joy to wear it," says Hero of her wedding gown, "for my heart is exceeding heavy"
(III. iv. 24-25). Her heaviness of spirits is a premonition, such as is Antonio's melancholy at the beginning of
The Merchant of Venice and Hamlet's misgivings before the duel, of the blow she is about to receive.
Unknown to her, Don John's plot has succeeded, just as, unknown to Beatrice, Don Pedro's plot has
succeeded.

88
There are a number of echoes from one plot to the other. "I pray God his bad voice bode no mischief," says Benedick sourly of Balthasar's song, which has just won Don Pedro's commendation (II. iii. 82-84). "I had as live have heard the night raven, come what plague could have come after it." Mischief is indeed afoot, for Don Pedro and Claudio are about to practice their deception on him. We are reminded, however, of the kind of genuine disaster supposed to be presaged by the raven's cry that is to be brought about by another enacted deception when Don Pedro says immediately after, "Dost thou hear, Balthasar? I pray thee get us some excellent music; for tomorrow night we would have it at the Lady Hero's chamber window" (II. .iii. 86-89). Benedick, wondering if he has been tricked, is dissuaded of it by the gravity of Leonato's demeanor: "Knavery cannot, sure, hide himself in such reverence" (II. iii. 24-25). "Knavery" is a word that is more readily applied to the other plot. The deception of Benedick successful, Don Pedro and Claudio congratulate themselves and eagerly await the outcome of the deception of Beatrice. "Hero and Margaret have by this played their parts with Beatrice," says Claudio (III. ii. 78-79)—and just then Don John, who is using Margaret to play another part, enters to tell him that his Hero is "every man's Hero," that she has been playing a part with him. And when Margaret is teasing Beatrice as Hero is preparing for the wedding, she remarks on Beatrice's observation that she cannot smell Hero's perfumed gloves because she is "stuffed," that is, has a head cold, "A maid, and stuffed! There's goodly catching of cold" (III. iv. 64-66). The jesting allegation contained in the double entendre "stuffed" is shortly to be made with deadly earnestness about Hero.

With the marriage ceremony disrupted, it is now Benedick and Beatrice who are united and Claudio and Hero who are separated. Benedick and Beatrice, on overhearing how their pride was condemned, had learned their lessons and sacrificed their egoism to give themselves to each other. As Benedick said "Happy are they that hear their detractions and can put them to mending" (II. iii. 237-238). So Claudio does "penance" for his "sin" (V. i. 282-283). It is a venial sin, for he sinned only in "mistaking." Yet, in not trusting to the heart's promptings but to the false knowledge of the senses, he has sinned against love. Beatrice, strong and loyal in her friendship, trusts despite all evidence to what her heart tells her: "O, on my soul, my cousin is belied!" (IV. i. 147). To Benedick's question "Think you in your soul the Count Claudio hath wronged Hero?" she replies, "Yea, as sure as I have a thought or a soul" (IV. i. 331-334). Beatrice's heart-felt conviction is sufficient for Benedick, believing in her as he does. Claudio, however, has to learn how to give himself wholeheartedly without regard to the impressions of the senses.

This he does in the final scene, when he atones for the wrong he had done Hero by keeping his contract with Leonato and marrying her supposed cousin without seeing her face. The final scene, which may be regarded as a highly patterned wedding masque, is a repetition of the previous marriage scene, to which Claudio and Don Pedro came pretending that they were in earnest before they threw off the mask to unmask, as they thought, the guilty Hero. So Leontes and Antonio come to the second marriage ceremony "with confirmed countenance," (V. iv. 17) with steady faces in pretended earnest, as they play out their little fiction that the disguised Hero is Antonio's daughter. When his bride removes her mask, Claudio finds to his joy that she is Hero herself—or rather, "another Hero," (V. iv. 62) the Hero of his false imaginings, "every man's Hero," having died. So too Beatrice, in response to Benedick's "Which is Beatrice?"—an echo of Claudio's "Which is the lady I must seize upon?—removes her mask to reveal herself. In this masquerade, unlike the dance scene of the second act, which the scene recalls, every one finds his true love.

Before the happyunion of both couples is completed, however, there is a final turn by Benedick and Beatrice which repeats in a lighter, quicker tempo the previous turn by Claudio and Hero: it seems for a moment as if the marriage between them that was about to have taken place is not going to take place after all, as the two continue their fencing until the end, with each thrust being parried and met by an answering thrust.

Benedick. Do you not love me?

Beatrice. Why, no; no more than reason.
Benedick. Why, then your uncle, and the Prince, and Claudio
Have been deceived—they swore you did.

Beatrice. Do not you love me?

Benedick. Troth, no; no more than reason.

Beatrice. Why, then my cousin, Margaret, and Ursula
Are much deceived; for they did swear you did.

Benedick. They swore that you were almost sick for me.

Beatrice. They swore that you were well-nigh dead for me.

Benedick. 'Tis no such matter. Then you do not love me?

Beatrice. No, truly, but in friendly recompense.

(V. iv. 77-83)

The revelations that have just taken place are here lightly glanced at: Leonato and the Prince and Claudio, says Benedick, were deceived in believing that Beatrice loved Benedick (just as they were deceived in believing that Hero did not love Claudio); it was given out, says Beatrice, that Benedick was well-nigh dead (just as it was given out that Hero was indeed dead). From this it seems that, having been talked into love, Benedick and Beatrice may talk themselves out of it although their repartee may also be taken as the teasing of two people who are sure of each other. However, Claudio produces a love sonnet that Benedick has written and Hero produces a love sonnet that Beatrice has written. "A miracle!" exclaims Benedick. "Here's our own hands against our hearts" (V. iv. 91-93). It is a miracle rather less wonderful than the resurrection of Hero. The near-rejection of Beatrice is linked with the repudiation of Hero when, Benedick stating to Claudio that he had thought to have beaten him but, since they are about to become kinsmen, will let him live unbruised, Claudio retorts, "I had well hoped thou wouldst have denied Beatrice, that I might have cudgeled thee out of thy single life. ... " (V. iv. 114-118).

Here we have an amusing turn-about: Benedick had acted as Hero's champion out of love for Beatrice and Claudio now would act as Beatrice's out of love for Hero. Just as in the concluding fencing between Benedick and Beatrice, there is a moment in the final scene when it seems as if the exchange between Benedick and Claudio may become serious. Claudio having made a jest about the prospect of horns for Benedick, Benedick replies with a taunt about the horns of Claudio's father implying that Claudio is both a calf and a bastard. Claudio's "For this I owe you" (V. iv. 51)—that is, I will repay you for this—is an echo of Benedick's statement immediately before expressing pleasure that he will not have "to call young Claudio to a reckoning" (V. iv. 9). But the proposed duel turns into an exchange of wit, and the threats become pleasant banter. In the final harmony love and friendship are reconciled. "Come, come, we are friends," says Benedick. Beatrice at the beginning of the play had said of Benedick, "He hath every month a new sworn brother. ... He wears his faith but as the fashion of his hat; it ever changes with the next block" (I. i. 73-77). Ironically, Benedick is to quarrel with his friend Claudio as a result of his love for Beatrice. Benedick's calling Claudio a villain is the counterpart of Claudio's calling Hero a wanton. Benedick's inconstancy in friendship illustrates the truth of the conclusion to which he comes in justifying his change of mind about marriage: "man is a giddy thing" (V. iv. 107-108). To be sure, this inconstancy is the result of his admirable wholeheartedness in love, but his initial recoil in dismay after his lover's offer to do any thing at all for Beatrice is answered by her curt "Kill Claudio" and his plaintive entreaty "Beatrice," (IV. ii. 291-315) five times overborne by Beatrice's furious tirade (the last time he is not even allowed to complete the second syllable), have their comic aspect as an exhibition of the power of love. The vagaries of love induce the most ridiculously inconsistent behavior; men are, as
Balthasar sings just before Benedick is made to turn to Beatrice and Claudio is about to be made to turn away from Hero, "One foot in sea, and one on shore./To one thing constant never" (II. iii. 66-67).

When Benedick challenges Claudio, neither Claudio nor Don Pedro believe that he can be serious but at length perceive that he is really in earnest: "As I am an honest man, he looks pale. Art thou sick, or angry?" (V. i. 130-131). Early in the play in response to Don Pedro's "I shall see thee, ere I die, look pale with love," Benedick stated: "With anger, with sickness, or with hunger, my lord, not with love" (I. i. 251-252). Don Pedro did indeed live to see the merry Benedick look pale, first with love-melancholy and then with anger, but, as Claudio says (V. i. 199), "for the love of Beatrice" in each case.

Benedick's challenge came just after Claudio had been challenged, first by Leonato and then by his rather comically irate brother Antonio, who, after having counseled patience to Leonato, outdid him in his fury. Wearied by the effort he had made to exercise forbearance with the two fuming old men and dejected by this sequel to his repudiation of Hero, Claudio welcomed Benedick, thinking that his wit would raise his spirits. Instead, he was greeted with another display of anger and another challenge. The scene falls within the pattern formed by a number of scenes in which Benedick mocks Claudio first when he is lovelorn and then when he is jealous and next Claudio in turn mocks Benedick when Benedick himself becomes lovelorn. When one's spirits are low, the other's are high. In the challenge scene, although Claudio is shaken up by his encounter with Leonato and Antonio, he is determined to be merry and meets Benedick's equally determined quarrelsomeness with sallies of wit. The turns have been completed, each couple is united and the two couples are joined together in love and friendship, as the pipers strike up the music for the dance that precedes their joint marriage.


Beatrice and Benedick
Most critics concur that Shakespeare's depiction of the relationship between Beatrice and Benedick far surpasses that of Hero and Claudio in depth and interest. Scholars have often emphasized the fact that Shakespeare deliberately introduces the theme of the sparring mockers Beatrice and Benedick before the theme of the pallid romantics Hero and Claudio; and further, that when all of the principal characters are on stage together, the audience is drawn not to the tame love-at-first-sight relationship that develops between Hero and Claudio, but rather to the "merry war" between Beatrice and Benedick. Commentators have also noted that while the romance of Hero and Claudio is based on the outer senses, Beatrice and Benedick place more value in each other's inner attributes. A key scene often held up for examination is Act IV, Scene i, beginning where Beatrice, alone with Benedick, commands her suitor to "Kill Claudio—and then, enraged by Benedick's hesitation, declares, "Oh, God, that I were a man! I would eat his [Claudio's] heart in the market place." "It is untrue to say that Beatrice and Benedick steal the limelight from them because Claudio and Hero never held it," John Crick has written. "Hero is far too nebulous a figure, and Claudio is made unattractive from the start." However, John Dover Wilson has contended that "the Hero-Claudio plot, on the whole, is quite as effective as the Beatrice-Benedick one, which is to some extent cumbered with dead wood in the sets-of-wit between the two mockers." Nevertheless, what Kenneth Muir has written of Beatrice and Benedick is undeniable: "They alone, of the characters in the play, are three dimensional." Bernard Shaw would disagree though, for he found them—contrary to widespread critical judgment—to be repellant individuals who use their wit indiscriminately. Shaw adds that they are perceived as charming only because of Shakespeare's inflated reputation and skillful use of language. Scholar Denzell S. Smith perceives the two as essentially realistic individuals whose personalities change during the course of the play; he explains why Beatrice's command to kill Claudio is important, concluding that it marks the play's high point in the development of the characters of Beatrice and Benedick. For additional commentary on the character of Beatrice, see the essays by Barbara Everett and John Crick in the OVERVIEWS section and the essay by John Russell Brown in the
APPEARANCE VS. REALITY section. For additional commentary on Benedick's character, see the Crick and Brown essays.

Bernard Shaw

[In the following review, originally published in the Saturday Review (London) on February 26, 1898, Shaw (an Irish dramatist and critic who regularly attacked what he considered Shakespeare's inflated reputation as a dramatist) focuses upon Beatrice and Benedick as figures who are—contrary to popular perception—coarse individuals who use their wit indiscriminately. Shaw adds that they are perceived as charming only because of Shakespeare's enchanting language. Shaw's remarks upon the musical nature of the play coincide with remarks made by W. H. Auden in 1957 on Much Ado.]

_Much Ado_ is perhaps the most dangerous actor-manager trap in the whole Shakespearean repertory. It is not a safe play like _The Merchant of Venice_ or _As You Like It_, nor a serious play like _Hamlet_. Its success depends on the way it is handled in performance; and that, again, depends on the actor-manager being enough of a critic to discriminate ruthlessly between the pretension of the author and his achievement.

The main pretension in _Much Ado_ is that Benedick and Beatrice are exquisitely witty and amusing persons. They are, of course, nothing of the sort. Benedick's pleasantries might pass at a sing-song in a public-house parlor; but a gentleman rash enough to venture on them in even the very mildest £52-a-year suburban imitation of polite society today would assuredly never be invited again. From his first joke, "Were you in doubt, sir, that you asked her?" to his last, "There is no staff more reverend than one tipped with horn," he is not a wit, but a blackguard. He is not Shakespeare's only failure in that genre. It took the Bard a long time to grow out of the provincial conceit that made him so fond of exhibiting his accomplishments as a master of gallant badinage. The very thought of Biron, Mercutio, Gratiano, and Benedick must, I hope, have covered him with shame in his later years. Even Hamlet's airy compliments to Ophelia before the court would make a cabman blush. But at least Shakespeare did not value himself on Hamlet's indecent jests as he evidently did on those of the four merry gentlemen of the earlier plays. When he at last got conviction of sin, and saw this sort of levity in its proper light, he made masterly amends by presenting the blackguard as a blackguard in the person of Lucio in _Measure for Measure_. Lucio, as a character study, is worth forty Benedicks and Biron's. His obscenity is not only inoffensive, but irresistibly entertaining, because it is drawn with perfect skill, offered at its true value, and given its proper interest, without any complicity of the author in its lewdness. Lucio is much more of a gentleman than Benedick, because he keeps his coarse sallies for coarse people. Meeting one woman, he says humbly, "Gentle and fair: your brother kindly greets you. Not to be weary with you, he's in prison." Meeting another, he hails her sparkingly with "How now? which of your hips has the more profound sciatica?" The one woman is a lay sister, the other a prostitute. Benedick or Mercutio would have cracked their low jokes on the lay sister, and been held up as gentlemen of rare wit and excellent discourse for it. Whenever they approach a woman or an old man, you shiver with apprehension as to what brutality they will come out with.

Precisely the same thing, in the tenderer degree of her sex, is true of Beatrice. In her character of professed wit she has only one subject, and that is the subject which a really witty woman never jests about, because it is too serious a matter to a woman to be made light of without indelicacy. Beatrice jests about it for the sake of the indelicacy. There is only one thing worse than the Elizabethan "merry gentleman," and that is the Elizabethan "merry lady."

Why is it then that we still want to see Benedick and Beatrice, and that our most eminent actors and actresses still want to play them? Before I answer that very simple question let me ask another. Why is it that Da Ponte's "dramma giocosa," entitled _Don Giovanni_, a loathsome story of a coarse, witless, worthless libertine, who kills an old man in a duel and is finally dragged down through a trapdoor to hell by his twaddling ghost, is still, after more than a century, as "immortal" as _Much Ado_? Simply because Mozart clothed it with
wonderful music, which turned the worthless words and thoughts of Da Ponte into a magical human drama of moods and transitions of feeling. That is what happened in a smaller way with *Much Ado*. Shakespeare shews himself in it a commonplace librettist working on a stolen plot, but a great musician. No matter how poor, coarse, cheap, and obvious the thought may be, the mood is charming, and the music of the words expresses the mood. Paraphrase the encounters of Benedick and Beatrice in the style of a bluebook, carefully preserving every idea they present, and it will become apparent to the most infatuated Shakespearean that they contain at best nothing out of the common in thought or wit, and at worst a good deal of vulgar naughtiness. Paraphrase Goethe, Wagner, or Ibsen in the same way, and you will find original observation, subtle thought, wide comprehension, far-reaching intuition, and serious psychological study in them. Give Shakespeare a fairer chance in the comparison by paraphrasing even his best and maturest work, and you will still get nothing more than the platitudes of proverbial philosophy, with a very occasional curiosity in the shape of a rudiment of some modern idea, not followed up. Not until the Shakespearean music is added by replacing the paraphrase with the original lines does the enchantment begin. Then you are in another world at once. When a flower-girl tells a coster to hold his jaw, for nobody is listening to him, and he retorts, "Oh, you're there, are you, you beauty?" they reproduce the wit of Beatrice and Benedick exactly. But put it this way. "I wonder that you will still be talking, Signior Benedick: nobody marks you." "What! my dear Lady Disdain, are you yet living?" You are miles away from costerland at once. When I tell you that Benedick and the coster are equally poor in thought, Beatrice and the flower-girl equally vulgar in repartee, you reply that I might as well tell you that a nightingale's love is no higher than a cat's. Which is exactly what I do tell you, though the nightingale is the better musician. You will admit, perhaps, that the love of the worst human singer in the world is accompanied by a higher degree of intellectual consciousness than that of the most ravishingly melodious nightingale. Well, in just the same way, there are plenty of quite second-rate writers who are abler thinkers and wits than William, though they are unable to weave his magic into the expression of their thoughts.

It is not easy to knock this into the public head, because comparatively few of Shakespeare's admirers are at all conscious that they are listening to music as they hear his phrases turn and his lines fall so fascinatingly and memorably; whilst we all, no matter how stupid we are, can understand his jokes and platitudes, and are flattered when we are told of the subtlety of the wit we have relished, and the profundity of the thought we have fathomed. Englishmen are specially susceptible to this sort of flattery, because intellectual subtlety is not their strong point. In dealing with them you must make them believe that you are appealing to their brains when you are actually appealing to their senses and feelings. With Frenchmen the case is reversed: you must make them believe that you are appealing to their senses and feelings when you are really appealing to their brains. The Englishman, slave to every sentimental ideal and dupe of every sensuous art, will have it that his great national poet is a thinker. The Frenchman, enslaved and duped only by systems and calculations, insists on his hero being a sentimentalist and artist. That is why Shakespeare is esteemed a mastermind in England, and wondered at as a clumsy barbarian in France.


Denzell S. Smith

*In the essay below, Smith explains why Beatrice's command "Kill Claudio" is important, concluding that this command represents "the climax of the development of Beatrice's and of Benedick's character." He notes that, first, the command indicates that both Beatrice and Benedick have reached a point at which neither is as self-centered as they had been at the beginning of the play. Secondly, the command indicates that the two are no longer a pair of duelists in frothy wit, but have become more serious individuals. Thirdly, because it represents the union of Beatrice and Benedick, the command stands at the climax of the plot of Much Ado. Finally, the command emphasizes that honor and truth must be inextricably bound up with love. In commanding Benedick to kill Claudio, Beatrice causes the most confusion in the plot than has occurred to this*
After each has been tricked into believing the other to be in love, Beatrice and Benedick do not confront each other privately until Hero has been slandered at the altar. Their confrontation results in a confession of love that, because of the slander, is at once followed by Beatrice's famous command "Kill Claudio" (IV.i.291). Nearly all critics of the play assert that the command is important, but the reason for its importance is seldom stated. Hardin Craig, for example, claims that the command is "a famous climax in both character and plot," but does not explain why. Several reasons can be offered.

First, the command shows Beatrice and Benedick as now less selfish than they were. Benedick's profession of love brings from her not a desire for her self-satisfaction, but rather a desire for satisfaction of Hero's wrongs. She subordinates her interests to Hero's, just as Benedick subordinates his desires to Beatrice's. Second, the command shows that Beatrice and Benedick are now more serious than they were. Rather than jest about serious problems as they did at the play's beginning, they now are engaged with them. Third, Beatrice's engagement with Hero's problem at once puts the new love relationship on a serious level—serious because the slander of Hero is serious, serious because of the possible outcome of a duel between two competent soldiers, and serious because both lovers regard the duel as a test of Benedick's love. Fourth, the command also shows the intensity of their love. Beatrice asks her newly-professed lover the utmost favor: to place his love for her above that of his long-established friendship with Claudio. Benedick is not only to prefer Beatrice to Claudio, but is to become the revenger who will place himself outside of God's law and outside of his country's law—the revenger who wreaks his vengeance even on his best friend. The extremity of the command is startling. Finally, the command shows Beatrice's acceptance of her womanliness, of the necessity for her at times to admit her physical weakness and to place her trust and confidence in Benedick. For these reasons we can say that the command "Kill Claudio" is the climax in the development of Beatrice's and of Benedick's character.

The command is also a climax of plot because it exemplifies the union of Beatrice and Benedick. Their story is traditionally comic. Two eligible and comely young people affectedly place themselves in the extreme position of flouting their natural desires, and the stock situation typically ends with the couple falling in love, thus exposing themselves temporarily to the ridicule of those who rightly thought their original position untenable. The extremity of the command, the trust Beatrice shows in asking it, and the choice of lover over friend that Benedick makes in accepting it show the real unity of the lovers. Second, the command is climactic for the plot because it links the major plot with one of the minor plots. Before the command, the actions of Beatrice and Benedick did not affect the Hero-Claudio story. After the command, Benedick's challenge entangles him with the main plot. That the duel does not take place does not detract from the entanglement. The command is climactic, third, because of its surprise. Who would expect that, at the first private meeting of newly professed lovers, such a command would be made and obeyed? Fourth, the command causes greater plot confusion than has occurred before in the play. At the play's beginning no one was estranged, but Don John and his henchmen soon estrange themselves and cause the estrangement of Hero from Claudio, of Hero from her father, of Don Pedro from Leonato and Antonio, of Claudio from Leonato and Antonio, and of Beatrice from Claudio and Don Pedro. Benedick is the only character of importance who is not estranged. After the altar scene he is concerned about Hero's well-being, but he suggests that Claudio and Don Pedro, otherwise honorable and wise, have been tricked. Beatrice's command estranges him from the two men who have his "inwardness and love" (IV.i.247). Only reconciliations follow this high point of confusion. Finally, one of the intents of the Beatrice-Benedick plot has been to show that love is necessary to life. The command makes clear that love is a powerful agent for virtue, since it works to secure honor and truth. If Beatrice is right in her conviction about Hero's innocence (and we as audience know she is), the trial by arms will result in the triumph of good over evil. Dishonor and misunderstanding destroy love; honor and truth foster it.

Hero and Claudio

For years, critics of Much Ado have examined the reason why the Hero-and-Claudio plot seems so colorless alongside the romance of Beatrice and Benedick. John Wain explains why and how, to his understanding, the Hero-and-Claudio plot fails to come to life, despite Shakespeare's craftsmanship. In further explanation, scholars have said that with Messina being a society of wit, the conventional Hero and Claudio are in a setting in which their shortcomings, particularly Claudio's, stand out. In this context, John Crick seeks to show how Hero and Claudio exist in a society in which their conventionality stands out as dullness and where Claudio's shortcomings are brought to the fore. Critics agree that Claudio's high point in the play comes at a low point in the portrayal of his character: when he accuses Hero of being a wanton in the presence of her father and the entire wedding party. Feminist criticism has focused upon this particular scene, with scholar S. P. Cerasano contending that Much Ado "implicitly dramatizes the plight of women and slander within the actual legal structure" of the play's society. For additional commentary on the character of Hero, see the essays by Barbara Everett and John Crick in the OVERVIEWS section and the essay by John Russell Brown in the APPEARANCE VS. REALITY section. For additional commentary on Claudio's character, see the Crick and Brown essays.

John Wain

[In the excerpt below, Wain (a prolific English author of contemporary fiction and poetry and a critic who believes that in order to judge the quality of literature the critic must make a moral as well as an imaginative judgment) explains why and how, to his understanding, the Hero-and-Claudio plot failed to live, despite the craftsmanship of Shakespeare.]

Why did the Hero-and-Claudio plot go so dead on its author? The answer is not easy to find. Because it is not, per se, an unconvincing story. Psychologically, it is real enough. The characters act throughout in consistency with their own natures. Hero, her father Leonato and his brother Antonio, are all perfectly credible. Don John, though he is only briefly sketched and fades out early from the action, is quite convincing in his laconic disagreeableness, a plain-spoken villain who openly wishes others harm. Conrade and Borachio, mere outlines, are at any rate free of inherent contradictions; so is Margaret. None of these characters presents any major difficulty. It begins to look as if the trouble lay somewhere in the presentation of Claudio.

This young man, according to the requirements of the story, has only to be presented as a blameless lover, wronged and misled through no fault of his own; convinced that his love is met with deception and ingratitude, he has no choice but to repudiate the match; later, when everything comes to light, the story requires him to show sincere penitence and willingness to make amends, finally breaking out into joy when his love is restored to him. On the face of it, there seems to be no particular difficulty. But Shakespeare goes about it, from the start, in a curiously left-handed fashion. First we have the business of the wooing by proxy. Claudio confesses to Don Pedro his love for Hero, and Don Pedro at once offers, without waiting to be asked, to take advantage of the forthcoming masked ball to engage the girl's attention, propose marriage while pretending to be Claudio, and then speak to her father on his behalf. It is not clear why he feels called upon to do this, any more than it is clear why Claudio, a Florentine, should address Don Pedro, a Spaniard, as "my liege" and treat him as a feudal overlord. Doubtless we are supposed to assume that he is in Don Pedro's service. It is all part of the donnee. There cannot be much difference in age between them, and Don Pedro is represented throughout as a young gallant, of age to be a bridegroom himself.

The scene is perfunctory, and carries little conviction; it seems to have been written with only half Shakespeare's attention. Why, otherwise, would he make Claudio bring up the topic with the unfortunate question, "Hath Leonato any son, my lord?" as if his motives were mercenary. Don Pedro seems to fall in with this suggestion when he replies at once that "she's his only heir." This is unpromising, but worse is to come. Immediately after the conversation between them, we have a short scene (I, ii) whose sole purpose seems to be to provide the story with an extra complication—one which, in fact, is never taken up or put to any use.
Antonio seeks out his brother Leonato; he has overheard a fragment of the dialogue between Claudio and Don Pedro, and evidently the wrong fragment, so that he believes the prince intends to woo Hero on his account. Leonato wisely says that he will believe this when he sees it; "we will hold it as a dream till it appear itself"; but he does say that he will tell Hero the news, "that she may be better prepared for an answer." Apart from confusing the story, the episode serves only to provide an awkward small problem for the actress who plays Hero. When, in the masked-ball scene in II, i, she finds herself dancing with Don Pedro, and he begins at once to speak in amorous tones, is she supposed to know who he is? Since she has been told that Don Pedro intends to woo her, she can hardly fail to guess that he will seek her out; presumably she is ready to be approached by him; does she intend to consent? There is no coldness or refusal in her tone, no hint of disappointment at not being approached by Claudio; she is merely gay and deft in her answers. It is a small, obstinate problem that is in any case hardly worth solving; on the stage, most producers cut out the scene where Antonio makes his mistake, and this is certainly what I should do myself. But it is hardly a good beginning.

Claudio is then convinced, by the unsupported assertion of Don John, that the prince has doubled-crossed him, that he made his offer merely to get Claudio to hold back while he went after the girl himself. If Claudio were a generous character we should expect him to put up some resistance to the story; he might say something like, "I have the prince's own word for it that he would act on my behalf; we have been comrades in arms, he wishes me well and I trust him; I know him better than to believe he would stoop to this." In fact, he believes the story straight away, with a depressing, I-might-have-known-it alacrity.

'Tis certain so; the Prince woos for himself.
Friendship is constant in all other things
Save in the office and affairs of love;
Therefore all hearts in love use their own tongues.
Let every eye negotiate for itself.
And trust no agent; for beauty is a witch
Against whose charms faith melteth into blood.
This is an accident of hourly proof,
Which I mistrusted not. Farewell, therefore, Hero.

Benedick, who has heard the rumour and sees no reason to disbelieve it, now enters and tells Claudio the unwelcome news again, in no very gentle manner; when Claudio goes off to nurse his grievance, Benedick looks after him with "Alas, poor hurt fowl! Now will he creep into sedges." This, though unconcernedly genial, is a contempt-image: Claudio has no more spirit than a dabchick.

At the next general muster of the characters (II, i) Claudio appears with a sour expression that makes Beatrice describe him as "civil [Seville] as an orange," an image that later recurs in his bitter speech of renunciation at the altar ("Give not this rotten orange to your friend"). When the misunderstanding is abruptly removed, and he is suddenly thrust into the knowledge that Hero is his after all, he is understandably speechless and has to be prompted by Beatrice, who, like Benedick, seems to have a slightly contemptuous attitude towards him.

Claudio is now launched on felicity, yet he has so far been given no memorable lines, has shown no gaiety or wit, and we know nothing about him except that he has a tendency to believe the worst about human nature. He has been brave in battle—offstage, before the story opens—but all we have seen is the poor hurt fowl creeping into sedges. Why Shakespeare treated him like this, when it was important to win the audience's sympathy for such a central character, I cannot say. But it is clear that, for whatever reason, Shakespeare found him unattractive. Already the altar scene, at which Claudio must behave with cold vindictiveness, is casting its shadow before.

The trick is played; the victims are planted, the charade is acted out. Don Pedro and Claudio believe that Hero is false and vicious. What, one wonders for the second time, would be the reaction of a generous young man,
with decent feelings and a tender heart? There are several possibilities; he could seek out the man who had stepped into his place and challenge him to a duel; or he could take horse and gallop out of town within that hour, leaving the wedding-party to assemble without him and the girl to make her own explanations. What he actually does is to get as far as the altar and then launch into a high-pitched tirade in which he not only denounces Hero but sees to it that her father is made to suffer as much as possible.

In all this, there is no psychological improbability. Such a youth would in all likelihood behave just in this way, especially if he were a Renaissance nobleman, touchy about his honour. Claudio's basic insecurity, already well demonstrated in the play, would naturally come out in vindictiveness if he thought himself cheated. The story, qua story, is perfectly credible. The reason we do not believe it is simply that it is put into an artificial idiom. If Shakespeare had told this story in the same swift, concrete, realistic prose with which he presented the story of Beatrice and Benedick, it would be perfectly convincing. But he has, for some reason, written consistently poor verse for the characters to speak, mishandled the details (we will come to that in a moment), and in general made such a poor job of it that everyone feels a blessed sense of relief when Leonato, Friar Francis and Hero take their departure, and the stage is left to Beatrice and Benedick. How reviving it is, to the spirits and the attention, to drop from the stilted heights of Friar Francis's verse, full of lines like

    For to strange sores strangely they strain the cure,

to the directness and humanity of

    —Lady Beatrice, have you wept all this while?

    —Yea, and I will weep a while longer.

The tinsel and the crape hair are laid aside with the attitudinizing and the clumping verse; we are back in the real world of feeling. Shakespeare obviously shares this relief. His writing, in this wonderful scene in which Benedick and Beatrice admit their love, has the power and speed of an uncoiling spring.

But to come back to Claudio. His vindictiveness towards Hero and her father is not in the least unconvincing; it springs from exactly that self-mistrust and poor-spiritedness which we, and some of the other characters in the play, have already noticed. The question is, why are they there? Why does Shakespeare give this kind of character to Claudio, when he could easily have made him more sympathetic?

The answer, as so often, lies in the exigencies of the plot. Claudio has to humiliate Hero publicly, has to strike an all but killing blow at her gentle nature, for the same reason that Leontes has to do these things to Hermione. In each case, the woman has to be so emotionally shattered that she swoons and is later given out as dead. So that Shakespeare had no alternative but to bring the whole party to the altar and let Claudio renounce his bride before the world. This, I believe, is the central spot of infection from which the poison pumped outwards. Having to make Claudio behave in this way, Shakespeare could feel no affection for him. And he had, as I remarked earlier, no gift for pretending. If he disliked a character, one of two things happened. Either, as in the case of Isabella in Measure for Measure, his pen simply ran away with him, providing more and more repulsive things for the character to say; or it refused to work at all. In Much Ado it was the second of these two fates that befell Shakespeare. As the play went on, he must have come to dread those scenes in which he would have to introduce Claudio. It became harder and harder to think of anything to make him say. Perfectly good opportunities presented themselves and were refused; he just could not try hard. The Shakespearean lie-detector was at work. Think, for instance, of the closing scenes of the play's last act. Claudio, however heartless he may have been, has here several golden opportunities to redeem himself. Shakespeare has only to show him as genuinely penitent, give him some convincing lines to say, and we shall begin to feel sorry for him, to look forward with pleasure to the time when his happiness is restored. In fact, nothing of the kind happens. In spite of the harm done to the play by Shakespeare's true opinion of Claudio,
he cannot help showing that opinion. In the scene (V, i) where he and Don Pedro are confronted by Leonato and Antonio, he appears as having disengaged himself, emotionally, from the whole situation.

Don Pedro. Nay, do not quarrel with us, good old man

Antonio. If he could right himself with quarrelling,
Some of us would lie low.

Claudio. Who wrongs him?

An unfortunate question from one in his position; and it would be difficult, to say the least, for an actor to speak it in a tone of kindly innocence. It comes out inevitably with a hard, sneering edge.

That scene develops interestingly, bearing out the view that the story in itself was not repugnant to Shakespeare; he found plenty of interest in it. Antonio, a very minor character whose general function in the play is simply to feed the plot, suddenly comes to life in this scene. Leonato, knowing that his daughter is not really dead yet unable to keep down his anger at the sight of the two smooth young gallants who have brought such sorrow on his grey hairs, begins to rail at Claudio and the prince, whereupon Antonio, catching his mood and feeling it more deeply—for we have no reason to suppose that he is in the secret - begins to rage and threaten, becoming more and more beside himself while his brother, alarmed at the passion his own words have set in motion, plucks at his sleeve with "Brother——" and "But, brother Antony——." "Do not you meddle; let me deal with this," cries the enraged old gentleman. The whole tiny episode is splendidly alive and convincing. But that life does not reach as far as Claudio. He says nothing until the two old men withdraw and Benedick comes onstage. Then he at once begins his accustomed teasing. He has it firmly in his head that Benedick is there to provide sport, either by his own wit or by providing a target for the infinitely more clumsy jokes that occur to himself or Don Pedro. Lightly dismissing the grief and anger of the previous encounter with, "We had lik'd to have had our two noses snapp'd off with two old men without teeth," he challenges Benedick to a wit-contest, and in spite of Benedick's fierce looks and reserved manner, goes clumping on with jokes about "Benedick the married man" until he is brought up sharply by an unmistakable insult followed by a challenge. He can hardly ignore this, but his is a mind that works simply and cannot entertain more than one idea at a time. He can change, when something big enough happens to make him change, but he cannot be supple, cannot perceive shifts in mood. Even after Benedick has challenged him, he cannot get it clear that the time for teasing is over; he keeps it up, woodenly enough, right up to Benedick's exit. So unshakable is his conviction that Benedick equals mirth and Sport.

Psychologically this is exactly right. Shakespeare saw clearly what kind of person Claudio would have to be, if he were to behave in the way called for by the plot. What depressed him, inhibiting his mind and causing him to write badly, was the iron necessity of making such a man—cold, proud, self-regarding, inflexible—the hero of the main story in the play.

We see this more and more clearly as the last act unfolds. In Scene iii, when Claudio, accompanied by the prince and "three or four with tapers," comes to do penance at Hero's tomb, Shakespeare shies away from the task of putting words into his mouth. Instead, he makes the scene a short formal inset; Claudio recites a few stiff, awkward rhymes and then a song is sung. The song has merit; the scene, lit by tapers and with a dramatic solemnity, is effective on the stage; but Shakespeare has missed the chance of bringing Claudio nearer to a humanity that would help us to feel for him. It is too late for that; the case is hopeless.

The characters then go home (evidently they are no longer houseguests at Leonato's) and put on "other weeds" for the marriage of Claudio and the supposed daughter of Antonio, which he has agreed to with the words,
I do embrace your offer, and dispose
For henceforth of poor Claudio

Arriving there, they find Benedick waiting with Leonato. Incredible as it may seem, Claudio again begins his clumsy pleasantries about Benedick's marriage ("we'll tip thy horns with gold," etc. etc.). Neither the challenge, nor the sobering effect of the occasion, nor the fact that he is newly come from the tomb of Hero, can make him forget that Benedick's presence is the signal for an outbreak of joshing. Shakespeare knows that this is the kind of man he is, and with his curious compulsive honesty he cannot help sharing that knowledge with us, whatever it may do to the play.

The cost is certainly great. Antonio goes off to fetch the girls, and brings them in wearing masks. Here, obviously, is an excellent opportunity for Shakespeare to give Claudio some convincing lines. When he is at last confronted with the girl he is to marry instead of Hero, there is plenty that even the most ordinary writer could make him say. He can speak, briefly but movingly, about his love for the dead girl, and his remorse; he can declare his intention of doing everything in his power to bring happiness into the family that has been plunged into misery through his error; he can thank the good fortune that has made him happy, even in this misery, by uniting him to a girl closely related to his love and closely resembling her. Then the unmasking and the joy. It is not my intention to try to take the pen out of Shakespeare's hand and write the play myself; I give these simple indications merely as a way of showing that it is not in the least difficult to imagine an effective speech that Claudio might make at this point in the action—how he might, even now, show some saving humanity.

What Shakespeare actually does is to give him the one line,

Which is the lady I must seize upon?

This, coming as it does at a crucial moment, has a strong claim to be considered the worst line in the whole of Shakespeare. It is the poet's final admission that Claudio has imposed his ungenerous personality on the story and ruined it beyond repair. After that, there is nothing for it but to get the unmasking scene over as quickly as possible and hurry on to the marriage of Beatrice and Benedick. Hero unmasks, and Claudio utters two words, "Another Hero!" before the action sweeps on and everyone turns with relief to the sub-plot. . . .

The Hero-and-Claudio plot, we have now established at perhaps tedious length, is a ruin. And what ruined it, in my opinion, was the pull towards psychological realism that seems to have been so strong in Shakespeare's mind at this time. Certainly this made the character of Claudio unworkable, and once that was hopeless it was all hopeless. Because the plot demanded that Claudio should behave ungenerously to a girl he was supposed to love, because Shakespeare could not stick to the chocolate-box conventions but had to go ahead and show Claudio as a real, and therefore necessarily unpleasant, youth, the contradictions grew and grew until they became unsurmountable.


John Crick

[In the excerpt below, Crick addresses Hero and Claudio as a conventional hero and heroine in an unconventional society, a milieu in which Claudio's shortcomings are brought to the fore.]

Conventional people and societies often relish the unconventional as a safety-valve for repressed instincts. In a society such as Messina's, where the instincts for life are in danger of being drained away in small talk, Beatrice and Benedick offer this outlet. Their conventional role is to appear unconventional. Where the
normal fashionable marriage is based on economic interests, and is ironically the end-product of romantic notions of love centred on physical appearance, a “partnership” of antagonisms and verbal bombardments will offer a vicarious satisfaction to onlookers. Beatrice and Benedick know this and, like court jesters, give society what it wants, until it has to be jolted out of its complacency when near-tragedy strikes. . . .

Against this background are presented the conventional hero and heroine—Claudio and Hero. It is untrue to say that Beatrice and Benedick steal the limelight from them because Claudio and Hero never hold it. Hero is far too nebulous a figure, and Claudio is made unattractive from the start. He is a typical young gentleman of Messina society—“a proper squire,” as Don John says—with an ear and eye to fashion. His romantic notions of the opposite sex—“Can the world buy such a jewel?”—are grounded in a realization of the economic basis of fashionable marriages in Messina society—“Hath Leonato any son, my lord?”—(In Bandello, Leonato is poor). We are reminded of Bassanio’s “In Belmont is a lady richly left And she is fair . . .” in The Merchant of Venice. The shallowness of Claudio’s attitude to life is betrayed by his every action. He leaves the wooing of Hero to Don Pedro, and then abandons the courtship with inordinate haste, taking a mere eleven lines to convince himself of the truth of Don John’s allegation against Don Pedro, even though the latter has "bestowed much honour" on him. He is merciless and revengeful when his pride has been wounded by the supposed betrayal, and punishes Hero and her father with sadistic exuberance in the "wedding scene"—"a rotten orange," he calls Hero. He refuses to abandon his normal flippancy when faced by an angry Benedick in the scene where the latter challenges him. Even when he knows he has done wrong, he refuses to admit his full guilt—"yet sinned I not but in mistaking." He is willing to accept another marriage offer without a moment's hesitation, perhaps spurred on by the knowledge that the girl is another heir; and his mourning for Hero is very formal and ritualistic, and couched in artificial terms and rhyming verse which has a false ring. Significantly, whereas Bandello emphasizes the hero's repentance, this is made a minor affair in Shakespeare, and I can see no evidence for W. H. Auden's view, expressed in an Encounter article, that Claudio "obtains insight into his own shortcomings and becomes, what previously he was not, a fit husband for Hero." Such a character is incapable of development for Shakespeare offers him as a postulate, a representative type.

In Claudio, therefore, the worst aspects of Messina society are revealed: its shallowness, complacency, and inhumanity. There is nothing absurd about Beatrice's "Kill Claudio"; in terms of the situation that has been revealed to us, the reaction is a natural one.


S. P. Cerasano

[In the essay below, Cerasano focuses on Claudio's treatment of Hero to illustrate how, during the course of Much Ado, "Shakespeare reveals that maintaining one's reputation is more complex than simply managing to avoid slander." The critic holds that the play "implicitly dramatizes the plight of women and slander within the actual legal structure." Cerasano also seeks to demonstrate that "the language of slander is shown to be a fabrication of the social and sexual values which are mirrored and married (literally and figuratively) in the cultured discourse of the play.

In Act III, scene i of Much Ado About Nothing, Hero tries to encourage Beatrice's love for Benedick by staging a conversation with Ursula which she expects Beatrice to "overhear." During their discussion Hero dismisses the possibility of confronting Beatrice openly with Benedick's passion because Beatrice cannot be trusted to respond positively. She "turns every man the wrong side out," Hero decides; therefore, since the match between the would-be lovers cannot end happily, Hero teasingly suggests that Benedick should be encouraged to fight against his love and ultimately to reject Beatrice. In aid of this course of action Hero contrives a plot:
And truly I'll devise some honest slanders,
To stain my cousin with, one doth not know
How much an ill word may empoison liking.
(III. i. 84-6)

Hero's playful proposal to employ "honest slander" brings ironic repercussions for her later in the play, for it is the "dishonest slander" that poisons Claudio's affections, disrupts Hero's marriage, prompts Leonato's rejection of his daughter, and requires finally that Hero "die," only to return to marry the man who earlier mistakenly condemned her to death by destroying her reputation. In this way, the possibilities presented by Hero's love game initiate the makings of a more serious matter. In the course of the play Shakespeare reveals that maintaining one's reputation is more complex than simply managing to avoid slander. The private language of honest slander raised by women like Hero in order to unite lovers becomes, in the mouths of men like Don John, a publicized "dishonest slander" by which relationships and particularly the women involved in them, can be destroyed. Moreover, Much Ado implicitly dramatizes the plight of women and slander within the actual legal structure. Although several critics comment that the play seems to lack a final trial scene in which to absolve Hero and set things right (as, for example, occurs in Measure for Measure) the causes and circumstances of slander—namely, the use and abuse of language—are put on trial publicly in the church scene and tested implicitly throughout the play. Finally, the language of slander is shown to be a fabrication of the social and sexual values which are mirrored and married (literally and figuratively) in the cultured discourse of the play.

The adjudication of slander suits in the Renaissance has been described by some critics (Lisa Jardine and Valerie Wayne, for instance) as following a well-established procedure and offering the possibility for the offended party to find justice under the law. Although they do not imply, for a moment, that a slander suit was a pro forma matter, their examples, being drawn from records of the consistory courts (which were ecclesiastical courts), do not reflect the enormous changes in the way slander was conceptualized and adjudicated during the sixteenth century. Throughout the Middle Ages slander was construed by the Church courts as the telling of lies. It was treated as a spiritual offence and the guilty party was sentenced to do penance, which could take a variety of forms including "humiliating [public] apology." This conception of slander was consistent with the type of court which was addressing the offence, and the penalty was consistent with the sort of compensation that the Church courts could legally extract. Although slander was treated as a sin (capable of being ameliorated through holy acts), at some unspecified time before 1500 the courts began to allow a fee to be substituted for penance. Consequently, a blurring of the distinction between the spiritual and the civil spheres of redress occurred, and this confusion overshadowed the litigation surrounding slander suits throughout the sixteenth century.

A further move from spiritual to civil in slander cases occurred with the decline of the local and ecclesiastical courts in the first half of the sixteenth century. Slander thus became actionable in the common law courts. However, the common law courts had inherited the ecclesiastical precedent that slander was a "spiritual offence," which fell slightly outside the judicial domain that the civil law was best able to adjudicate. There was no debate among the courts at Westminster, all of which acknowledged that the telling of lies was morally wrong; but the courts were bound to specific modes of redress. [Slander could not be treated as an action of trespass in the common law courts unless 'damages' could be assessed.] Restricted to this criteria, the courts did not consider slander as assault, and they were reluctant to award damages for "evanescent or indirect harm," although that was the type of damage slander most often caused.

But the complications do not stop here. As a result of Henry VIII's break with the Church the ecclesiastical courts gradually began to vanish, and as they did slander suits lost their natural legal venue. In addition, there was a growing awareness that slander constituted not only a moral offence but a breach of the peace, sometimes instigating violence. In recognition of these realities the common law courts eventually found themselves in the unhappy business of trying to deal with slander in a purely civil context. By 1550 slander
had become part of the everyday business of common law, in particular of the Court of King's Bench. Before long—and owing in part to the allegations of conspiracy frequently accompanying slander charges—the equity courts also became involved. The Court of Star Chamber, in which assault was integral to the pleadings, became steeped in slander suits. And because of its lower costs and its tradition of expediency, the Court of Requests started to deal with slander on a regular basis. By Shakespeare's day at least three major courts were forced to decide large numbers of cases, although the legal mechanisms through which they operated were ill-suited to deal with the charges at issue.

The judicial precedent established by the common law courts meant that the legal atmosphere was, in some ways, inhospitable to any claimant, and doubly inhospitable to claims by women. Perhaps the latter fact is not surprising, given the well-documented tendencies towards cultural misogyny, as well as women's general disadvantages under the law at the time. Women could not, for instance, plead for themselves without a male guardian. Yet the serious difficulty in adjudicating slander suits resided in the ephemeral nature of verbal assault. Proving that a statement was slanderous was contingent upon issues involving personal identity, and determining tangible damages caused further problems. Both factors were difficult to address and complicated to adjudicate. Then, as now, the textbook definition was clear enough. Slander was:

> a malicious defamation ... tending either to blacken the memory of one who is dead, or the reputation of one who is alive, and thereby expose him to public hatred, contempt and ridicule.

Commonly, name-calling was the precipitating activity in slander suits, such as that exemplified in the case in which Thomas Lancaster told "diverse persons" that John Hampton was a "cosening knave." Given the necessity of showing that Hampton had somehow suffered damages, the outcome of the lawsuit depended upon evidence demonstrating that Lancaster had willfully spread false information about Hampton with the intention of destroying his reputation; and further, that damage to Hampton's professional or personal status (his marriage, for example) had ensued as a result of Lancaster's rumour. The usual insults for which people brought suit—"drunkard," "quarreller," "lewd liver," "notorious thief," "beggar" or "runneger"—might be distasteful; but legal retribution was impossible without demonstrable evidence that harm had been done. And the legal process of proving that the verbal assault had taken place, such as Lancaster really calling Hampton "a cosening knave," was often circuitous. Unless the defendant had made some egregious comments in public or performed activities such as singing songs or reciting rhymes before a large audience of reliable citizens, showing that the slanderous situation had indeed transpired was difficult. Reliable evidence had to include a number of witnesses, frequently living at a distance, who could "document" a rumour as it spread.

Therefore, even a cursory reading of cases in a common law court, such as the Court of Requests, shows that it was easy to be violated by verbal abuse but difficult to succeed in pressing charges. Plaintiffs did sometimes manage to extract public apologies and monetary redress for their "damages." However, the law was fundamentally incapable of remedying losses to one's reputation. As a result, the courts do not seem to have been consulted because litigants could expect their public images to be restored through legal action. In part, the courts acted as verbal boxing rings, mediating the hostility between litigants and providing a stage whereon actors such as Thomas Lancaster and John Hampton could each audition for the role of victim, more sinned against than sinning. If, in the end, Lancaster was found guilty of slandering Hampton, then Hampton "succeeded" in court but also had to cope with any residual damage to his reputation. If, on the other hand, Lancaster was found innocent, then he had essentially been slandered by Hampton who, by bringing charges, had implied that Lancaster was a slanderer and a criminal.

Considering the propensity of Elizabethans to take charges of slander to court, this background would have been familiar to the audience of *Much Ado About Nothing*, even though it is almost entirely unfamiliar to most twentieth-century audiences. Likewise, it is important for us to understand that the subordinate position of women during the Renaissance made them especially vulnerable to verbal abuse. Women were expected to be
"chaste, silent, and obedient," and the high social value placed upon women's chastity left them deeply susceptible to claims of whoredom. In fact, virtually all slander suits involving women called into question their sexual morality. A typical case occurred in rural Shropshire in the early seventeenth century; C.J. Sisson later identified it as a provincial version of *The Old Joiner of Aldgate*. In this situation two young men, Humphrey Elliot and Edward Hinkes, were charged with performing "scandalous and infamous libelous verses, rhymes, plays, and interludes" about Elizabeth Ridge, a young woman of the same village. According to Elizabeth's account the young men hoped to characterize her as "vile, odious, and contemptible" and, through social pressure, to force her to marry one of them. Moreover, Elizabeth laid the charge that the men conspired against her "out of a most covetous & greedy desire to gain" her father's sizeable estate, to which she was the sole heiress. Elizabeth Ridge's reasons for taking legal action centred upon the damage done to her reputation, as did Hampton's in the former example. However, the concept of reputation was complicated by gender issues. Like other women Elizabeth was concerned that once she was labelled a "fallen woman," no man would want to marry her. As a young woman in a small rural village she might well have perceived the opportunities for a suitable match to have been few and far between. Also, the close-knit nature of village life would have ensured that the slanderous rumours spread to most of the inhabitants of the village by the time the case came to trial. On top of these events—by which a young woman like Elizabeth Ridge would have felt violated anyway—there were the further harrowing experiences of undergoing the process of law and of demonstrating that harm had arisen. As a single woman she could not show loss of or damage to her marriage; as a young woman of her class, not engaged in meaningful work or a trade, she could not claim "damage" to her professional life; as a woman, denied full status as a citizen, she could not easily assert that her public presence had been "damaged." If a woman was called a "whore," she had little compensation to look forward to. Not surprisingly, given the personal costs involved, no woman felt that she could afford to ignore a public allegation such as slander. Even the young *Elizabeth I* about whom rumours circulated to the effect that she was pregnant by Thomas Seymour in 1548-9, felt obligated to set the record straight. On 23 January 1549 she wrote to the Lord Protector:

My lord, these are shameful slanders ... I shall most heartily desire your lordship that I may come to the court after your just determination that I may show myself there as I am.

At the same time women had to face the fact that the law was particularly inept to assist them in reclaiming such an intangible commodity as reputation, and that the potential consequences of slander for them were vastly different from those for men. The potency of language as it related to sexual status was clearly in the control of men like Elliot and Hinkes, and the process of the law favoured men, whether they were plaintiffs charging other men or defendants against complaints brought by women.

For Renaissance women, reputation, that which was synonymous with a "good name" or a "bad name," defined identity in an ideological, as well as in a legal, sense. A "fair name" was essential in order for a woman to maintain her "worthiness"; and as a woman was treated as the property of her father, husband or guardian, her name was treated as property which could be stolen, usurped or defiled. In *As You Like It*, for instance, Duke Frederick warns Celia that Rosalind "robs thee of thy name" (I. iii. 76). Related to the theme of property was an economic discourse that determined the value of a woman's name, and it was always the "fair name" that was stolen, for the "black name" could only be "bought" (suggesting prostitution): "she hath bought the name of whore, thus dearly" (*Cymbeline*, II. iv. 128). Moreover, reputation could be "disvalued" (see, for instance, Measure for Measure, v. i. 220). Nor was a woman's name her own property to "sell" as she thought fit. A woman's reputation belonged to her male superior, who "owned" her and to whom she could bring honour or disgrace. In so far as a woman was "renamed" when she was slandered and her identity thus altered, her husband lost his good name and was rechristened with abuse-slandered by association. If the characterization of a woman as "loose" was true, that was all to the worse. In articulating the dual sense of *name*, signifying both "reputation" and "a malicious term," and in describing his wife's effect on his reputation, Frank Ford rails to the audience of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*:
See the hell of having a false woman: my bed shall be abused, my coffers ransacked, my reputation gnawed at, and I shall not only receive this villainous wrong, but stand under the adoption of abominable terms, and by him that does me this wrong. Terms! Names! Amaimon sounds well; Lucifer, well; Barbason, well: yet they are devils' additions [names], the names of fiends. But cuckold? Wittol? Cuckold! The devil himself hath not such a name. (II. ii. 280-89)

The comic overtones of Ford's tirade are balanced, however, by the more severe associations of a bad name with prostitution. When Othello upbraids Montano, he remarks:

The gravity and stillness of your youth  
The world hath noted, and your name is great  
In mouths of wisest censure [judgement]: what's the matter,  
That you unlace your reputation thus,  
And spend your rich opinion [reputation], for the name  
Of a night-brawler?  
(II. iii. 182-7; emphasis added)

M. R. Ridley glosses "unlace" as "not the simple 'undo' . . . but the stronger hunting (and carving) term." The "undoing" of Montano is suggestive of a literal "gutting" of his personal value. Othello implies that his unwillingness to "unlace" himself and "spend" his rich opinion is a sign not only of Montano's weakness but of his sexual vulgarity. Montano loses his reputation to a "night-brawler," the disclosure of which costs him dearly in excess of what he has already "spent" for sexual favours. For the Elizabethans the rhetoric was pungent. Privileging "dishonour in thy name" makes "fair reputation but a bawd," and slander creates "the wound that nothing healeth" (The Rape of Lucrece, 11. 621-3, 731). The language of a sullied reputation—whether or not that reputation belonged to a man or a woman—was constantly associated with female sexuality gone amiss, as if no Montano would ever go astray were it not for the presence of a bawd to tempt him and rob him of his wealth.

The church scene in Much Ado About Nothing is replete with just these sorts of legal and ideological associations. As its opening Claudio first breaks the terms of the pre-marital agreement that Don Pedro had arranged for him. He then explicitly rejects Hero and openly refuses to accept her as his property: "There, Leonato, take her back again" (IV. i. 30). After Claudio's dispossession of Hero he calls her "rotten orange" (IV. i. 31) and "an approved wanton" (IV. i. 44), but he waits until he has dissociated himself from her completely so that her reputation and moral state cannot sully his own. In a particularly brutal and unambiguous manner he states that he does not wish: "to knit my soul/To an approved wanton" (IV. i. 43-4). Claudio's choice of language identifies Hero with prostitution, a suggestion that acts as a powerful verbal cue inciting the other men in the scene to join in his abuse of her. Don Pedro casts her as "a common stale [whore]" (IV. i. 65). Leonato declares that she is "fallen" (IV. i. 139), her very flesh is "foul-tainted" (IV. i. 143), that her sin "appears in proper nakedness" (IV. i. 175). To destroy Hero's identity further, Claudio attempts to reduce her image, her very being to "nothingness":

Would you not swear,  
All you that see her, that she were a maid,  
By these exterior shows? But she is none:  
(IV. i. 37-40; emphasis added)

In Claudio's eyes Hero has dissolved from a facade of "seeming" to "none" ("no one"—that is, nothingness). The tactics that reduce Hero's status and deny her humanity creep in throughout Claudio's speech in this scene. His language becomes increasingly insidious as he first appeals to the others (primarily the men) to believe that Hero bears a false front, and then turns directly against Hero herself. Intriguingly, he tries to make
her name potent and worthless at the same time:

HERO: O God defend me, how am I beset!
What kind of catechizing call you this?

CLAUDIO: To make you answer truly to your name.

HERO: Is it not Hero? Who can blot that name
With any just reproach?

CLAUDIO: Marry, that can Hero;
Hero itself can blot out Hero's virtue
(IV. i. 77-82)

While Hero seeks an explanation as to "who" ("what person") can blot her name with just cause, Claudio replies that "Hero itself" can stain her honour. On his rhetorical terms, she cannot possibly win. But whether he means that her tainted name "itself" can dishonour Hero, or whether she is being symbolically reduced to a genderless object ("Hero itself"), Claudio's response is tempered with the sexual values of his society. He would not call a man "wanton" because it is so explicitly a male term of opprobrium for a woman.

When Claudio slanders Hero in such an extreme manner his rhetoric has the effect of uniting part of the male community behind him, with the exception of Benedick (who, with Beatrice, stands outside the rhetorical and social codes to which Claudio and the others subscribe) and the Friar (who immediately takes steps to attempt to turn slander to "remorse") (IV. i. 211). Nevertheless, Leonato, Don Pedro and Don John all take an active verbal role in Hero's persecution, knowing that Claudio's slander could well lead to grievous injury. Leonato, in fact, demands Hero's extinction, even her death, as a justifiable retribution for her presumed digression and for jeopardizing his name. When Hero swoons, Leonato responds:

O Fate, take not away thy heavy hand!
Death is the fairest cover for her shame
That may be wished for. . . .

Do not live, Hero, do not ope thine eyes;
For did I think thou wouldst not quickly die,
Thought I thy spirits were stronger than thy shames,
Myself would on the rearward of approaches
Strike at thy life.
(IV. i. 115-17; 123-7)

Slander and death are familiar bedfellows throughout Shakespeare's plays. The slandered victim, spoken of in terms that relate to discredit, sexual defilement and disease, was finally described as an outcast. Slander, popularly thought of as "the transient murderer," if not actually the cause of literal death, was thought to lead to public alienation and metaphorical death. As Antony succinctly points out concerning his political opponents:

These many men shall die; their names are prick'd.

He shall not live. Look, with a spot I damn him
(Julius Caesar, IV i. 1, 6).
The urgency of the Friar's proposal to turn slander into remorse recognizes the price Hero will have to pay for Claudio's slander. Her alternatives are to be reborn ("a greater birth": IV. i. 213) and to begin anew with a pure reputation (possibly to be slandered again at some future time) or to be hidden away "in some reclusive and religious life" (IV. i. 242). But finally, the Friar urges that death and resurrection is the best course—"Come, lady, die to live" (IV. i. 253)—regardless of the fact that Hero initially "died upon his [Claudio's] words" (IV. i. 223) and that Claudio makes no attempt to repair her shattered emotions at the end of the scene, simply going off and leaving her for dead.

In describing the violation of Hero as the conspiracy of "eyes, tongues, minds, and injuries" (IV. i. 243), Friar Francis reminds us of the other ways in which those in Messina are slandered and violated, and of the covert strategies that stand in the way of the characters' ability to negotiate meaningful interactions. Chief among these undercurrents is that presented by the atmosphere of Messina itself, an environment which revolves around tale-telling, eavesdropping and spying, all purportedly performed in the name of some legitimate purpose. From the opening of the play, where Beatrice asks for "news" of Benedick, the characters seem caught up in a web of gossip and surface appearances. Marriages are arranged by proxy, while men and women woo and wed behind masks—literal face-coverings and social expectations alike. This tendency towards doubling encourages naive young men like Claudio to cling to the traditional male sphere of war in public, and to accept the less-than-gratifying pose of Petrarchan lover in his private life.

As long as conversations are witty and frivolous, Messina's social code is attractive; but as soon as serious issues are at stake, the community opens itself up to misrepresentation and slander. As much as Hero is slandered by Claudio's words she is also slandered by his eyes, by his predisposition to distrustfulness, and by his need to spy on her in order to test her virtue. And because the men in Messina are so willing to accept what they (mis)perceive and (mis)hear, they easily become impulsive and abusive. Leonato and Claudio will trust each other through a process of male bonding, but they will equally trust impersonal and unsubstantiated "report." As a result, they condemn Hero on the basis of slight evidence without allowing her to defend herself. The natural tendency of the residents of Messina is towards gullibility, inconstancy, unpredictability and slander; and also towards giving short shrift to personal identity, individual circumstances or motivations, patience and constancy.


Dogberry

Constable Dogberry is considered one of the most beloved characters in all of Shakespeare's works. But critics have not devoted the intensive studies of his character as they have of other principal characters in Much Ado. James Smith has written one of the more short studies of Dogberry, emphasizing that the wordy constable, far from being mere comic relief, mirrors the values of his betters in Messina society, with their emphasis upon superficiality and appearance above all. Critics agree that, despite their stupidity, Dogberry and his companions, Verges and the Watch, are key to the resolution of the play for their role in divulging the truth about Don John's plot against Hero. Anthony B. Dawson demonstrates the significance of Dogberry as an interpreter and conveyer of messages crucial to the play's outcome; he also compares Dogberry with Bottom, from A Midsummer Night's Dream.

James Smith

[In the following excerpt, Smith seeks to refute Samuel Taylor Coleridge's claim that Dogberry is a dispensable figure in Much Ado, and that the play lacks a unified design. The critic contends that Shakespeare's treatment of the constable and his associates is closely linked to his depiction of Messina and its inhabitants, which embody absurdity, shallowness, irresponsibility, and immaturity.]
Coleridge chose *Much Ado* as an illustration of his famous “fourth distinguishing characteristic” of Shakespeare, in accordance with which “the interest in the plot” in the latter’s plays “is always in fact on account of the characters, not vice-versa . . . the plot is a mere canvass and no more.” And he went on to exemplify:

> Take away from *Much Ado* ... all that which is not indispensable to the plot, either as having little to do with it, or, at best, like Dogberry and his comrades forced into the service, when any other less ingeniously absurd watchmen and night-constables would have answered the mere necessities of the action;— take away Benedick, Beatrice, Dogberry, and the reaction of the former on the character of Hero,—and what remains?

The implication is nothing, or almost nothing; so that the play as a whole has no purpose—that it has no unity and, failing to show even a thwarted striving towards unity, is most conveniently for the critic resolved into its elements.

As Coleridge’s sharp distinction between plot and character would now no longer be accepted, it becomes at least possible that his judgment on *Much Ado* should be modified—perhaps, indeed, reversed. Antecendently, this would seem probable; for whatever they have said or written, post-Coleridgeans have not, perhaps, ceased to enjoy the play as a whole: at least they have not been reduced to reading it as some of Dickens's novels are read, with a methodical skipping of scenes or chapters. Are they not to be held more justified in their practice than in their theory? The best way to attack this problem is perhaps to consider one by one the elements which Coleridge claims to have isolated from the plot and from each other, asking whether in fact they can be so isolated: whether they or the plot do not succumb to the operation or, if they survive it, whether they are not maimed thereby.

And first of Dogberry: though with regard to him, it is indeed difficult to maintain the detachment desirable in an analysis. Let us begin however by noting that, though he and his fellows are at times styled malaprops, the term is not altogether happy. Mrs. Malaprop is not a character who, on a second reading of *The Rivals*, gives any great if indeed any pleasure; for her pride in “the derangement of epitaphs” is a foolish pride that the reader, for discretion's sake, prefers to ignore. Mrs. Quickly of *The Merry Wives*, with her "aligant" and "alicholy," has perhaps something of the same pride—though having other things too, she does not prove quite so embarrassing on continued acquaintance; and in any case, rather than painfully aping, she is probably lazily echoing her superiors. As for the Mrs. Quickly of the historical plays, she is another person: with her "Arthur's bosom," she gives expression, as best she may, not to a selfish foolishness but to a charitable concern for souls—at least, for one soul; arriving in a moment of illumination, or perhaps at the end of a train of thought, at a striking conclusion about the state of the blessed.

Dogberry and his fellows, of from time to time the victims of syllables like Mrs. Malaprop, are more frequently and more significantly, like the second Mrs. Quickly, the victims of ideas. When Verges speaks of “suffering salvation body and soul,” and Dogberry of being "condemned into everlasting redemption,” it is impossible they are being deceived merely by similitude of sounds. Rather, they are being confounded by ideas with which, though unfitted to do so, they feel it incumbent upon themselves to cope. Such utterances are of a piece with Dogberry's method of counting; with his preposterous examination of Conrad and Borachio, in which condemnation precedes questioning; with his farewell of Leonato, to whom, in an endeavour to conserve both their dignities, he "humbly gives leave to depart"; with his desire "to be written down an ass," in which the same sense of his own dignity is in conflict with, among other things, a sense that it needs vindication. It is not Mrs. Malaprop, but rather Bottom, who comes to mind here: Bottom who, like Dogberry, is torn between conflicting impulses—whether those of producing his interlude in as splendid a manner as possible, while at the same time showing as much deference as possible to the ladies; or of claiming as his own the "most rare vision" which, as a vision, certainly had been his, while for its rarity it seemed such as could not rightly belong to any man.
In thus addressing themselves to intellectual or moral feats of which they are not capable, Bottom, Mrs. Quickly and Dogberry do of course display a form of pride. Given his attitude towards Verges:

> a good old man, sir, hee will be talking as they say, when the age is in, the wit is out, God helpe us, it is a world to see ...

Dogberry's pride needs no stressing. It is however no longer a foolish pride; or if foolish, then not with the folly of Mrs. Malaprop, but rather of all the protagonists of drama, comic or tragic, who measure themselves against tasks which ultimately prove too much for them. Perhaps with justice it is to be classified as a form of hybris, a comic hybris; and if so, then some kind of essential relation between the Dogberry scenes and the tragically inclined scenes of the main plot is immediately suggested.

The suggestion is strengthened, once Dogberry's strength rather than his weakness, his triumphs rather than his failures, are considered. For he has established himself as Constable of Messina, not only to the content of his subordinates, but with the tolerance of his superiors. In this respect he is no longer to be compared with Bottom—who, it is to be feared, would never gain a firm footing, however humble, at the court of Theseus—but with Falstaff, a character of greater importance. Unlike Bottom, Dogberry and his companions have taken fairly accurate measure both of themselves and of those who surround them; so that, if swayed by hybris in a certain degree, they take care that this degree shall fall short of destructive. For example, they are quite clear "what belongs to a Watch": they will "sleep rather than talk"; rather than bid a man stand against his will, they will let him go and thank God they are rid of a knave; rather than take a thief, they will "let him shew himselfe for what he is," and steal out of their company. In short, they will exert themselves, or fight, no longer than they see reason: to adapt Poins's words. Indeed, in this matter they are more consistent than Falstaff, who, in dismissing Prince Henry as "a Fellow, that never had the Ache in his shoulders," is for once allowing himself to be puffed up by hybris. In his boasts to Shallow, Falstaff betrays not a little of a Bottom-like recklessness:

> Master Robert Shallow, choose what Office thou wilt in the Land, 'tis thine . . . Boote, boote, Master Shallow, I know the young King is sick for mee . . .

And discomfiture of course follows. Whereas Dogberry has perfectly accommodated himself to those on whom he depends, making their ideals his own. His list of qualifications is revealing:

> I am a wise fellow, and which is more, an officer, a householder, and which is more, as pretty a peece of flesh as any in Messina, and one that knowes the Law, goe to, and a rich fellow enough, goe to, and a fellow that hath had losses, and that hath two gownes, and everything handsome about him.

It needs little acquaintance with the Leonato circle to realize that for them too it is a principal concern that everything, as far as possible, shall remain "handsome about them."

[Fortune] shall not be impaired, social position shall be safeguarded; this would seem to be the prime occupation of society in Messina. Obviously, it is an important occupation; but equally obviously, it has no claims to be considered as unique. To fill up the gap, war is allowed of as a diversion for males and, for both the sexes, games and small talk. Thus, though not active about things of great importance nor, it would appear, importantly active about anything, society in Messina manages to keep up the appearance of great activity.

Such a society has the merit of being a society, that is, a more or less stable organization of human beings for common ends; and ex hypothesi, it is charming on the surface. For appearances lie on the surface. Yet for that reason they may be hollow; and there is a danger that faculties, exercised exclusively on appearances, may incapacitate themselves for dealing with, or even for recognizing, substance, when on occasion this presents
itself. Something of the kind would seem to have happened to Pedro, Leonato, Claudio and their like; who when faced with the substance of Hero's grief, display an incompetence as great as that of any Dogberry; give rein to a hybris which is, perhaps, greater. For it is inconceivable that any but the most pampered and therefore the most spoilt members of a society should, in circumstances of such distress, show themselves as immune as they do from self-questioning, as free from misgiving. Hybris on this scale is of course tragic; but, it may be suggested, hybris on this scale is also ridiculous—indeed, unless the ridiculous aspect is first acknowledged, the tragic may escape acknowledgement altogether. For human vanity alone constitutes a strong temptation to discount it as preposterous. The figures of Dogberry and his kind are necessary in the background, to reduce the figures in the foreground to the required proportions—to the proportions of apes (as Isabella says, in Measure for Measure), apes for whom no tricks are too ferocious, too fantastic. Coleridge's isolation of Dogberry from the main plot is perhaps the effective reason for his dismissal of that plot as a "mere canvas"; and if so, this of itself suggests that the isolation is not to be justified. But there is the further point: because of the same isolation, Coleridge dismisses Dogberry as "ingeniously absurd." Undoubtedly he is: but also, he is relevantly absurd—relevantly absurd to the main plot, and to life such as the main plot renders it. And finally, Dogberry is relevant not only for his absurdity, but for the limitations placed on this absurdity by his persistent if purblind prudence, but the steady if myopic eye which he keeps fixed on appearances—on his office as constable, on his comfort, on the main chance. This immediately establishes his commensurability with the figures of the main plot; who like him, take care not to prejudice what is comfort in their eyes.

Having perhaps established this point, we may allow ourselves to go even further than Coleridge in separating Dogberry and the rest from what he called the "mere necessities of the action." "Any other watchmen," he says, "would have served the latter equally well"; whereas now it would seem clear, that, in all probability, they would have served it better. Few if any other watchmen would have taken stock of themselves as frankly as Dogberry; they would not therefore appear guilty of an inconsistency, as Dogberry's assistants seem to be, in arresting the swashbucklers Conrad and Borachio. For they have just declared an intention to attempt no such thing. Or perhaps this inconsistency is due, not to the watchmen, but to the swashbucklers; who indeed, from this point in the play onwards, show a remarkable meekness. But the matter is hardly worth discussing; nor, perhaps, whether the carelessness involved on the author's part is to be described as positive or negative.


Anthony B. Dawson

[Below, in an excerpt from a larger essay, Dawson examines Dogberry's role in interpreting and expressing messages. The critic also offers an interesting comparison of Dogberry with Bottom, from A Midsummer Night's Dream.]

Dogberry and Bottom make an interesting contrast. Bottom is involved in drama, he seeks to play all roles, he is transformed in the course of a metadrama which reflects the concern of A Midsummer Night's Dream with metamorphosis and the art of the drama. His blithe unawareness of the conditions and constraints of theatrical "reality" (in contrast to, say, Puck's very sharp awareness) is a large part of his humor. Dogberry, on the other hand, is involved in investigation, in seeking out the truth. His language is peppered with malapropisms, which distort language as, analogously, Bottom distorts dramatic conventions, and which reveal Dogberry's proud concern with language just as Bottom's theatrical bravado reveals his egotistical interest in the drama. Dogberry, again like Bottom, is blithely unaware of his humorous incompetence. Thus, at the very core of what makes each of them funny we can perceive the central concerns of the plays they inhabit.

The gap between Dogberry's professional involvement with investigation, with clues that lead to truth, and his evident failure to master the relations between reality as he perceives it and language (his malapropisms
frequently mean the opposite of what he "means"), is central to the comic irony of the play as a whole. It is precisely gaps between modes of interpretation which give structure to the plot and fascinate both the characters and the audience. Language is central to interpretation, both as a model for it, and as the medium in which it is carried out. This double function is one of the sources of confusion and uncertainty in the play.

Dogberry's speech on being called an ass offers an illustration:

> Dost thou not suspect my place? Does thou not suspect my years? O that he were here to write me down an ass! But, masters, remember that I am an ass. Though it be not written down, yet forget not that I am an ass. No, thou villain, thou art full of piety, as shall be proved upon thee by good witness I am a wise fellow; and which is more, an officer; and which is more, as pretty a piece of flesh as any is in Messina . . . Bring him away. O that I had been writ down an ass! (IV.ii.73-86)

The humor in the substitution of "suspect" for "respect," "piety" for "impiety," is itself a sign of insufficient control over the process of signification; but this failure of control becomes most explicit and most humorous in the play with the word and concept "ass" and the application of that word to Dogberry.

Again a contrast with Bottom is instructive. In keeping with the codes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Bottom is turned literally (or should we say, "theatrically," as part of the show) into an ass. Here, in order to bring out the analogous assinity of Dogberry, a linguistic rather than a theatrical code is invoked. In both plays, too, an ironic truth is discovered in assinity, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a result of Bottom's dream (I am thinking of the underlying sense of value, of concord generated out of discord, that ultimately emerges from his dream and his hilariously confused discourse about it); in *Much Ado* as a result of the success of Dogberry's investigation. In the speech under discussion, Dogberry's syntax and the oppositions he creates ("I am an ass . . . I am a wise fellow"), leave us momentarily uncertain whether he truly understands the word "ass." We know he does, but the syntax works against our accepting the fact—"yet forget not that I am an ass." Alternatively, one could say that the word Dogberry misunderstands in "am"; he uses it as if it could have only one kind of locutionary force, or only one tone (as in "So I'm an ass, am I?") or one meaning ("he says I am"). Just as we have to supply the right word in order to get the humor of "Dost thou not suspect my place," so we have to supply the right construction in the sentences that follow. In order to laugh, we have to remind ourselves of what Dogberry "really" means, and at the same time be aware of the appropriateness of what he actually says. Hence the simple correlation, ass-Dogberry, is complicated by a series of interpretative interventions on our part, a series which goes something like this: he is saying he's an ass; he doesn't mean what he says; this is not because he doesn't understand the word "ass" or the word "am," but because he lacks the linguistic power to achieve control over his meaning; nevertheless, what he is saying is *true*; in fact saying it shows him to be an ass. Thus the process of signification itself, so crucial to this play, is brought into humorous relief, exactly as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the process of dramatic representation is highlighted by Bottom's transformations.

The distinction between spoken and written language is another of Dogberry's concerns. The exaggerated respect of the unlettered for the written word is part of what is behind Dogberry's desire to be *written*. But beyond that, he alludes to the primacy of writing in the law, and by extension in culture in general. "It is written" is the mark of cultural validity. To become part of a text is to become official; to be writ down an ass would, ironically, fix Dogberry, making him an ass for all time. This, of course, is exactly what Shakespeare has done, though in a slightly different sense than that Dogberry has in mind when he seeks his own textualization.

The problem of the transference of messages is raised most cunningly within the play in the scene in which Dogberry comes with his report to Leonato just before the wedding. The audience cannot help feeling tantalized here, knowing the importance of Dogberry's message and yet becoming increasingly aware of the
fact that Dogberry does not realize its importance, and is probably ignorant of what the real crime, and hence the real message, is. As we watch, we begin to realize that he will not be able to get the message across to Leonato in time to prevent the breaking of the nuptial—except by chance, through some random statement that Leonato will suddenly be able to perceive as significant. But the more Dogberry rambles on, the more likely Leonato is to dismiss him; as an audience we are thus caught in a squeeze, knowing that Dogberry has to be allowed to ramble in order to stumble into revealing the crime and yet realizing that Dogberry's vice of rambling is likely to lead to his quick dismissal. Wanting the message to come through, we are yet caught between the logic of that desire and our enjoyment of the comedy of misinterpretation. The difficulty of getting the message across thus enters directly into our response—we are teased, desiring the discovery and resisting it at once.

Essays

Feminist Criticism of Beatrice and Hero

At the conclusion of the play, Much Ado's two principal female characters---Beatrice and Hero---prepare to wed their respective mates. This is certainly an appropriate end for a comedy in which the relationship between the sexes serves as an overarching theme, and the audiences of Shakespeare's day saw the pre-marital dance as both a happy and a fully expected outcome. But from the standpoint of a modern feminist sensibility, Beatrice and Hero's acceptance of marriage can be interpreted in a highly negative light. Indeed, from a modern feminist perspective, that Beatrice marries a "professed tyrant" of women while Hero weds a man who has inflicted gross humiliation upon her demonstrates that these women are portrayed by Shakespeare as subordinated and powerless figures in the male-dominated society of Messina. From this modern feminist viewpoint, the author of Much Ado can be accused of gender bias.

Any assessment of this charge must begin with Beatrice: of all Shakespeare's comic heroines, Beatrice comes closest to embodying feminist values. At the very start of the play, only Beatrice is capable of penetrating through the inflated egos of Don Pedro and his gallant soldiers. She makes no bones about her disdain for the overblown macho gallantry which the returned heroes use as veneer to hide their lust, and she is equally aggressive in her rejection of any potential suitors. It is crucial to note that Beatrice is not anti-male, but instead keen to counter the use of male wit and deception as a means for controlling her. In her independence and in her own command of wit, Beatrice is an attractive character, and we must assume that feminist critics would approve of Beatrice before her "conversion" at the start of Act III.

In the parallel orchard scene that begins Act III, Beatrice is partially deceived by Hero and Ursula about Benedick's passion for her. During this charade, Hero speaks with a great deal of candor about the character defects of her cousin, knowing full well that Beatrice is within earshot. Hero's words resonate for Beatrice: after hearing them, she resolves to abandon her proud and scornful attitude, saluting "Contempt, farewell, and maiden pride adieu!" (III, i., l.109). Contrary to feminist criticism, what is crucial to observe here is that it is the opinion of her female cousin, Hero, that counts for Beatrice and that Beatrice herself recognizes her own arrogance as an inglorious quality. Rather than being pressured by a male dominated society into a pliant female headed toward marriage, Beatrice initiates her change of attitude on her own accord and with the aid of a mirror held to her face by another woman. Indeed, after this conversion, Beatrice is fully capable of directing Benedick to Hero's side, going so far as to insist that he "Kill Claudio."

One of the chief issues that has divided critics of all stripes in their respective readings of Much Ado About Nothing concerns Hero's acceptance of Claudio after he has spurned her on their first wedding day. Many commentators, and virtually all modern feminist critics have found it intolerable that Claudio should be reunited with Hero after believing a flimsy slander and rejecting her in public on their wedding day. On this count, we note that the extraordinarily satiric wit of Beatrice should not blind us to the fact that the gentler and more feminine Hero is fully capable of holding her own in the war of the sexes. When a disguised Don Pedro attempts to woo Hero, she matches wits with him, showing that she is by no means a vapid, powerless female. In response to the masked Don Pedro's requests that she walk with him, Hero makes it clear that she will do so only on her terms, i.e., "so you walk softly, and look sweetly, and say nothing, I am yours for the walk, and especially when I walk away" (II, i., ll. 88-90). Hero is not as pliant to male will as is often supposed; she merely appears that way when set alongside the feistier Beatrice.

Hero does accept Claudio back into her fold in Act V. But two points should be taken into account before she is condemned for this even by modern, feminist lights. First, Claudio suffers deeply upon learning that he is, in fact, a victim of Don John's vile deception. Hero can forges him not because she is subservient, but because he is penitent. Second, Hero does not demand the satisfaction of humiliating Claudio as he humiliated her. By virtue of this, Shakespeare elevates the Hero to the status of a genuine Christian heroine who, like
Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, recognizes the supremacy of mercy as a value. In the end, Hero's willingness to forgive Claudio is presented by Shakespeare as a model of behavior for both the female and the male participants in the war of the sexes. Beatrice and Hero may concur in their assumption of a wifely role in a male-dominated society, but not before they demonstrate the inherent superiority of feminine traits like compassion and forgiveness, and, in this way, modify and improve Messinian society as a whole. That being so, the feminist charges against Shakespeare's handling of Beatrice and Hero cannot be sustained.

The Artificiality of Messinian Society

There is a strong suggestion that Shakespeare took elements of contemporary Venetian society into account in his imaginative construction of Messina, its local society and dominant values. Venice in Shakespeare's day was a leading commercial power, and, like Messina, it was a materially rich city in which attendance at masquerades was expected of all its leading figures. Even more to the point, Venice was known in Elizabethan times as a hotbed of intrigue and deception, a place in which outsiders could easily be fleeced by indigenous city-slickers. Messina too is full of plots and ploys, some benign in their aims, others malevolent in their purposes. At bottom, there is "something wrong" in Messina.

As noted elsewhere in this analysis of *Much Ado*, in Act I, scene i., not only does the legitimate Prince of Aragon, Don Pedro, appear on the stage with his loyal followers, his bastard brother Don John is there as well, along with a brace of demi-villains to assist him in further dirty work. Don Pedro explains that even though Don John has attempted to turn his reign, the two are now reconciled. For Shakespeare's audiences, this would have sounded loud of alarums. Threats to the state by illegitimate usurpers had only one proper ending in Elizabethan society, the execution of the guilty. Seeing a defeated enemy of the state on stage, moving about freely and permitted to rub elbows with the local Messinians would be interpreted as a sign of weakness in the body politic. Under Leonato, Messina is a weak patriarchy, vulnerable to intrigue and disorder, with clowns like Dogberry assigned the task of safeguarding the public order. It is noteworthy that once Don Pedro has explained his "reconciliation" with Don John, no further word is said about the rebellion that the later has presumably led. Instead, war, even civil war, is treated by the victors and their hosts as a gentlemanly pursuit, a sport in which individuals distinguish themselves, rather than a serious political crisis.

Ceremony and custom predominate in Messina. With the possible exception of Beatrice, an elaborate social code of behavior defines and constrains all of the characters in the play. Claudio turns over the wooing of Hero to Don Pedro not because he thinks that the much older man has greater romantic charms than himself, but because Don Pedro is equal in rank with Leonato and can therefore better meet the customary obligation of requesting the governor's permission for his daughter to wed. Indeed, even the mature Benedick must seek out Leonato's blessing before marrying Beatrice, the patriarch's niece.

There is a narcissistic self-centeredness infused throughout the Messina of Shakespeare's *Much Ado*. The "hero soldiers" of Don Pedro's cause are given to florid, self-congratulatory rhetoric. Indeed, ornate, artificial and stilted language is the common verbal currency of Messina. The text of the play is replete with antithesis, alliteration, puns, euphemisms, repetitions, and word-patterns. The imagery of *Much Ado* is also artificial and tends toward the prosaic and the conventional, e.g., as in the "clothes" motif, rather than the strikingly imaginative. What people say and, above all, how they say it, counts heavily in Leonato's court. Indeed, one reason that both Beatrice and Benedick are held in such high regard stems from their capacity for verbal wit. On the bottom of the social hierarchy, Dogberry plugs away, trying to use "big words" over which he has no command or even comprehension.

Social rank and money figure large in Messina. Claudio may be immediately smitten by Hero, yet his inquiry about whether her father has a son and, hence, a male heir, fleshes out the welcome fact that Hero will inherit her father's estate. In Act V, Leonato seals the marriage of Claudio to a fictitious niece by mentioning that she too comes equipped with a suitable dowry. Indeed, one of the reasons that Claudio and Don Pedro react so negatively to the sight of Hero (actually Margaret) taking a lover (actually Borachio) is that they feel that they
have been "cheated" in a marriage "bargain."

Against this social backdrop of hypocrisy, some characters do distinguish themselves. Beatrice and, to a lesser extent, Benedick, remain apart from Messinian society. Their non-conformity is, in fact, a virtue. Friar Francis is also outside of Messina's highly secularized culture by virtue of his clerical vocation and his good sense. What ails Messina, however, can be cured by the introduction of a counterweight to curb unrestrained male egotism. Thus, not only would Don Pedro and the (presumed) widower Leonato benefit from having a female partner, Messina itself is in evident need of feminine charity and concern for others.
Much Ado About Nothing

From its opening lines to its final scene, MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING is a feast of wit and verve. The play’s humor runs from slapstick to subtle wordplay, and it features Shakespeare’s Wittiest couple, Beatrice and Benedick.

The plot consists of two interwoven love stories: those of Beatrice and Benedick, and that of Claudio and Hero. Claudio, accompanying his friend, Don Pedro to Messina, is smitten with the lovely Hero, daughter of Leonato, governor of Messina. To help his friend, Don Pedro assumes Claudio’s identity at a masked ball and woos Hero. In the meantime, Don John, bastard brother of Don Pedro, does his worst to undermine the love affair by convincing Claudio that Hero is unfaithful.

Benedick, another friend of Don Pedro, has arrived in Messina a confirmed bachelor, ridiculing men who succumb to marriage. Equally opposed to marriage is Beatrice, Leonato’s niece, the verbal jousting partner of Benedick. The fireworks between these two spark the play. Don Pedro, Hero, Claudio, and Leonato all conspire to bring this unlikely couple together.

The plot speeds to its climax on Hero and Claudio’s wedding day as Don John’s deceit convinces all but Beatrice and Benedick. When Don John’s evil plot is exposed in a hilarious report by the constable, Dogberry, Claudio is led to believe that his foolish acceptance of Don John’s lies about Hero has led to her death. One remaining plot twist awaits the repentant Claudio. After he consents to marry Leonato’s niece, he learns that Hero in fact is alive. A double wedding ensues.

Bibliography:


Hunter, Robert Grams. Shakespeare and the Comedy of Forgiveness. New York: Columbia University Press, 1965. Argues persuasively that the thematic core of several Shakespeare comedies derives from the tradition of English morality plays. In Much Ado About Nothing, Claudio sins against the moral order by mistrusting Hero and is saved by repentance and forgiveness.


Children of the Mind: Miscarried Narratives in Much Ado about Nothing

Introduction

Children of the Mind: Miscarried Narratives in Much Ado about Nothing

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An idea for a short story about people in Manhattan who are constantly creating these real unnecessary neurotic problems for themselves ’cause it keeps them from dealing with more unsolvable, terrifying problems about the universe.

—Woody Allen, Manhattan

When Beatrice first speaks in Much Ado about Nothing, she inquires after Benedick: "I pray you, is Signior Mountanto returned from the wars or no?" (I.i.28-9). That her first concern is Benedick's welfare suggests an interest in him beyond their ongoing "skirmish of wit" (I.i.58). Like Benedick's assertion that Beatrice exceeds Hero "as much in beauty as the first of May doth the last of December" (L.i. 178-9), her question looks ahead to their open acknowledgment of love and concluding nuptials. That Beatrice refers to Benedick as "Signior Mountanto" (I.i.28)—literally, "Lord Upward Thrust"—also implies, through a bawdy innuendo, the erotic nature of their "merry war" (I.i.56).

We thus meet Beatrice and Benedick in medias res, the two having already developed an antagonistic attraction: "I know you of old," Beatrice cryptically apostrophizes (L.i. 133-4). As they quarrel, compete, and court, their veiled allusions to the past do more than provide a context for their war of words. Suggesting images of sex, birthing, and loss, Beatrice's language—particularly in II.i—evokes possible causes for their mutual animosity and hints at ominous events from their past that lend depth to the play's comic tone. I want to posit a history for Beatrice and Benedick, a history to which the text alludes but always deflects. I further wish to suggest, in the second part of my reading, that such deflection is itself the subject of comedy: at the core of the play lies a haunting sense of loss that the characters, especially Beatrice, communicate obliquely.

This technique of alluding to an undeveloped, possible history represents a neglected strategy of Shakespeare's dramaturgy: he convinces us of the worlds that he creates by intimating suggestive details of his characters' past experience. I am not concerned whether Benedick and Beatrice actually lived the history that the text implies; rather, I think it important that Shakespeare contextualizes the fiction that he dramatizes by evoking another fiction that he does not.

I Hinting at events that precede the play, the multiple allusions to Hercules in Much Ado about Nothing color Benedick's conversion from soldier to lover as his relationship with Beatrice progresses. To understand how these images may have been intended to influence our perception of his character, we need first to recall that Hercules was born when Zeus tricked the virgin Alcmene into sleeping with him. Enraged by another of her husband's infidelities, Hera tried to prevent Hercules' delivery by having the goddess of childbirth sit outside Alcmene's room with her legs and fingers crossed; when that plan failed, Hera attempted to murder the child by sending two serpents to strangle him in his crib.

The theme of infanticide recurs in the story of Hercules: struck by Hera with a fit of madness, Hercules murdered his own children, two of his nephew's children, and in some versions of the myth, his wife. He performed his twelve labors as punishment from the Pythia, the prophetess of Apollo at Delphi. To absolve
himself, she stipulated that he must visit King Eurystheus and do whatever tasks the ruler demanded.

Hercules' reputation as a child killer later prevented his marriage to Iole, the daughter of another king, Eurytus. Eurytus had put up Iole as the reward in an archery contest, but after Hercules defeated the king and his sons, Eurytus reneged on his offer because of Hercules' past crimes. Hercules vowed revenge, and when Iphitus, the eldest son of Eurytus, requested Hercules' aid in searching for the king's missing horses, Hercules killed again. He flung Eurytus' son off the walls of Tiryns. As punishment, the gods inflicted Hercules with a disease, and so a second time he sought the Pythia's advice. She told Hercules that he could cure his malady and receive absolution if he were sold as a slave to Omphale, Queen of Lydia. According to some Roman authors, Hercules had to dress in women's clothes while in Omphale's service and tend to domestic chores, such as providing music and spinning yarn.

In Much Ado about Nothing, Benedick allies himself with Hercules by comparing Beatrice to Omphale. She is so unreasonable, he quips, that "She would have made Hercules have turned the spit, yea, and have cleft his club to make the fire too" (II.i.236-8). Initially he suggests a series of Herculean labors to escape Beatrice: when she enters with Claudio after the dance, Benedick frantically beseeches Don Pedro to send him away; he will do even the most absurd task—"the slightest errand" (II.i.248)—to avoid her company. Benedick's exaggerated request for permission, even when playfully performed, not only calls attention to Beatrice's independence in her ensuing rejection of Don Pedro, but also casts Benedick as a burlesque version of the Greek hero. He rattles off a list of pointless, Herculean labors: "I will fetch you a tooth-picker now from the furthest inch of Asia," he offers, or "bring you the length of Prester John's foot" (II.i.250-2). Thus, as Beatrice enters, Benedick suggests that he would prefer this kind of futile activity so as to escape the consequences of his earlier gibes—or, in terms of the play's title, he introduces the idea of a great deal of work for nothing.

By the end of the play, however, Benedick offers to perform such labors on Beatrice's behalf. When Claudio slanders Hero at their wedding, Beatrice laments the decline of manhood by caustically observing, "He is now as valiant as Hercules that only tells a lie and swears it" (IV.i.320-1). Motivated in part by his own belief that Claudio has wronged Hero, Benedick accepts Beatrice's challenge, agreeing to "Kill Claudio" and thus defend Hero's honor (IV.i.288). He has moved from his own parody of a militant Hercules, eager to fetch Don Pedro "a hair off the great Cham's beard" (II.i.252), to a love-struck version of the over-achieving hero. For Beatrice, he will do anything; he pledges to "live in thy heart, die in thy lap, and be buried in thy eyes" (V.ii.94-5). Although we cannot know what previously occurred between Beatrice and Benedick, the play's allusions to Hercules suggest the need for atonement: just as Hercules depends on the Pythia and must serve Omphale, Benedick eventually places himself in a woman's control to find forgiveness for his own past crime. Hinting at the nature of this crime, Beatrice explains that Benedick, like Hercules challenging King Eurytus, had attempted to rival "Cupid at the flight; and my uncle's fool, reading the challenge, subscribed for Cupid, and challenged him at the bird-bolt" (I.i.36-8). Although we do not know for certain the identity of her "uncle's fool," Beatrice calls her own heart "poor fool" (II.i.295); and as Benedick's verbal adversary, she seems the likeliest candidate to have encountered him on Cupid's behalf. In addition to its association with the god of love, the phallic shape of a "bird-bolt," a blunt arrow, implies a sexual challenge.

The "flight" to which Benedick challenged Cupid during his previous visit presumably refers to the flight of an arrow, but "flight" also can denote an act of fleeing or an extraordinary display of something, such as fancy, or in the case of Cupid, love. Thus, in this one speech, Beatrice subtly justifies her hostility toward Benedick: she compresses into a whimsical narrative hints that he seduced and abandoned her, using one word, "flight," to connote both. Beatrice conjures the image of Benedick striding into town, advertising his interest in love ("He set up his bills here," I.i.35)—but taking "flight" at the first sign of her challenge. As Carol Cook notes, when the play opens Beatrice "already seems to be nursing wounds from some abortive romance with Benedick." I will argue that the play is more suggestive than Cook describes, and that Cook's own diction—"nursing" and "abortive"—unconsciously echoes the text's allusions to Beatrice and Benedick's
previous romance.

II
We get perhaps our best glimpse of Benedick and Beatrice's pre-history during Beatrice's conversation with Don Pedro. She explains that she puts Benedick down "[s]o I would not he should do me, . . . lest I should prove the mother of fools" (II.i.267-8). Just as she earlier alluded to Benedick's visit as a sexual encounter—a challenge "at the bird-bolt" (I.i.38)—the verbs "do" and "put down" also suggest a sexual conquest; her concern with becoming a "mother of fools" points to a real, potential outcome of letting down her guard. More subtly, the lack of punctuation in her remark signals a complexity that Beatrice's humor masks. Without a comma, the dependent and independent clauses collide: the sentence "So I would not he should do me" suggests, on the one hand, "If I did not insult him, he would put me down" and, on the other, "I insult him, so that he should not put me down." Although both versions convey the same general meaning, the possibility that "not" can attach itself to the "I" clause or the "he" clause subtly obscures responsibility for putting down the other person. The negation of "not" acts as a hinge between Beatrice and Benedick, knotting them together while, as a negation, keeping them apart.

The full implications of this "not" / "knot" become clearer as Beatrice discusses "the heart of Signior Benedick": she says that Benedick "lent it me awhile, and I gave him use for it" (II.i.259-62). The word "use" can mean interest (as in usury), but it also denotes employment or maintenance for sexual purposes (as when "using someone" means having sex). Beatrice seems to say that Benedick temporarily loved her, and she responded to his advances.

We need to doubt, of course, that Beatrice and Benedick once had a sexual relationship, but her diction momentarily teases us into questioning what previously transpired. As Sandra Cavallo and Simona Cerutti note, a man's promise to marry a woman in early modern Europe—especially if he were a man of honor—was often enough to initiate a sexual relationship: "a woman pledged her sexuality, obtaining from the man, through his promise of marriage, the guarantee of a new condition that assured her a permanent state of honor." The deception to which women were susceptible in this exchange "was so frequent and endemic" that it acquired a specific vocabulary in Italian: "dare la burla (to give the trick); gettare la burla (to throw the trick); or burlare (to trick or deceive in the sense of making a fool of)." A man had the power, in other words, to rescind a promise of marriage simply by turning it into a "trick" and thus mocking the woman and those with her who had foolishly believed him.

Balthasar alludes to this practice of false wooing when he sings about the "fraud of men" who "were deceivers ever" (II.iii.63, 72) and advises women to "sigh not so, but let them go, / And be you blithe and bonny" (II.iii.66-7). Such tricks also occur frequently in Shakespeare's other comedies. Bertram in All's Well that Ends Well breaks his promises to both Helena and Diana: he flees from Helena before consummating their marriage and abandons Diana after (apparently) seducing her. Similarly, in Measure for Measure, Claudio impregnates Juliet before their marriage, Lucio breaks his promise to marry Kate Kepdown after she becomes pregnant, and Angelo gives Mariana the trick "in chief / For that her reputation was disvalu'd" (V.i.219-20).

When Beatrice complains to Benedick that "You always end with a jade's trick, I know you of old" (I.i.133-4), she suggests a scenario in which Benedick "gave the trick" to negate a promise of marriage. Although Much Ado about Nothing could not support an explicit reference to this kind of deception, the hint of such duplicitous behavior, common as it was, is sufficient to darken briefly the comedy's light-hearted tone. Beatrice's words "always" and "of old" suggest that Benedick characteristically retreated when he felt threatened by her, as he does during the dance when she approaches with Claudio and as he does during their badinage after volleying a last insult.
Again and again, Beatrice conflates her feelings for Benedick with sex and pregnancy. Explaining to Don Pedro that she once gave Benedick "a double heart for his single one" (II.i.261-2), she conjures a metaphor of considerable intimacy. By "double heart" she may be referring to the union of her heart with Benedick's, or to the compounded interest that she earned on his borrowed affection. The metaphor carries the added implication that in return for Benedick's "single" heart, she could have given him two, hers and a child's. The "not" that ties her and Benedick together would then signify a miscarriage or abortion—that is, an absent child who remains unspoken, but nevertheless haunts her conversation about Benedick and marriage. The play's frequent references to Hercules, who murdered his children, his nephew's children, and King Eurytus's son, subliminally evoke, at least, the idea of lost children and the need for forgiveness. Although the predominant tone of the play cannot support more than this furtive suggestion, that suggestion is enough.

Even the title of Much Ado about Nothing subtly suggests as part of the play's metaphoric structure the idea of a lost child. In the seventeenth century, "nothing" could signify a nobody as well as something or someone destroyed or non-existent; according to the editors of the OED, Shakespeare established the first usage of several meanings of this word. We also ought to recall that Shakespeare would have likely been thinking about a dead child while composing the play, for he wrote it around the middle or later part of 1598, soon after losing Hamnet, his only son. The term "ado" in the title not only meant action or fuss, but also signified labor or work forced upon a person, as in Hercules' labors or the labor of childbirth; the editors of the OED identify its usage as "labour, trouble, difficulty" as early as 1485. Thus the phrase "much ado about nothing" includes among its various implications the tragedy of miscarriage or the death of an infant, for which a woman suffered much without producing a living child.

In Beatrice's conversation with Don Pedro, her thoughts turn naturally from Benedick to childbirth. When Don Pedro presumes she must have been "born in a merry hour" because she is so "pleasant-spirited," she takes him literally, responding with uncommon candor about the pain of birthing: "No, sure, my lord, my mother cried" (II.i.314, 320, 315). That Beatrice, too, has experienced such pain remains—and, to preserve the play's comic atmosphere, must remain—virtually impossible. Yet, she obscures the outcome of her and Benedick's previous romance:

Don Pedro. Come, lady, come, you have lost the heart of Signior Benedick.

Beatrice. Indeed, my lord, he lent it me awhile, and I gave him use for it, a double heart for his single one. Marry, once before he won it of me with false dice, therefore your Grace may well say I have lost it.

(II.i.259-64)

Although "it" signifies Benedick's heart in the first two phrases—"he lent it me" and "I gave him use for it" (II.i.261-2)—its subsequent meaning is less clear. Logically, "he won it of me" ought to refer to Beatrice's heart, which Benedick claimed under false pretenses (i.e., "false dice"). But grammatically we expect the antecedent to remain consistent and "it" to signify still Benedick's heart. Substituting "Benedick's heart" for "it," however, makes little sense: once before he won his own heart from her? Beatrice may, of course, mean that Benedick had won his heart back from her, but the passage's ambiguity at least temporarily reunites Beatrice's and Benedick's hearts: her explanation grammatically recreates the "double heart" that she describes.

Like the half-disclosed events that precede the play, Beatrice's antecedents are teasingly unclear; that the "it" signifying Benedick's heart becomes unstable insinuates that he was unfaithful to her. In the final phrase "I have lost it," Beatrice may mean that she has lost her heart to Benedick or that she lost Benedick's heart. The ambiguity in the previous usage of "it" now allows a flood of possibilities to rush in. We can no longer say with certainty what Beatrice has lost from her past relationship with Benedick—his heart? her heart? her
virginity? a child? Perhaps "it" means that she has lost the game of courting, the metaphor she introduces in the phrase "he won . . . with false dice."

Beatrice's claim that "I am sunburnt" (II.i.300) suggests still another kind of loss. By sunburnt, she observes that, unlike the "fair Hero" (II.i.280-1), she is dark-complexioned and, therefore, not attractive enough to marry, according to Renaissance notions of beauty. "Burnt" in early modern England, however, also meant parched or dried up, as from a sexually transmitted disease. Beatrice specifically complains that she is "sick" when she learns that Benedick loves her. Margaret's punning prescription, "distilled Carduus benedictus" (III.iv.68), refers to a general cure-all used during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that had a special application for women. The herbalist William Langham claimed that Carduus benedictus "helpeth the matrix" and "provoketh . . . the termes," and in his guidebook for midwives, Jacob Rueff notes the tradition that "If a woman take the juycie of Carduus, and shall cast it up againe being taken, it is supposed to be a certaine signe of conception." Beatrice's complaint that "I am stuffed" (III.iv.59) thus warrants Margaret's remedy; like Benedick's sexually suggestive name, her diction has a sexual innuendo. Triggering a series of other bawdy puns—"prick'st," "thistle" (III.iv.71)—the word "stuffed" and the reference to Carduus benedictus together evoke sex and pregnancy, which, although not literally true, reveal how Beatrice thinks about a relationship with Benedick.

Throughout the play, Beatrice uses metaphors of disease to refer to Benedick. If she suffers, he is to blame, for she has caught "the Benedick," a sickness that, she jokes, costs a thousand pounds to cure (I.i.81). Scorning his new friendship with Claudio, Beatrice playfully warns that Benedick "will hang upon him like a disease" and that Benedick "is sooner caught than the pestilence, and the taker runs presently mad" (I.i.78-80). Even at the wedding, Beatrice finally relents only because, she tells Benedick, "I was told you were in a consumption" (V.iv.96). Though couched in these humorous remarks, Beatrice's association of Benedick with disease suggests that their previous relationship has caused her considerable injury. The final allusion also recalls Hercules' relationship to Queen Omphale: just as the diseased Hercules obtains absolution by serving as Omphale's effeminized slave, Benedick, too, may be seeking forgiveness when he submits to Beatrice's charge.

Benedick is the one character who seems to recognize Beatrice's unhappiness perhaps because, the play suggests, he knows its cause. Whereas Don Pedro especially misunderstands Beatrice—he ignores her repeated attempts to change the subject to her cousin and overlooks her insulting reference to his bastard brother, "Hath your Grace ne'er a brother like you?" (III.304)—Benedick intimates that he and Beatrice know a great deal about each other. Referring to Beatrice's "base (though bitter) disposition" (III.193), for example, Benedick may be alluding to her hurt feelings from their previous encounter. Rather than implying a causal relationship between the two words—i.e., that Beatrice is bitter because of her poor quality—Benedick positions them as two contradictory facts, "base (though bitter)," as if the latter somehow restricted or qualified the former. The adversative phrase "though bitter" thus suggests that he sympathizes with Beatrice; while belittling her, he parenthetically acknowledges what no one else in the play realizes: she is nevertheless full of affliction.

Similarly, as Benedick attempts to write Beatrice a poem, his poor rhymes create provocative word associations. Benedick keeps stumbling on "very ominous endings": he "can find out no rhyme to 'lady' but 'baby,'" and all he can think of for "scorn," is the "hard rhyme" of the cuckold's "horn" (V.ii.35-9). His frustration not only implies the limits of conventional poetry, but also hints at the circumstances of some half-disclosed, failed affair. Just as Beatrice conflates her feelings for Benedick with sex, pregnancy, and disease, he thinks about their relationship in these "ominous" terms; when he tries to articulate his love, his mind immediately turns to images of a child, rejection, and unfaithfulness.

The couple's final rapprochement within a comic framework requires, however, that such grim events remain ambiguous. Any attempt to argue that Beatrice and Benedick had a child or that they once had a sexual
relationship would be to push into literalism the characters' wordplay and metaphors—or, again in terms of the play's title, to make too much ado about nothing. On the contrary, Shakespeare teases us: the characters of Beatrice and Benedick, as predominantly drawn, could not have experienced the darker, more realistic history that their language implies. Beatrice affirms, after all, that she is still a virgin when she imagines the devil addressing her, "Get you to heaven, Beatrice, get you to heaven, here's no place for you maids" (II.i.41-2). But when Beatrice envisions her death, she first goes, not to heaven, but to the gates of hell: "and there will the Devil meet me like an old cuckold with horns on his head" (II.i.39-40). With the placement of "like an old cuckold," she could be describing the devil or comparing herself to a man whose wife has committed adultery. Once again, her language encourages us to question momentarily her sexual experience. When Beatrice says that she will "lead his apes into hell" (II.i.37), she refers, on the one hand, to the peculiar proverb that virgins escort apes in the underworld. On the other hand, at least one version of this proverb, the ballad "The Maid and the Palmer," describes a maid who must "lead an ape in hell" as part of her penance for having buried her illegitimate children.

III
This strategy of evoking a fragmentary, undeveloped history, which enriches the relationship between Beatrice and Benedick, arises repeatedly in Much Ado about Nothing. Dogberry elliptically refers to the losses he has endured (IV.ii.82), Leonato's wife, Innogen, appears in only two scene headings (I.i and II.i), and Beatrice's parents remain absent and undiscussed. Leonato inquires after Antonio's son (I.ii.1) and claims that Claudio "hath an uncle here in Messina" (I.17), but neither character is incorporated into the play. We do not know against whom Don Pedro, Claudio, and Benedick have been fighting in their recent battle, nor can we explain with certainty whether Don John is their prisoner or a disgruntled ally. More information about Margaret's former relationship with Borachio might help us comprehend how she would agree to dress in Hero's clothes, stand in Hero's window, be addressed as Hero, and bid Borachio as Claudio "a thousand times good night" (III.iii.142-3). In an attempt to account for such inconsistencies, John Dover Wilson and Arthur Quiller-Couch have argued that the ambiguities in the text represent vestiges of an older play that Shakespeare was hurriedly revising. According to Wilson and Quiller-Couch, Shakespeare reworked the play into its surviving state by emphasizing the plot of Beatrice and Benedick, but retaining as much of the older version as possible.

Regardless of its origin—Shakespeare's artistry or the traces of an unknown source-text—this technique of partial information characterizes Shakespeare's dramaturgy: the details of the characters' pasts hover on the periphery of the plays, spied from the corner of our eyes, but frustrating any attempt to specify what has previously transpired. We cannot pinpoint, for example, whether the ghost lies to Hamlet about Claudius's adultery; we are not even told why the crown passed to Claudius, and can only speculate about the exact nature of Hamlet's relationship to Ophelia before his father's death. In King Lear, the absent mother receives scant attention; in Othello, Iago inexplicably refers to Cassio's "fair wife"; and in The Winter's Tale, the events of Polixenes' nine-month visit to Sicily remain ambiguous as do the pressing matters that he cites when he tries to depart. In Romeo and Juliet, the Montagues and Capulets are feuding—but why?

Such shadowy narrative contexts draw us into the dramas by tantalizing us with what has already occurred. We believe that the characters have a past because they do not enter with neat, packaged explanations of their previous experiences: the plays seem more realistic because the characters' lives exceed the boundaries of the stage. As Norman Rabkin argues, Shakespeare's artistic achievement lies in his ability "to create illusory worlds which, like the world we feel about us, make sense in ways that consistently elude our power to articulate them rationally." According to Rabkin, we must understand the worlds of the plays intuitively because they "cannot be reduced to sense." Writing on the Henry IV plays, John Rumrich also emphasizes this kind of "organic messiness" inherent in the "evocative idiom of the dramas"; he suggests that Shakespeare's play-making depends on its "life-like mingling of significance and irresolvability," which often defies the restrictive categories imposed by a critical analysis.
More specifically, the genteel world of Shakespeare's comedy cannot accommodate the volatile passions to which the characters allude. No one in Messina, for example, is able to confront the emotional events that precede the play: except for the messenger's terse account of Don Pedro's victory, we learn little about the recent battle, and the characters can only refer to painful memories covertly. Describing what she calls Messina's "sophisticated, graceful, almost choreographic social forms," Carol Cook notes that its inhabitants often rely on humor to communicate their aggression; the "tight rein kept on emotions" makes "them difficult or dangerous to express."30

Such dangerous emotions receive a fuller and more open treatment in Shakespeare's later comedies. If we doubt that he would have crafted such a cruel history for Beatrice and Benedick, we should recall that Shakespeare often built his comedies around tragic or potentially tragic circumstances. In Troilus and Cressida, Pandarus encourages his niece to become Troilus's mistress. In All's Well that Ends Well, Bertram callously rejects Helena, cruelly tortures his follower Parolles—and shows scant signs of repentance at the play's end. The third of the "problem comedies," Measure for Measure, focuses on prostitution, capital punishment, and premarital intercourse.31 Claudio tries to escape execution by persuading his sister Isabella to gratify Angelo sexually, and Angelo covers up his sexual exploits by ordering Claudio's death.

Although in Much Ado about Nothing Messina, like Beatrice, appears "pleasant-spirited" (II.i.320), it too harbors these darker sentiments. When Claudio, Leonato, and Beatrice successively release their pent-up hostility at the wedding, we momentarily witness the intense emotions that have been percolating beneath Messina's decorum.32 These feelings remain for the most part offstage, however, or lurk in the play's humor and imagery. Just as we do not know what has previously transpired, we must infer what will happen after the final act. Benedick tells Don Pedro not to think about the captured Don John "till tomorrow: I'll devise thee brave punishments for him" (V.iv. 125-6). He then immediately exclaims, "Strike up, pipers!" which is followed by the single stage-direction, "Dance" (V.iv. 126). Such celebrating suggests a cathartic release, but it also represents an artful dodge: the inhabitants of Messina, in particular Benedick, make "much ado" so as to escape serious consequences. Benedick's promise displaces the torture of Don John, as if Messina could not tolerate such violence; the play cannot linger over his treachery for it to sustain its comic tone. Don John flees after Hero allegedly dies, Hero copes with her public humiliation by hiding, and Don Pedro assuages the pain of Beatrice's rejection by distracting himself with his elaborate match-making. Again and again, the characters turn away from difficult situations; they even brush aside Margaret's complicity, rationalizing that she helped Borachio "against her will" (V.iv.5).33

Benedick most consistently embodies the play's strategy of fleeing from serious consequences. He wears a mask to speak with Beatrice, for example, and cowers in the arbor to avoid Don Pedro and Claudio. He takes flight whenever he feels threatened—at the dance, during his conversation with Beatrice, and during his past visit to Messina. That Benedick should speak the final line is thus fitting: the play leaves us with the threat of violence—Don John's "brave punishments"—but just as the comedy persistently averts its attention from a sense of loss, these punishments remain deflected, put off indefinitely until a "tomorrow" that will never come.

In like manner, Beatrice and Benedick's past is there and not there, alluded to but absent. Rather than depict (or even fully explain) the couple's previous, failed relationship, Shakespeare constructs a parallel narrative with less emotionally complex lovers, Hero and Claudio, whose losses are visible and potentially more devastating than what Beatrice and Benedick have endured. Presumably, because this pair of lovers quickly recovers, so can Beatrice and Benedick. The plot of Hero and Claudio thus represents the present displacement of Beatrice and Benedick's earlier romance; like the jokes that the characters use to sublimate their passions, the story of Hero and Claudio furiously suggests the pain of Benedick and Beatrice. Within Hero's plot, a loss of virginity results in a child's death, and Claudio, like Hercules, must perform a series of prescribed tasks to achieve absolution: he must clear Hero's name, "Hang her an epitaph upon her tomb, / And sing it to her bones," and then marry Leonato's fictitious niece (V.i.278-9). This plot does not entirely
correspond to Beatrice and Benedick's; it refracts and compresses parts of the narrative I have been suggesting. Hero supposedly loses her virginity, for example, the "child" that dies is Leonato's, and, of course, Leonato only pretends that Hero dies. But these discrepancies render Beatrice's possible loss all the more poignant, for the play implies that she may have truly suffered what Leonato feigns and, unlike the fair Hero, she may have truly lost her virginity.

The irony lies in the play's title, "much ado about nothing." It refers to the characters' strategy for denying serious consequences by occupying themselves with futile activity, and, as we have seen, it specifically describes Beatrice's suffering—she endured much ado and she has come away with nothing. The title applies to the relationship between Claudio and Hero because he creates a great deal of fuss over nothing: in fact, Hero has not lost her virginity and she only pretends to die. "Nothing" also means the absence of a "thing," and "thing" in the Renaissance euphemistically signified a penis; this sense applies to the play in that Claudio makes a fuss about Hero's sexual organ. But Beatrice, too, has experienced a great deal of labor/ado because of her "no thing"—because of her womanhood and perhaps because of a lost child. Her emotional response to Hero's ostracism at the wedding becomes even more touching when we acknowledge that Beatrice may empathize with Hero. Beatrice, too, has suffered.

Throughout the play, we encounter metaphoric shades and echoes of "nothing," such as Hero's virtual silence in the opening scene, the watch's orders to do essentially nothing (III.iii.25-80), and Don John's inability to devise any mischief without Borachio's prompting. In addition to its many instances of deflection, Much Ado about Nothing depends on trickery and lying (Don John's machinations, Claudio's false accusation, the ruse to bring together Benedick and Beatrice), words full of sound, veiling their characters' fury, and signifying not the thing that they pretend to represent. The absence of Benedick and Beatrice's child and, more generally, their shared past suggests another manifestation of this theme. By only glimpsing Benedick and Beatrice's previous romance, we can appreciate their "merry war" while remaining distanced enough to find their plight humorous. For us to laugh rather than sympathize, they must make much ado about "nothing"; the source of their pain must remain offstage, just beyond our comprehension.

The technique of implying an undeveloped, fragmentary history for Benedick and Beatrice corresponds to the imagined lost child that haunts their relationship: the details of their previous romance represent a miscarried fiction that complements the fully-conceived narrative, occupying the stage. "I was born to speak all mirth and no matter," Beatrice explains to Don Pedro after rejecting his marriage proposal (II.i.310-1). She is pretending that she is light-hearted, but her explanation also implies that she cannot speak any "matter": she suggests that, because she was born a woman, everything she says is interpreted as mirth. Or she may be hinting that as a woman she must cloak her real feelings with humor. The genre of comedy also demands that she speaks "all mirth" and that what "matters" to Beatrice be communicated in densely allusive language, which continually threatens to undercut the play's light-hearted tone, but can never be explicitly articulated.

Notes

1 William Shakespeare, the Arden Edition of Much Ado about Nothing, ed. A. R. Humphreys (London: Routledge, 1981). Future references will appear parenthetically in the text by act, scene, and line number. In all cases I have checked the text against the first quarto, Much adoe about Nothing (London, 1600), at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin (STC 22304; Pforz 819).

Ironically, Benedick resembles Hercules not through his feats of strength during the war, but in his acceptance of a woman's sovereignty. He appears most heroic when, at Beatrice's prompting, he severs his friendships with Claudio and Don Pedro, and thus resigns from the battlefield. The two kiddingly taunt Benedick to distract themselves from their "high-proof melancholy," but he remains serious and reserved, gallantly thanking Don Pedro for his "many courtesies" and formally announcing that "I must discontinue your company" (V.i.123, 185-7).

Accepting Beatrice's charge, Benedick, like Hercules under Queen Omphale, is made effeminate though still forceful. Beatrice claims that if she were married to a husband without a beard, she would "Dress him in my apparel and make him my waiting-gentlewoman" (II.i.30-1). After learning of Beatrice's love for him, Benedick complies—he shaves, and thus submits, at least symbolically, to her authority. Borachio explicitly refers to a "shaven Hercules" when he contrasts the clothes of "Pharaoh's soldiers" with "Bel's priests" and "the shaven Hercules in the smeared worm-eaten tapestry, where his codpiece seems as massy as his club" (III.iii. 130-4). This image seems to conflate the myth of Hercules with the story of Samson. By simultaneously evoking Hercules' virility and blind Samson's emasculation, the image captures the paradoxical nature of Benedick's changed status. After accepting Beatrice's love, Benedick is both cowed and potent: he shaves according to Beatrice's preference, but in complying with her command he bravely challenges Claudio and defends Hero's honor.

Rather than choose the lance or long-distance arrow, Beatrice mocks Benedick's manhood by arming and countering him with this modest weapon.


Neither the quarto nor the First Folio version punctuates this line.

Sandra Cavallo and Simona Cerutti, "Female Honor and the Social Control of Reproduction in Piedmont between 1600 and 1800," in Sex and Gender in Historical Perspective, ed. Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero, trans. Margaret A. Gallucci (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 73-109, 76, 77-8. For the frequency of prenuptial fornication, see Martin Ingram, Church Courts, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1570-1640 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987). Ingram claims that the "[a]litudes to antenuptial fornication are best summed up as ambivalent but, especially before the end of Elizabeth's reign, tending towards tolerance" (p. 230). For example, the Duke in Measure for Measure (ed. J. W. Lever [London: Routledge, 1992]), claims that Mariana may sleep with Angelo, for "He is your husband on a pre-contract: / To bring you thus together 'tis no sin" (IV.i.72-3).

Cavallo and Cerutti, p. 78. As Ralph A. Houlbrooke observes in The English Family 1450-1700 (London: Longman, 1984), such "private agreements or promises . . . might be highly informal" and therefore "could not be enforced at law" (pp. 81-2).

For an example of the definition that I am applying here, see Lysander's comment during the rustic's play in A Midsummer-Night's Dream, ed. Harold F. Brooks (London: Routledge, 1991): "Less than an ace, man; for he is dead, he is nothing" (V.i.297). See also Cardinal Wolsey in King Henry VIII, ed. R. A. Foakes (London: Routledge, 1991):

So looks the chafed lion
Upon the daring huntsman that has gall'd him;
Then makes him nothing.

(III.ii.206-8)
As an example of "nothing" meaning "a nobody," see Imogen's outburst in *Cymbeline* (ed. J. M. Nosworthy [London: Routledge, 1991]):

> No court, no father, nor no more ado  
> With that harsh, noble, simple nothing,

That Cloten, whose love-suit hath been to me  
As fearful as a siege.

(III.iv.133-6)

We can only speculate how devastating Hamnet's death may have been for the author: as the biographer S. Schoenbaum notes, with Hamnet "died Shakespeare's hopes of preserving the family name according to the common way of mankind" (*Shakespeare's Lives* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991], p. 12). From the parish records we learn that the twins Hamnet and Judith Shakespeare were christened on 2 February 1585, and that Hamnet was buried on 11 August 1596.

The Historie of the Pitifull Life, and Unfortunate Death of Edward the Fifth (London: William Sheares, 1641; Wing M2688A), Thomas More writes, for example, that "the Dutches had much ado in her travell, that shee could not be delivered of him uncut, and that hee came into the world the feet forward" (B3v). Similarly, in *Thystorye and Lyf of the Noble and Crysten Prynce Charles the Grete Kyng of Fraucc* (1485; STC 5013), William Caxton writes "And made no more a-doo to bere hym, than dooth a wulf to bere a lytel lambe."

Based on the methods of delivery described in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century guidebooks, the woman whose child died in the womb experienced considerably more pain than the woman who had a "normal" delivery. In *The Expert Midwife, Or An Excellent and most necessary Treatise of the generation and birth of Man* (London, 1637; STC 21442), for example, Jacob Rueff recommends (and includes pictures of) scraping and pulling devices that appear more torturous than useful.

Beatrice's reference to her mother's crying may imply, more generally, her cultural disappointment in giving birth to a daughter, especially such a strong-willed daughter as Beatrice proves to be. But we ought not to underestimate her literal meaning, given that no anesthetics were used during the Renaissance to alleviate the pains of birthing. In *Child-birth, or The Happy Deliverie of Women* (London, 1612; STC 12496), Jacques Guillemeau only recommends that the laboring woman, "as soone as shee feels her selfe stirred and prouoked with throwes and paines," ought to "walke vp and down the chamber, and then lay herselffe down warm in her bed," repeating this action until "the water bee gathered, and the Matrice be opened" (L4r).


According to herbalist encyclopedias, *Carduus benedictus* was used, among other applications, to assuage fevers, comfort the brain, prevent the plague, induce appetite, cure halitosis, improve the memory, relieve snakebites, and "strengtheneth all the principali partes of the bodie" (see Thomas Cogan, *Haven of Health* [London, 1584; STC 5478], G3v-G4r; and William Langham, *The Garden of Health* [London, 1597; STC 15195], E8r-F3v).

Langham, E8v, F2r; Rueff, N6).

See II.i.268, 296 317.
In light of all the implications in Beatrice's speeches—sex, childbirth, disease, and loss—her rejection of Don Pedro, which may initially surprise readers, now seems logical. He proposes while she reflects upon the suffering she endured in her past relationship with Benedick and, more generally, the pain associated with being a woman. In this frame of mind, she would not likely accept any man, even a prince.

I am following the punctuation of the first quarto, CT. In the Arden Edition of *Much Ado about Nothing*, Humphreys uses commas to set off the phrase "though bitter."

Interestingly, the word "base" not only meant of poor quality, but also denoted illegitimacy, as in Edmund's soliloquy in *King Lear* (ed. Kenneth Muir [London: Routledge, 1991]): "Why bastard? Wherefore base?" (I.ii.6). Benedick's diction playfully suggests one possible explanation for Beatrice's missing parents. For this definition of "base," see also Henry Cornelius Agrippa, *The Commendation of Matrimony*, trans. David Clapham (London, 1534), B8r: "For he is base borne, and is the sonne of the people, yea rather the sonne of no man, which is the chylde of a woman not laufully maryed."

Susan C. Shapiro in "The Originals of Shakespeare's Beatrice and Hero" (*N&Q* 25, 2 [April 1978]: 133-4), argues that Penelope Devereaux, the strong-willed wife of Lord Rich, served as a model of Beatrice. Reportedly Devereaux was so independent that she refused to live with her husband "except at odd intervals." If we accept Shapiro's claim, Benedick's "halting sonnet" (V.iv.87) to his lover becomes that much more humorous, for Lady Rich served as the model for Sidney's "Stella," and more generally, as a patron of literature, she often had poems addressed to her. That she bore five children by her lover Lord Mountjoyn—which echoes Beatrice's nickname for Benedick, "Signior Mountanto"—suggests that the potential inspiration for Beatrice did not let the niceties of social expectations deter her, even in pursuing her sexual desires.


We learn the details of the deception piecemeal. I have combined here Borachio's original description of the plot (II.ii.33-50), his boastful conversation with Conrade (III.iii. 139-47), and his confession to Don Pedro and Claudio (V.i.225-38).


Ibid.


Cook, p. 193.
31 Richard P. Wheeler, *Shakespeare's Development and the Problem Comedies: Turn and Counter-Turn* ([Berkeley: Univ. California Press, 1981], pp. 2-3), neatly summarizes the various uses of the label "problem comedies." Applying the term only to *All's Well that Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*, Wheeler argues that these two plays "occupy a transitional place in Shakespeare's development of comic form" (p. 2).

32 Responding to critics who have complained that Claudio's violent denunciation at the wedding mars the play's comic tone, Cook argues that this eruption of "naked emotions" is intended to startle us (p. 193).

33 To account for Margaret's participation, Borachio claims that she "knew not what she did" (V.i.295), and Leonato offers the terse, unsatisfactory explanation that

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Margaret was in some fault for this,
Although against her will, as it appears
In the true course of all the question.
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(V. iv. 4-6)

34 We glimpse the difference between the two stories in the stringency of the two men's punishments: whereas Claudio's labor seems, by his own admission, "overkindness" (V.i.287), Benedick's labor requires that he "Kill Claudio" (IV.i.288). Beatrice's bluntness and alliteration emphasize the severity of what she asks.

35 The word "nothing" also connotes something that is not very much, like a failed romance, which could apply equally to Claudio and Hero as well as Benedick and Beatrice.

36 For advice and encouragement in the writing of this essay, I would like to thank Eric Mallín, Shannon Prosser, and John Rumrich.

Critical Evaluation

William Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing* has in fact very much to do with “noting” (an intended pun on “nothing”) or half-seeing, with perceiving dimly or not at all. Out of a host of misperceptions arises the comedy of Shakespeare’s drama. Indeed, if it can be said that one theme preoccupies Shakespeare more than any other, it is that of perception, which informs not only his great histories and tragedies but also his comedies. An early history such as *Richard II* (pr. c. 1595-1596, pb. 1600), for example, which also involves tragic elements, proceeds not only from the title character’s inability to function as a king but also from his failure to apprehend the nature of the new politics. Both Othello and King Lear are perfect representatives of the tragic consequences of the inability to see. Hindered by their egos, they live in their own restricted worlds oblivious to reality. When they fail to take the real into account, whether it is the nature of evil or their own limitation, they must pay the cost.

Although the blindness of Leonato, Don Pedro, Claudio, and Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing* very nearly results in tragedy, it is the comic implications of noting rather than seeing that Shakespeare is concerned with here. Yet if his mode is comic, his intention is serious. Besides the characters’ inability to perceive Don John’s villainy, their superficial grasp of love and their failure to understand the nature of courtship and marriage reveal their moral obtuseness. In fact, the whole society is shot through with a kind of civilized shallowness. The play begins as an unspecified war ends, and the audience is immediately struck by Leonato’s and the messenger’s lack of response to the casualty report. To the governor of Messina’s question, “How many gentlemen have you lost in this action?” the messenger replies, “But few of any sort, and none of name.” Leonato comments, “A victory is twice itself, when the achiever brings home full numbers.” The heroes of the war—Don Pedro, Claudio, and Benedick—return in a high good humor, seemingly untouched by their experiences and now in search of comfort, games, and diversion.

Only Beatrice is unimpressed with the soldiers’ grand entrance, for she knows what they are. Between their “noble” actions, they are are no more than seducers, “valiant trenchermen,” gluttons and leeches, or, like Claudio, vain young boys ready to fall in love on a whim. Even the stately Don Pedro is a fool who proposes to Beatrice on impulse after he has wooed the childish Hero for the inarticulate Claudio. In contrast to their behavior, Beatrice’s initial cynicism—“I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow, than a man swear he loves me”—is salutary and seems like wisdom.

Beatrice, however, is as susceptible to flattery as is Benedick. Like her eventual lover and husband, she is seduced by Don Pedro’s deception, the masque he arranges to lead both Beatrice and Benedick to the altar. Both of them, after hearing that they are adored by the other, pledge their love and devotion. To be sure, the scenes in which they are duped are full of innocent humor, but the comedy does not obscure Shakespeare’s rather bitter observations on the folly of human love and courtship.

Nor is their folly and foolishness the end of the matter. Don John realizes that a vain lover betrayed is a cruel and indeed inhuman tyrant. With little effort he convinces Claudio and Don Pedro that the innocent Hero is no more than a strumpet. Yet rather than break off the engagement in private, they wait until all meet at the altar to accuse the girl of “savage sensuality.” Without compunction they leave her in a swoon, believing her dead. Even the father, Leonato, would have her dead rather than shamed. It is this moment that reveals the witty and sophisticated aristocrats of Messina to be grossly hypocritical, for beneath their glittering and refined manners lies a vicious ethic.

In vivid contrast to the decorous soldiers and politicians are Dogberry and his watchmen, although they certainly function as no more than a slapstick diversion. Hilarious clowns when they attempt to ape their social betters in manners and speech, they are yet possessed by a common sense or—as one critic has observed—by an instinctual morality, which enables them to uncover the villainy of Don John’s henchmen.
Conrade and Borachio. As the latter says to the nobleman, Don Pedro, “I have deceived even your very eyes: what your wisdoms could not discover, these shallow fools have brought to light.” Like the outspoken and bawdy Margaret, who knows that underlying the aristocrats’ courtly manners in the game of love is unacknowledged lust, Dogberry and his bumbling followers immediately understand the issue and recognize villainy, though they may use the wrong words to describe it.

Shakespeare does not force the point home in the end. He is not dealing here with characters of great stature, and they could not bear revelations of substantial moral consequence. They may show compunction for their errors, but they exhibit no significant remorse and are ready to get on with the rituals of their class. It does not seem to matter to Claudio whether he marries Hero or someone who looks like her. Even Beatrice has apparently lost her maverick edge as she joins the strut ting Benedick in the marriage dance. All ends well for those involved (with the exception of Don John), but through no great fault of their own.
Much Ado about Nothing (Vol. 31)

Introduction

Much Ado about Nothing

See also Much Ado about Nothing Criticism (Volume 55) and Much Ado about Nothing Criticism (Volume 88).

Much Ado about Nothing has been described by critics as an enjoyable but problematic play. Attempts to categorize it have yielded varied assessments: C. L. Barber (1967) called it a festive comedy because it ends in a celebration; Northrop Frye (1965) identified it as a "green-world" comedy, focusing on Hero's death and rebirth; and Leo Salingar (1974) cited the broken nuptials when labeling Much Ado about Nothing a problem comedy. Scholars have also argued about the structure of the play; Ralph Berry (1971) observed that critics "do not agree on the number of plots, on the identity of the 'main' plot, or on the relevance of the Dogberry scenes." Although commentators have presented contrasting viewpoints on many aspects of Much Ado about Nothing, they have consistently analyzed the relationship of the Beatrice-Benedick subplot to the Hero-Claudio story, the importance of gender roles in the society of Messina, and the theme of appearance versus reality.

Most critics concur that Shakespeare's depiction of the relationship between Beatrice and Benedick far surpasses that of Hero and Claudio in depth and interest. Larry S. Champion (1970) has praised the characters of Beatrice and Benedick, stating that they "are presented as realistic human characters, who with credible motivation develop in their attitude toward love during the course of the play." Scholars have often emphasized the fact that Shakespeare deliberately introduces the theme of the sparring mockers (Beatrice and Benedick) before the theme of the pallid romantics (Hero and Claudio), and that, when all of the principal characters are on stage together, the major interest of the audience is not the love-at-first-sight which develops between Hero and Claudio, but rather the "merry war" occurring between Beatrice and Benedick. Commentators have also noted that while the romance of Hero and Claudio is based on the outer senses, Beatrice and Benedick place more value in each other's inner attributes. B. K. Lewalski (1968) has observed that Beatrice and Benedick act out the pattern of rational lovers, "attracted by physical beauty but regarding the inner qualities of the soul more highly, basing love on genuine knowledge, and accepting it not in terms of mad passion but by conscious choice," which results in a heightened perception of reality. However, John Dover Wilson (1962), while acknowledging that Beatrice and Benedick "are actually the outstanding figures of the play," has contended that "the Hero-Claudio plot, on the whole, is quite as effective as the Beatrice-Benedick one, which is to some extent cumbered with dead wood in the sets-of-wit between the two mockers."

The importance of gender roles in the society of Messina has also attracted significant critical attention. Commentators have explored the role of bawdy language in Much Ado about Nothing in establishing sexuality as a central component of marriage and in emphasizing male power and female weakness. Many critics agree with Carol Thomas Neely's assessment (1985) that while women fear submission to men's aggressive sexual power, men, likewise perceiving sexuality as power over women, fear its loss through female betrayal. Scholars have consistently noted the emphasis on cuckoldry and the imagery of horns and wounds in cuckold jokes told by the men in the play, as well as its importance in establishing sexual and social power. Carol Cook (1986) has observed that the men of Messina fear cuckolding because they believe that in becoming a cuckold, a man relinquishes his dominant role and falls instead to the woman's position as the object of jokes; by telling cuckold jokes, the men retain their power and return the women to silence.

The theme of appearance versus reality has been deemed central to the play's structure and tone. Reflecting on the numerous instances of deception in Much Ado about Nothing, Lewalski has observed, "mistake, pretense,
and misapprehension are of the very substance of life in Messina," and Dover Wilson has asserted, "Eavesdropping and misinterpretation, disguise and deceit—sometimes for evil ends, but generally in fun and with a comic upshot—such are the designs in the dramatic pattern of Much Ado." All of the main characters deceive or are deceived by others at some point during the play. The first instances occur at Leonato's party, as Don Pedro woos Hero in Claudio's name and Don John, pretending to take Claudio for Benedick, convinces Claudio that Don Pedro has won Hero for himself. In Act 2, scene 3, Benedick overhears his friends discussing Beatrice's undying love for him; shortly after, Beatrice eavesdrops on a similar conversation and eventually each professes true love for the other. In Act 3, scene 3, Borachio tells Conrade that Claudio, Don Pedro, and Don John observed him and Margaret in Hero's chamber, and that Claudio, mistaking Margaret for Hero, believes that he has been betrayed. The next day, at the wedding, Claudio denounces Hero for her alleged infidelity, then is later told that Hero died from embarrassment. Claudio, seeking forgiveness, agrees to marry Hero's cousin, and Leonato, introducing his own deception, presents a masked Hero as the bride. While critics have often noted that the theme of appearance versus reality is articulated in most of Shakespeare's plays either by an external force imposing some incorrect perception of reality on the characters which is rectified as the plot proceeds, or by some characters voluntarily creating deceptions that impel the plot and demonstrate the importance of distinguishing appearance from reality, Elliot Krieger (1979) has maintained, "Much Ado about Nothing fits neither pattern, for the series of deceptions that compose the plot, although created by the characters, are lived through en route to other deceptions, and are not overcome; false perception characterizes rather than disrupts the norm of the society depicted in the play."

Overviews

John Dover Wilson (essay date 1962)


[In the following essay, Dover Wilson explores structure and characterization in Much Ado about Nothing, defending the merit of the Hero-Claudio plot, detailing the "hide and seek" pattern of the play, and praising the characters Beatrice, Benedick, and Dogberry.]

[Much Ado about Nothing] has two main plots: (i) the Hero-Claudio plot, belonging to the tragi-comedy type of The Merchant; and (ii) the Beatrice-Benedick plot, belonging to the comedy of wit, exemplified in Love's Labour's Lost. The dramatic dovetailing is carried out with Shakespeare's usual tact in such matters, but most critics appear to agree that, as we find them declaring in the case of the casket-plot and the bond-plot of The Merchant, there is to their thinking some dissonance of tone. Sir Edmund Chambers, for example, premising that Beatrice and Benedick are creatures of 'pure comedy', while the story of Hero, Claudio and Don John is 'melodrama', writes [in his Shakespeare: A Survey]:

Benedick and Beatrice may be structurally subordinate to Claudio and Hero. This does not prevent them from being a very living man and a very living woman, and as such infinitely more interesting than the rather colourless lay figures of the melodrama.… The plane of comedy … is far nearer to real life than is the plane of melodrama. The triumph of comedy in Much Ado about Nothing means therefore that the things which happen between Claudio and Hero have to stand the test of a much closer comparison with the standard of reality than they were designed to bear.… Before Beatrice's fiery-souled espousal of her cousin's cause, the conventions of melodrama crumble and Claudio stands revealed as the worm that he is, and that it should have been the dramatist's main business to prevent the audience from discovering him to be. The whole of the serious matter of the last Act fails to convince. Don Pedro and Claudio could not, outside the plane of melodrama, have been guilty of the insult of staying on in Leonato's house and entering into recriminations with him. Claudio could not
have complacently accepted the proposal to substitute a cousin for the bride he had wronged. Hero could not have been willing to be resumed by the man who had thrown her off on the unconfirmed suggestion of a fault. Such proceedings belong to the chiaroscuro of melodrama; in the honest daylight which Benedick and Beatrice bring with them, they are garish.

Here indeed is much ado! And, since Sir Edmund is only the spokesman of many, scarcely about nothing.

It would take too long in this [essay] to answer all his points, though I think a reply might be found for every one. I must deal with them in general terms only, thus:

(i) I do not think that the 'garishness' which Sir Edmund sees in reading the play in his study is visible on the stage. On the contrary, Much Ado, when I first saw it acted, took me almost as much by surprise as Guthrie's Love's Labour's Lost had done. And, having seen it now several times and played by companies of very different calibre—amateur, first-rate companies, and second-rate ones—I have come to the conclusion (a) that Much Ado is a capital stage-play, indeed a better one than either As You Like It or Twelfth Night; and (b) that the Hero-Claudio plot, on the whole, is quite as effective as the Beatrice-Benedick one, which is to some extent cumbered with dead wood in the sets-of-wit between the two mockers.

But these are only personal impressions, and carry no weight. Speaking, then, by the book, the criticisms of the Hero-Claudio story appear to be based partly upon misapprehension, partly upon forgetfulness of different social customs which reigned in Shakespeare's day, and partly upon failure to observe the pattern of the play.

Let me take up these matters in order. Surely, Shakespeare never intended Claudio to be a hero, any more than he does Bertram in All's Well, who is in many ways Claudio over again, or that other Claudio in Measure for Measure, who is also cast in the same mould. All three are young noblemen, with plenty of physical courage (at least two of them have), an attractive presence, and very little judgment or experience, Claudio's youth is much insisted upon—'he hath borne himself beyond the promise of his age, doing in the figure of a lamb the feats of a lion'; to Don John he is 'a proper squire' and a 'very forward March-chick'; Leonato speaks of

His May of youth and bloom of lustihood

and his inexperienece of the ways of woman is surely proved by the fact that Don Pedro no sooner hears that his mind is on Hero, than he offers to do the courtship for him. He is no 'worm', only a rather foolish boy.

As for his belief in Borachio's story of Hero's infidelity, there are several things about it which are generally overlooked:

1. Claudio is not only very youthful but of an abnormally jealous disposition. A youthful Leontes, he gratefully accepts the Prince's offer to woo Hero in his name; but the suggestion is no sooner put to him that Don Pedro is really trying to steal the young lady for himself than he believes it and goes off and sulks. 'Alas, poor hurt fowl,' exclaims Benedick, 'now will he creep into sedges.' It is true that Benedick also thinks Don Pedro has been courting Hero on his own account; but he knows nothing of his offer to act as Claudio's proxy. Claudio's suspicions of his Prince are unpardonable—and having doubted the good faith of a friend well known to him, he will hardly continue to believe in that of a girl, whom he scarcely knows at all, and this in the face of what seems to be ocular proof of her treachery.

2. Shakespeare deals a little carelessly with the incident of Borachio and Margaret at Hero's window, which was probably more consistent and clearer at some earlier stage of the play's history. But both Claudio and Don Pedro watch a strange man climbing into Hero's bedroom and received lovingly by a woman dressed in Hero's clothes. They could not see her features in the dark, but they had every excuse for assuming her to be that which she pretended.
3. If Leonato, Hero's father, is at Claudio's revelation in the church ready at first to believe her guilty, is it surprising that Don Pedro and Claudio have done so? Women were easier of access in those days, and morals generally were looser. Critics have been too ready to assume that the household of Leonato was a Victorian one.

A fairly recent editor of *Ado* [G. Sampson] has declared:

There is scarcely a rag of credibility in a story that causes a king and a count to conduct themselves like a pair of ill-bred and overstimulated brawlers.

Surely this is the very ecstasy of misinterpretation.

Sir Edmund Chambers is at once more subtle and more cautious. But his objection to the proceedings of the last Act seems to me no less misguided. Don Pedro is a king; he has done Governor Leonato, who is not even of noble birth, the signal honour of accepting his hospitality. Is he to move into meaner quarters because the old man's daughter is not as honest as she might be? Would any monarch of the period have done so? So far from regarding the continuance of his stay as an 'insult' he would think of it as a favour. And if he stayed on, Claudio would have to do likewise. Shakespeare does not say all this; he didn't need to, for it would never have occurred to him that his spectators might question it.

Similarly, Claudio had done Leonato honour by asking the hand of his daughter; he, a count, was a great match for a gentleman's house. The least he can do, then, in restitution, when he discovers that his suspicions are baseless, is to agree to marry the cousin of the supposedly dead girl, in order that Leonato may not lose his match. Marriage in those days was first a matter of business, and only secondarily (if at all) a matter of love. The mood in which Claudio goes to this second marriage is evident in V, iv, 38: 'I'll hold my mind,' he declares, 'were she an Ethiope.' He is sacrificing himself for the old man's sake. The story of Hero and Claudio is no more melodrama than that of Ophelia and Hamlet, to which as a matter of fact it bears some resemblance.

Finally, a word may be said in defence of Don John, not as a man but as a dramatic character. Here again there may be some obscurity owing to revision. But his villainy is surely not of the melodramatic kind of Richard Crookback, who was a villain only because, as he says,

I am determinéd to prove a villain.

Nor does the melancholy of the bastard suffice to account for it. The matter is not, I say, as clear as it might be, but he tells us that Claudio, 'that young start-up, hath all the glory of my overthrow' (I, iii, 62), and when we remember the glory that Claudio had won in the late 'action', of which we hear at the opening of the play, is it not at least plausible to suppose that Don John had been fighting against his brother, Don Pedro, in that action, and being overthrown had perforce become 'reconciled to the prince' (I, i, 148)? To suppose so would, at any rate, go far to explain his actions, and make a man of him, instead of the 'thorough-paced villain of the deliberate Machiavellian type dear to the Elizabethan imagination' as Sir Edmund Chambers labels him.

But though I think the tone and significance of the Hero-plot have been badly misjudged by modern criticism, I am not claiming it as more important than Beatrice and Benedick. Their plot is simple, so simple as hardly to be a plot at all, while the story of Hero is an intricate one. But in dramatic perspective there is no doubt which is the more prominent. From the very outset Beatrice and Benedick take the centre of the stage, and though 'structurally subordinate to Claudio and Hero' in the sense that the story of the latter determines their actions and explains their movements, they are actually the outstanding figures of the play.
And they are more interesting and more alive than the younger lovers, not because they belong to 'pure comedy' and the others to 'melodrama', but because Shakespeare intended them so to be and gave them far more to say. Apart from the scene where Beatrice lies hid in the pleached arbour, a scene in which Hero of necessity leads the dialogue, the latter has less than fifty lines to speak in the whole play. She does not even speak a word when she is formally betrothed to Claudio in Act 2—it is Beatrice who covers her natural shyness with 'Speak, cousin, or if you cannot, stop his mouth with a kiss, and let him not speak neither.' (II, i, 290-1.) Similarly, though Claudio has of course more to say than Hero, because the action demands that he should, he does not even play second fiddle to Benedick. For between the two stands Don Pedro, who woos for his young favourite; and so leads him by the hand throughout the play, that we cannot overlook the latter's subordinate position.

All this is, without question, quite deliberate on Shakespeare's part. In *The Merchant* he had two plots, a love-story and a revenge-story, of almost equal weight. They were cleverly linked together, but he only just kept the balance, and so saved the play. In *Much Ado*, the comedy that followed, he ran no such risks. Once again, he had two plots—this time combining love and revenge into one, and reverting to *Love's Labour's Lost* for the other. But he kept the former in strict subordination to the latter, and so created what was, in my opinion, structurally a more shapely play.

Furthermore, he imposed, as I have said, his own pattern, a special pattern peculiar to *Much Ado*, upon the texture of plot and character. *The Merchant of Venice*, for all its excitement and its beauty, does not really hang well together, and, apart from the grey thread of the melancholy Antonio, no pattern runs through it. *Much Ado*, on the other hand, possesses a very definite pattern of its own, at once pretty and amusing; and though no modern critic, I believe, has ever noticed it, that does not prove that generations of spectators have not unconsciously derived much pleasure from it. Indeed, in my view, it contributes very materially to the life and interest of the play, though it does so more certainly in the theatre than in the study.

When one watches *Much Ado* on the stage, does one not feel somehow as if one were looking on at an elaborate game of Hide and Seek? Shakespeare himself suggests it at one point, when he makes Claudio describe Benedick lurking in the arbour as 'the hidfox'. Whether the children's game of 'Hide-fox' in Shakespeare's day was exactly the same as the modern Hide and Seek, I do not know. In any case, he is thinking in *Much Ado* of it rather from the point of view of the hidden person than of those who seek. The hid-fox lurks unseen and listens to the other children as they move about and talk—sometimes of him.

In a word, the pattern is partly made by eavesdropping, of which there are no fewer than half a dozen instances in the play.

1. A serving-man in a 'thick-pleached alley' of the orchard overhears the Prince and Claudio talking of the intended courtship of Hero, and misapprehending what he has heard, reports to Antonio, the brother of Leonato, that Don Pedro proposes to win her for himself.
2. Next Borachio, Don John's spy, from behind the arras in a room overhears the Prince and Claudio still discussing the same project and reports likewise to his master, this time however getting the facts correctly.

These two eavesdroppings we are told of but do not see on the stage—they introduce the theme as it were, to use a musical term. The next two are enacted before our eyes, viz.:

- and Benedick and Beatrice are in turn lured into the pleached arbour in the orchard in order that they may overhear their friends in talk and so come to imagine that each is in love with the other.
- This time not seen on the stage, Claudio and Don Pedro are similarly led to believe Hero unfaithful by eavesdropping outside her bedroom window.
Lastly, the Watch overhear the scoundrels Conrade and Borachio talking under a penthouse, and after much misunderstanding and delay, this leads to the discovery of the plot against Hero's honour.

Closely connected with this eavesdropping motif, though not identical with it, is a subsidiary design of the familiar disguise variety. Thus Borachio gains access to the room in which he spies upon the Prince and Claudio, disguised as a fumigator. There is a masked dance in Act II, very similar to that in Love's Labour's Lost, in the course of which Don Pedro, pretending to be Claudio, woos Hero, and after which Don John, addressing Claudio as if he were Benedick, persuades him that the Prince is acting treacherously. Margaret again disguises herself as Hero for the scene at the bedroom window. And finally Hero herself, masked once more, poses as Leonato's niece in the last scene.

Eavesdropping and misinterpretation, disguise and deceit—sometimes for evil ends, but generally in fun and with a comic upshot—such are the designs in the dramatic pattern of Much Ado. It is simple enough, once the matter is explained: it is dependent upon stage-effects rather than upon poetic construction, and Shakespeare was to improve in subtlety upon it later. But this spying and hoodwinking give the play its special atmosphere, an atmosphere which is reproduced for tragic purposes, though by similar devices, in Hamlet.

In Much Ado about Nothing, however, it is all a game. The children skip in and out of their pleached alleys and arbours, and the hid-fox is fitted with his penny-worth. Shy little Hero gets put into the corner unjustly for a while; jealous young Claudio misdoubts her, insults her, repents and hangs his little verses upon her empty monument; the melancholy Don John does his worst and then flees.

But our main interest lies neither in this background nor in the patterned framework; what we remember when the play is done are three figures which stand out in front of it all, and for the exhibition of whom most of what I have been hitherto speaking of was designed by the dramatist—I mean Beatrice, Benedick and the immortal constable, Master Dogberry. The rest of this [essay] belongs to them by right.

The first thing to note about them is that they all talk prose; in this dramatic composition poetry belongs to the romance which forms the background, prose to the foreground. The Constables would talk prose in any case; it is their element as it is that of Bottom and Lancelot Gobbo. It is a new thing however in Shakespearian comedy for characters who sit above the salt, as it were, to speak anything but verse. But Shakespeare had been at school since he wrote The Merchant of Venice, he had learnt to write the raciest, supplest, most delicately articulate prose in English dramatic literature, a prose that speaks itself and is so constructed that it is as easily committed to memory as blank verse, and is therefore perfectly adapted to the theatre, I mean, of course, the prose of Falstaff, and the Falstaff scenes. For an example of the rhythm of it, take part of his Apologia pro vita sua:

If sack and sugar be a fault, God help the wicked! if to be old and merry be a sin, then many an old host that I know is damned; if to be fat be to be hated, then Pharaoh's lean kine are to be loved. No, my good lord; banish Peto, banish Bardolph, banish Poins; but for sweet Jack Falstaff, kind Jack Falstaff, true Jack Falstaff, valiant Jack Falstaff, and therefore more valiant, being, as he is, old Jack Falstaff, banish not him thy Harry's company; banish plump Jack, and banish all the world.

(I Henry IV, II, iv, 461-70)

Having forged a steel of that temper, Shakespeare was not the man to lay it lightly aside. He fashioned a couple of bright rapiers from it and placed them in the hands of Benedick and Beatrice for the duel of sex.

There can be little doubt that Benedick was played by Richard Burbadge, the leading actor in Shakespeare's company. We may see him also in Berowe, the Bastard of King John, Petrucchio the shrew-tamer, Mercutio,
the taciturn Bolingbroke, and probably Henry V. To judge from the description of Cœur-de-Lion's bastard son, Burbadge possessed a large frame and a roistering manner; and we have records of his taking vigorous action in private life. In any case, all these characters possess much in common and were clearly modelled upon the same actor. They are bluff soldiers, rough wooers or whimsical rudesbies in turn, or two of these combined.

There is nothing, therefore, very new in the character of Benedick, who may be described, I have said, as a Berowne with a touch of Petruchio about him. What is new is his speech, to which I have just referred, and the fact that his love civilizes him, for when he comes to the business of courting he does it with a grace far beyond anything within the scope of Berowne, or even Henry V.

The case of Beatrice is different. We have found a shadowy foretaste of her in the mocking wenches of Love's Labour's Lost, and at times we may be reminded of Petruchio's shrew, but to all intents and purposes she is a new creation, something Shakespeare had never before dreamt of, but a something that was to be imitated time and again down the centuries. There is no one in the Histories in the least like her, not even Lady Hotspur, and which character in the Comedies so far written can be set beside her? None except Portia, and Portia, though not lacking in a sprightly wit, is of a different cast—at once tenderer and wiser, and yet less completely realized.

Beatrice is the first woman in our literature, perhaps in the literature of Europe, who not only has a brain but delights in the constant employment of it. She is not without beauty; if Benedick in his scornful days is to be believed, she exceeded Hero 'as much in beauty, as the first of May doth the last day of December'. But it never occurs to her to use that in her dealings with men. On the contrary: 'I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me.' She does not want to catch men at all; what interests her in them is not their person but their intelligence, of which she generally holds a poor opinion. She knows enough about marriage to dread it.

For hear me, Hero—wooing, wedding, and repenting, is as a Scotch jig, a measure, and a cinque-pace; the first suit is hot and hasty like a Scotch jig, and full as fantastical; the wedding mannerly-modest, as a measure, full of state and ancieny; and then comes Repentance, and with his bad legs falls into the cinque-pace faster and faster, till he sink into his grave.

It is a sorry sequence—though many a twentieth-century Marriage Guidance Council would endorse it—and so she is at God upon her knees every morning and evening for the blessing of having no husband, and 'will even take sixpence in earnest of the bearward, and lead his apes into hell' (II, i, 36-7)—the fate of old maids who could not lead children into heaven.

'Well, then,' asks her uncle ironically, 'go you into hell?' 'No,' retorts Beatrice,

'but to the gate, and there will the devil meet me like an old cuckold, with horns on his head, and say, "Get you to heaven, Beatrice, get you to heaven—here's no place for you maids." So deliver I up my apes, and away to St. Peter: for the heavens, he shows me where the bachelors sit, and there live we as merry as the day is long.'

How Sir Thomas More would have delighted in that speech!

Her heaven is with the bachelors, because she sets her wits against theirs and beats them at their own game. 'In our last conflict' she reports of Benedick before he appears,
four of his five wits went halting off, and now is the whole man governed with one. (I, i, 61-3)

This is not intended, of course, to be taken seriously, and is only uttered that it may be reported to Benedick again; but it shows that her chief delight in life was—not hunting men for capture, but shooting at them her barbed arrows and watching them quiver, as she smites between the joints of the harness.

And she delights especially in Benedick, because he is as impatient as she is with all this sex-business, and in their wit-skirmishes can give as good as he gets, or rather as good as 'a piece of valiant dust … a clod of wayward marl' can be expected to give.

For note that Benedick, brave face as he puts upon it, always comes a little halting off from one of their encounters. The trouble is that his male vanity cannot quite concede to her the equal rights which the conditions of the game demand and so he never wounds her and she always gets past his guard. 'She told me', he complains,

that I was the prince's jester, that I was duller than a great thaw—huddling jest upon jest with such impossible conveyance upon me, that I stood like a man at a mark, with a whole army shooting at me…. She speaks poniards, and every word stabs.

And he acknowledges his defeat in what follows:

Don Pedro. Look, here she comes. Enter Beatrice.

Benedick. Will your grace command me to any service to the world's end? I will go on the slightest errand now to the Antipodes that you can devise to send me on: I will fetch you a toothpicker now from the furthest inch of Asia: bring you the length of Prester John's foot: fetch you a hair off the great Cham's beard: do you any embassage to the Pigmies—rather than hold three words' conference with this harpy. You have no employment for me?

Don Pedro. None, but to desire your good company.

Benedick. O God, sir, here's a dish I love not—I cannot endure my Lady Tongue. Exit.

This is not all banter; it conceals a real wound. The hurt fowl creeps into his sedges. His vanity is touched to the quick partly because his heart is already engaged without knowing it.

The Prince, who is too high a mark for shooting at, and whose heart is free, sees her more clearly than Benedick does. He offers to find a husband for her.

Beatrice. I would rather have one of your father's getting; hath your grace ne'er a brother like you? Your father got excellent husbands if a maid could come by them.

Don Pedro. Will you have me, lady?

Beatrice. No, my lord, unless I might have another for working-days—your grace is too costly to wear every day…. But I beseech your grace pardon me, I was born to speak all mirth and no matter.

Don Pedro. Your silence most offends me, and to be merry best becomes you, for out o'question you were born in a merry hour.
Beatrice. No, sure, my lord, my mother cried—but then, there was a star danced, and under that was I born.

And presently, after she goes out, the Prince remarks to her uncle:

Don Pedro. By my troth, a pleasant-spirited [i.e. jocose] lady.

Leonato. There's little of the melancholy element in her, my lord. She is never sad [i.e. serious] but when she sleeps, and not even sad then: for I have heard my daughter say, she hath often dreamt of unhappiness and waked herself with laughing.

This light-hearted merriment, this apparent indifference to suitors, might be qualities of a coquette. And if that be not too hard a word for Rosalind, we find them again in her, and even more so in Cleopatra, and Congreve's delightful transformation of Cleopatra, Millament. But for Beatrice's intellectual gifts, for her sheer pleasure in talking men's talk on terms of equality, and without the undertones of sentiment, we have to wait until modern times for parallels—for the women of George Meredith, and George Bernard Shaw.

Her merriment is without a spark of malice, and she is quite unconscious of the depth of the wounds she inflicts—

Deals she an unkindness, 'tis but her rapid measure,
Even as in a dance.

She notes, and rejoices in, Benedick's wincings; but she thinks it is only annoyance at being worsted in word-play.

He'll but break a comparison or two on me, which peradventure, not marked or not laughed at, strikes him into melancholy—and then there's a partridge wing saved, for the fool will eat no supper that might.

Yet, though without malice, she in her turn has her little vanities. Her very blindness to the pain she gives is proof of them. When, therefore, she hears herself taxed by Hero in these terms:

But nature never framed a woman's heart
Of prouder stuff than that of Beatrice:
Disdain and scorn ride sparkling in her eyes,
Misprizing what they look on, and her wit
Values itself so highly, that to her
All matter else seems weak: she cannot love,
Nor take no shape nor project of affection,
She is so self-endeared—

there is just enough truth in the calumny, deliberate caricature though it be, to make her feel mighty uncomfortable. Intellectual pride might easily have been her undoing, but for the revelation of the 'pleached arbour'. And no woman on earth, however much she may profess to scorn love, will endure being told she is incapable of it.

Benedick is also accused of pride by his orchard critics, but what touches him is not that, so much as the salve to his wounded vanity when he learns that she has been half-dying for love of him all the time. And so, both are brought to realize the love which had been implicit in their intellectual attraction from the beginning.
The garden-scenes are first-rate sport, of the kind Shakespeare excelled in. But the device, after all, is simple enough; and far more skill is shown in the dramatic setting of the declaration which follows. It was indeed a master-stroke to combine this with the defamation of Hero, so that the two plots intersect, as it were, at their most crucial points. The situation calls out the full manhood and womanhood of each: we feel, for the first time in the play, that they are deeply serious; and Beatrice's sudden appeal to him to avenge her cousin's honour comes upon us with an almost overwhelming force, after the previous scenes of gaiety; with an effect indeed not unlike that produced by the news of the French King's death towards the end of Love's Labour's Lost.

_Benedick._ Lady Beatrice, have you wept all this while?

_Beatrice._ Yea, and I will weep a while longer.

_Benedick._ I will not desire that.

_Beatrice._ You have no reason, I do it freely.

_Benedick._ Surely I do believe your fair cousin is wronged.

_Beatrice._ Ah, how much might the man deserve of me that would right her!

_Benedick._ Is there any way to show such friendship?

_Beatrice._ A very even way, but no such friend.

_Benedick._ May a man do it?

_Beatrice._ It is a man's office, but not yours.

_Benedick._ I do love nothing in the world so well as you—is not that strange?

_Beatrice._ As strange as the thing I know not. It were as possible for me to say I loved nothing so well as you—but believe me not—and yet I lie not—I confess nothing, nor I deny nothing—I am sorry for my cousin.

_Benedick._ By my sword Beatrice, thou lovest me.

_Beatrice._ Do not swear and eat it.

_Benedick._ I will swear by it that you love me, and I will make him eat it that says I love not you.

_Beatrice._ Will you not eat your word?

_Benedick._ With no sauce that can be devised to it—I protest I love thee.

_Beatrice._ Why then God forgive me—

_Benedick._ What offence sweet Beatrice?

_Beatrice._ You have stayed me in a happy hour, I was about to protest I loved you.

_Benedick._ And do it with all thy heart.

_Beatrice._ I love you with so much of my heart, that none is left to protest.

_Benedick._ Come bid me do anything for thee.

_Beatrice._ Kill Claudio.
Benedick. Ha! not for the wide world.

Beatrice. You kill me to deny it—farewell.

Benedick. Tarry sweet Beatrice.

He stays her.

... Here we have the leading lady bidding her lover kill his 'sworn brother' in order to vindicate the honour of her cousin. We have travelled a long way from the finale of *The Two Gentlemen* in which the leading man is prepared to hand over his lady to the friend who has just attempted to violate her before his eyes, in order to prove his unselfish devotion to friendship. The journey has been from Convention to Life, from an attempt to give dramatic form to an ideal accepted from others to one which succeeds in combining dramatic illusion with a situation which is felt by dramatist and audience to be real.

How long did Shakespeare take over *Ado*? If *The Merry Wives* occupied two weeks, *Ado* can hardly have taken two months. The source of the plot, the main Hero-Claudio plot, is well known, viz. a novella by Bandello probably read in the French version by Belleforest in his *Histoires Tragiques* which also contained the Hamlet story. But clearly, I think, Shakespeare was not concerned with this in 1598. He was working over an old play, his own or some other's. There are a number of little clues in the text pointing to revision which it is unnecessary to speak of here. It is enough perhaps to note two points:

1. In the stage-directions of the 1600 Q, but not elsewhere in the text, Hero is provided with a mother called Innogen, a name which crops up again in *Cymbeline* in the form of Imogen.
2. I find it impossible to read III, i (the scene in which Hero persuades the hidden Beatrice that Benedick is in love with her) without being convinced that the verse is older than that of most of the rest of the verse in the play. And what a strange Beatrice it is who emerges from the arbour at the end of the scene:

   What fire is in mine ears? Can this be true?
   Stand I condemned for pride and scorn so much?
   Contempt, farewell! and maiden pride, adieu!
   No glory lives behind the back of such….
   And Benedick, love on, I will requite thee,
   Taming my wild heart to thy loving hand:
   If thou dost love, my kindness shall incite thee
   To bind our loves up in a holy band:
   For others say thou dost deserve, and I
   Believe it better than reportingly.

'Taming my wild heart to thy loving hand!' The Beatrice *we know* is incapable of such a thought even in soliloquy: it is some primitive puppet who speaks, perhaps a sister to the Shrew Katherine after her taming. And—'No glory lives behind the back of such!' What a line! It is inconceivable for Shakespeare in 1598. Indeed, I find it hard to believe he can ever have been capable of it. The speech is patently from a drama of the early nineties; what Shakespeare did in 1597 therefore was to revise an old play. And in his rehandling he tightened up and abbreviated the original Hero-Claudio story so as to push it into the background in order to bring forward Beatrice and Benedick, rewriting and greatly expanding their dialogue or almost all of it. It is possible that he rewrote and expanded the Dogberry scenes at the same time, for it is at least conceivable that the original Dogberry was a small part, one corresponding with the part of Constable Dull in *Love's Labour's Lost*. But this contingency is connected with the theory that the unrevised *Ado* can be equated with *Love's Labour's Won*. 

140
But however long the reshaping may have taken, Shakespeare produced an excellent theatre piece in the
process which gave something for everyone at the Globe.

1. It provided excellent parts for the leading men—Dogberry for Kempe, Benedick for Burbadge, and
Beatrice for the leading boy:
2. it had a good story with strong situations, which all parts of the audience could appreciate;
3. the Beatrice and Benedick scenes would appeal to the noble patrons in the 'lords' room, the gentlemen
and the critics:
4. and Dogberry would fit the groundlings with far more than their pennyworth.

I once tried Dogberry upon a typical Elizabethan audience: I had been asked to lecture on Shakespeare to 288
male prisoners in Lincoln gaol, but learning from the chaplain that 60 per cent of them were illiterate, instead
of a lecture I read them the Dogberry scenes, and at once had the whole prison roaring with laughter over the
antics of the constable. The medieval crowd had likewise roared over the antics of the Devil—that universal
constable. They knew the Devil might (many of them knew he must) get them in the end; but it was some
satisfaction to be able to watch him bamboozled in play. Shakespeare knew that his rascals on the floor of the
Globe would get the same kind of satisfaction from Dogberry, Verges and the rest.

'O, that I had been writ down an ass!' (IV, ii, 84-5). How the pothouses after the play must have rung with the
laughter over that jest!

But Shakespeare did not write only for Burbadge, the gallants, and the groundlings; he wrote for himself and
his artistic conscience. For he had a conscience, though Ben Jonson didn't think so, because it was so different
from his own. Shakespeare's conscience was not of the kind that set up before it an ideal of artistic perfection,
derived from previous masterpieces, or what students thought were the laws previous masters had observed,
and strove to attain it. Shakespeare's was of a more adventurous type. He was always trying new things, new
forms, new possibilities, and having once begun on a new line, to better his experiment. And when he felt he
had gone as far as he could in a certain direction, he tried a new tack. Romeo and Juliet marks a final stage—he
never tried to better that, though Antony and Cleopatra was in a sense (a maturer sense) a return; Richard II
marks another stage; and Falstaff (in Henry IV) was yet a third, though his creator had to fake a spurious
image of him in The Merry Wives and kill him definitely off in Henry V before he could escape from him.

Was his artistic conscience satisfied with Ado? He was surely pleased with one thing—the Beatrice-Benedick
business, and that he had succeeded in fitting it into his romantic pattern. But the rest—it is not good enough!

I fancy he underlined Nothing in the title. He felt there was an emptiness in the play. He could do better than
this, much better. As an afternoon's entertainment Ado makes, I said, a shapelier stage-play than As You Like
It, but As You Like It is in every way riper and more golden; the harvest was still to come.

William G. McCollom (essay date 1968)

SOURCE: "The Role of Wit in Much Ado about Nothing," in Shakespeare Quarterly, Vol. XIX, No. 2,
Spring, 1968, pp. 165-74.

[Here, McCollom studies the role of wit in Much Ado about Nothing in terms of its influence on
characterization and its contribution to the theme of the "triumph of true wit over false wisdom."]

Much Ado About Nothing is very popular with audiences but somewhat less so with critics. Although it is
conceded to be very witty, it is felt to be lacking in that profounder quibbling that characterizes Shakespeare's
later work. In her book Shakespeare's Wordplay, M. M. Mahood gives a chapter to The Winter's Tale but not
to Much Ado About Nothing. One may feel too that the play is less serious than Shakespeare's witty
sonnets—for example, in its exploration of love. So far as the verse is concerned, it does not lead one to think
of the play as a poem. It has a good deal of rather elementary rhetoric, as in Leonato's lamentations, and,
although there are passages of charm and delicacy, perhaps no one would maintain that as poetry the writing
ever equals the opening of Twelfth Night or Viola's "Make me a willow cabin". In fact, one of the most
successful verse passages in the play—Hero's satire on the "lapwing" Beatrice—has the salience of wit rather
than the ambience of poetry. The main plot of the play is certainly not the chief interest, and the central
characters in this plot would never stimulate an A. C. Bradley. Moreover, the three main strands of action do
not at first seem very well joined. The sudden appearance of Dogberry and his men in Act III, for example,
comes as quite a jolt on the path of the action. The role of Margaret is mysterious, to say the least; only by
straining can we think of her various activities as congruent.

William Empson once remarked that the greatness of English drama did not survive the double plot. Partially
under Empson's influence, recent Shakespearian criticism is in general looking for Shakespeare's unities not in
plot or character, or even characteristic action, but in theme. Actually, the theme of a play, if dramatically
significant, is worked out in action, and conversely a particular action can be translated into theme. If you say,
as does John Russell Brown [in Shakespeare and His Comedies, second edition, 1962], that the theme of
Much Ado is love's truth, the governing action (the activity guiding the characters) could be formulated as the
search in love for the truth about love—though where this would leave Dogberry is a bit hard to say. In a keen
study of the comedy ["Much Ado About Nothing", Scanning, XIII, 1946], James Smith found pride or comic
hybris the binding agent in an action presenting a shallow society whose superficiality is finally transcended
by Benedick and Beatrice. The analysis is illuminating, but I believe it pushes the comedy too far in the
direction of satire and understates the role of wit, which in both its main senses drives the play.

During a performance of a Shakespearian comedy one sometimes notices that his neighbors are laughing at a
line before the point has been made, or in ignorance of the exact meaning of the sentence, unless they have
been studying footnotes. (This assumes that witticisms and jokes have exact meanings—not always a safe
assumption.) One may feel a slightly superior sympathy for such an audience—they are so eager to enjoy what
their piety has brought them to witness.

Yet this solicitude may be misplaced. For a witticism may be delightful and funny even if understood in a
sense slightly different from that advanced by Kittredge or Dover Wilson. When Beatrice says that Benedick
"wears his faith but as the fashion of his hat; it ever changes with the next block", the audience laughs though
it may not know whether "block" is a hat-block, a fashionable hat-shape, a blockhead, or some combination of
these. Secondly, if the actor has been advised to "throw away" the line as highly obscure and to create instead
a visual and musical impression of wit, the audience can hardly be expected to laugh for the "right" reason.
And finally, if Susanne Langer is right, the point of the line is not primary anyway; for Mrs. Langer advances
the interesting idea that when an audience laughs, it does so not at a particular joke or witticism but at the
play. In Much Ado, at any rate, wit is organic.

The wit of Shakespeare's play informs the words spoken by the characters, places the characters themselves as
truly witty and intelligent, inappropriately facetious, or ingeniously witless, suggests the lines of action these
characters will take, and, as intelligence, plays a fundamental role in the thematic action: the triumphing of
true wit (or wise folly) in alliance with harmless folly over false or pretentious wisdom. I will further suggest
that the comedy itself is a kind of witticism in the tripartite form often taken by the jests.

As language, the wit has a variety of functions. From the first it creates the tone of "merry war" which will
resound through so much of the comedy, though the timbre will change as the scenes or speakers change. The
merry was is primarily between Benedick and Beatrice, but in the opening scenes Leonato, Don Pedro,
Claudio, and even Hero participate in the skirmishing. Even before Don Pedro arrives with his party, we find
Leonato experimenting with word-play. Hearing that Claudio's uncle has wept at the news of the young man's
martial exploits, Leonato remarks: "a kind overflow of kindness…. How much better it is to weep at joy than to
Joy at weeping" (I.i.27-28). It is as if he knew that some witty friends were coming to visit and he had better try out a pun and an antimetabole—a rhetorical figure popular in the earlier nineties. Since there has been no question of taking pleasure in tears, one tends to downgrade the speaker for this verbal flourish. But he may be more shrewd than this when, a bit later, he chides Beatrice for ridiculing Benedick: "Faith, niece, you tax Signior Benedick too much; but he'll be meet with you, I doubt it not" (11. 44-45). Since "meet" and "mate" were pronounced alike, Leonato is not only referring to Benedick's powers of retaliation, but predicting the happy and voluble ending.

After establishing his fundamentally witty tone in the first three acts, Shakespeare almost destroys it in the church scene. But notice the language in which Claudio rejects Hero and Leonato responds to the scandal. There is the outburst of Claudio—

O what men dare do! What men may do!
What men daily do, not knowing what they do!

(IV. i. 18-19)

—a rhetorical display so hollow as to bring on this burlesque from Benedick: "How now? Interejections? Why then, some be of laughing, as, ah, ha, he!" As the scene progresses, Claudio's speeches rely more and more on the verbal tricks recorded in the rhetorical texts of the time. His half-ridiculous, half-pathetic pun "O Hero! What a Hero hadst thou been" is a parody of the wit crowding the early scenes. When he says:

… fare thee well, most foul, most fair,
farewell;
Thou pure impiety and impious purity.…

(IV. i. 102-103)

the idiom is of the kind that Shakespeare will overtly ridicule at the turn of the century. Leonato's response to the rejection is equally conventional:

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.…

(IV. i. 135-137)

The tone is precariously balanced between seriousness and levity. I believe that the scene has to be played for what it is worth and should not be deliberately distanced; otherwise the grief and anger of Beatrice will be unfounded; but if the dialogue is recognized as a distortion of wit, the scene becomes a grim sequel to the opening scenes and not an absolute break with them.

It is often difficult to separate style for tonal effect from style for characterization. But to put the matter in Renaissance terms, the decorum of the genre will sometimes take precedence over the decorum of the speaker. Critics like Stoll and Bradbrook have shown that the Elizabethans were frequently ready to drop consistency of characterization for tonal or other reasons. Margaret seems to illustrate the point. She is a witty lady-in-waiting, on excellent terms with both Hero and Beatrice, but the plot demands that she play her foolish part in the famous window scene that almost destroys Hero. After the rejection of her mistress, we see Margaret enjoying herself in a bawdy dialogue with Benedick, for all the world as if we were still in Act I. It is true that Hero has just been exonerated, but presumably Margaret does not yet know this. At the end of the preceding scene (V. i), Borachio has assured Leonato of Margaret's innocence of treachery to her mistress, but Leonato wants to know more. The men leave the stage, whereupon Benedick and Margaret enter for a set of
It is well played. But if we are trying to make sense of Margaret, we are puzzled. As she must be aware, her foolishness has been a main cause of all the distress, and she supposedly does not know of the happy solution brought about by Dogberry's men; if she does know, she also realizes that her role at the window is now revealed. Is she so indifferent to what has happened? Apparently we are not supposed to raise this question. Margaret asks Benedick if he will write a sonnet to her beauty.

Benedick. In so high a style, Margaret, that no man living shall come over it; for in most comely truth thou deservest it.

Margaret. To have no man come over me! Why, shall I always keep below-stairs?

Margaret is here a representative of wit from the lady-in-waiting, and her quibble is related to her earlier wit but not to her earlier substantive behavior. Her wit at this moment is a bit crude. When Beatrice comes in a minute later, she will reveal a continuing concern for Hero along with a continuing mental agility. We can say that the two women represent two varieties of wit, though Beatrice is also clear as a character.

One has to distinguish between the seemingly ill-timed roguishness of Margaret and the really insensitive banter of the Prince and Claudio in Act V. Margaret makes no reference whatever to Hero, Leonato, or the painful episode of Act IV. But in V. i, after Leonato and his brother Antonio have quarreled with Claudio and Don Pedro over Hero and left the stage, Benedick enters, whereupon Claudio remarks, "We had liked to have had our two noses snapped off with two old men without teeth" (11. 115-116). This is bad enough. Then, in view of Hero's supposed death, his cheery "What though care killed a cat" is one of his worst gaffes. When Benedick challenge his friend and tells him he has killed Hero, Claudio promises that in the duel he will "carve a capon". As the scene continues he and the Prince struggle to revive the tone of Act I. As word-play, their language is much the same as ever, but neither Benedick nor the reader is in the mood for jocose references to "the old man's daughter", as if Hero were still happy. Stage directors and audiences seem ready to go along with the struggling wits at this point, but the reader's judgment is the right one: the scene makes a sardonic comment on the Prince and his young friend and gives supporting evidence of the ineptitude previously manifested. The wit in this context downgrades the two lords.

Apart from placing the characters, the play of wit indicates in advance the way the action will go. Where the repartee is not clearly out of place, the wittier speakers will prefigure in language the wit or intelligence of their acts. Benedick and Beatrice are the shrewdest in speech and with the Friar are the first to reject the rejection of Hero. What of Claudio's jests? At first they seem technically equal to Benedick's, but, on closer inspection, we notice that Claudio tends to repeat in somewhat different words the jests of the Prince. If Don Pedro heckles the amorous Benedick with "Nay, 'a rubs himself with civet. Can you smell him out by that?", Claudio will add, "That's as much as to say the sweet youth's in love" (III. ii. 48-51). There may be a groundswell of laughter in the second line, but its point hardly differs from the other. If Don Pedro says that Beatrice has been ridiculing Benedick and then sighing for him, Claudio will chime in: "For the which she wept heartily and said she cared not" (V. i. 172-173). This echolalia illustrates the lack of independence which will cause him to swallow the slander of Don John and mirror the response made by the Prince. "O day untowardly turned!" says Don Pedro; and Claudio: "O mischief strangely thwarting!" (III. ii. 127-128). Language is here the perfect expression of action, or rather of action descending toward comic automatism.

When Shakespeare was writing Much Ado, wit as mental agility or liveliness of fancy had rather recently come to supplement wit as intelligence. (A passage from Lyly is the first listing in N.E.D. of the newer use.) Both senses occur frequently in the play, and there are examples of overlapping. It seems clear, for example, that in the following dialogue,
Dogberry… We are now to examination
these men.
Verges. And we must do it wisely.
Dogberry. We will spare for no wit, I warrant
you; here's that shall drive some of them to
a non-come.

(III. v. 57-60)

Dogberry is preening himself not only on his intelligence but on a handling of language so ingenious that it will drive the accused out of their minds. Benedick and Beatrice are witty and are described as witty and wise by their peers, and again both ideas are comprehended in the word "witty".

The word wit (or witty) occurs over twenty times, and one-third of these examples cluster in V. i, the scene in which Don Pedro and Claudio are flogging the dialogue. According to Benedick the wit does no more than amble in spite of the whip. As the scene progresses, one becomes weary of the verbal effort. After Benedick leaves, the Prince comments on his uncooperativeness: "What a pretty thing is man when he goes in his doublet and hose and leaves off his wit” (V. i. 198-199). Here the word suggests that for the idle nobility wit is a fashionable accessory you put on for lack of something else to do. In no other scene does this sub-sense (or Mood of wit, in Empson's terminology [in The Structure of Complex Words, 1951]) make itself felt.

In the drama, a particular witticism has three dimensions: the character's motivation for the speech, the technique, and the effect in context. A full criticism of a particular mot would have to consider all three. As Freud points out in his study of wit, a joke may be far more powerful than an examination of its technique would reveal: it may be poor in technique but strong in motive or "tendency". In a play, if a character's motive is strong, it may justify, in dramatic terms, what would be merely crude. Or if we share his animus, we will give way to hard laughter. In Act I Beatrice sometimes attacks Benedick in terms so unsubtle as to amaze—unless we realize that the insults express a half-conscious anger over his past treatment of her. At such moments we see the “wild” spirit of the “haggard of the rock” (III. i. 35-36), in Hero's phrase for her. The effect of a joke emerges in part from motive and technique but may extend far beyond these. After Beatrice has given a satiric picture of marriage, we have this:

Leonato. Cousin, you apprehend passing
shrewdly.
Beatrice. I have a good eye, uncle; I can see
a church by daylight.

(II. i. 80-82)

Leonato's speech is a mild rebuke but also an appreciation. The power of her unforgettable reply is remarkable, considering the simplicity of the technique, ironic understatement; but apart from the doubt whether she is speaking modestly or proudly, the line looks back to her own hardly masked fears of spinsterhood and forward to marriage in general and Hero's illomened ceremony in particular, when Beatrice will not only see the church but see better than most what is really happening there.

The technique of wit in Much Ado may be classified under four main heads: (1) verbal identifications and contrasts including puns, quibbles, and sharp antitheses; (2) conceptual wit including allusive under-statement and sophistical logic; (3) amusing flights of fancy; (4) short parodies, burlesques, etc. The first begins with the pun, as where it is said that Beatrice wrote to Benedick and found them both "between the sheets". Claudio calls this a "pretty jest", but Shakespeare uses the pun rather sparingly in this play. Much more frequent are the quibbles wherein a speaker deliberately mis-takes a word for his own purposes. Typically, a word used metaphorically is suddenly given a literal sense: the Messenger says that Benedick is not in Beatrice's "books", and she replies, "No. And he were, I would burn my study" (I. i. 76). One is reminded of Bergson's
principle that it is comic to introduce the physical where the spiritual is at issue. At the opposite extreme from the pun is the sharp antithesis, as in Don John's assertion, "Though I cannot be said to be a flattering honest man, it must not be denied but I am a plain-dealing villain" (I. iii. 28-30). Here, of course, the wit includes paradox.

I would suggest that, in comedy at least, the pun is a sign of harmony, the quibble or mis-taking is a ripple on the surface of social life, and the antithesis an index of separation or selfishness. The pun is obviously social and in comedy is seldom bitterly satiric. Even Claudio's silly "what a Hero hadst thou been" is a sigh after vanished good relations. Or one could cite Margaret's use of the pun as coquetry in her scene with Benedick. The quibble may be petty, but it is heavily dependent on what has just been said and may tacitly accept it. When Don Pedro declares that he will get Beatrice a husband, she replies that she would prefer one of his father's getting. The new meaning does not reject the old but merely improves it. The antithesis of Don John, on the other hand, flatly rejects the concept of "honest man", for like Goethe's Mephistopheles, John is the spirit that always denies. Since Much Ado is neither a jolly farce nor a morality play, it fittingly emphasizes mis-taking as opposed to puns and antitheses.

Freud's category of conceptual jokes or wit includes the play of ideas and playfully false logic. The joke in Gogol, "Your cheating is excessive for an official of your rank", is conceptual, but it would become more abstract if transposed into the key of La Rochefoucauld as follows: "If a man appears honest, it is merely because his dishonesties are fitted to his position in life." Obviously the latter form is too abstract for Much Ado, though not for the tragedies. But in the mercurial world of Much Ado, Shakespeare infiltrates ideas less directly:

*Don Pedro.* … I think this is your daughter.
*Leonato.* Her mother hath many times told me so.
*Benedick.* Were you in doubt, sir, that you asked her?
*Leonato.* Signior Benedick, no; for then were you a child.

(I. i. 100-104)

Leonato's first pleasantry is standard social chit-chat, and no more critical than Prospero's "Thy mother was a piece of virtue, and / She said thou wast my daughter" (Tmp. I. i. 56-57). But Benedick's rude interruption, a quasi-quibble, pricks the complacencies of a cliché-ridden society. If his question is liberal, Leonato's reply is conservative: except for a few men like you, life in Messina is eminently respectable.

A good example of false logic in the service of true wit appears in Benedick's great soliloquy, which he speaks after hearing that Beatrice loves him. Faced with his own absolute opposition to marriage, he is capable of this: "Shall quips and sentences and these paper bullets of the brain awe a man from the career of his humor? No, the world must be peopled. When I said that I would die a bachelor, I did not think I should live till I were married" (II. iii. 236-240). Previously he had boasted that he would never decide to marry. Deserting that premise, he now pretends that the anticipated decision to marry can be taken as a mere occurrence happening to a thing innocent of choice. Involved in the complexity of the thought, however, is the speaker's awareness that to fall in love is to become a thing—an accident to which he gracefully acknowledges himself liable. The soliloquy promotes Benedick from social critic to self-critic. He is now ready to appreciate the maxime of La Rochefoucauld: "C'est une grande folie de vouloir être sage tout seul." It is a crucial moment in the play.

At moments, Beatrice or Benedick will launch into an extended flight of fancy that moves distinctly away from its environment, particularly because the play is dominated by prose. Benedick will describe a series of
fantastic expeditions to escape Beatrice, or Beatrice will picture herself in a private harrowing of hell. Beatrice's comparison of wooing, wedding, and repentance to a Scotch jig, a measure, and a cinquepace is halfway between the conceptual wit just described and Shakespeare's more densely "tropical" style. Each of the dance steps is characterized as if it were a dramatic person, and all three encourage the actress to demonstrate. Like poor Yorick, Beatrice is a creature of "gambols", "of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy".

Outright burlesque or parody is used infrequently but significantly. When Beatrice asks Benedick if he will come to hear the news of Hero, he replies: "I will live in thy heart, die in thy lap, and be buried in thy eyes; and moreover, I will go with thee to thy uncle's" (V. ii. 100-102). This good-natured burlesque of the Petrarchan tradition affirms what we already knew, that Benedick will never make a conventional lover. Beatrice parodies Petrarchanism with deeper ironic effect:

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Don Pedro. Come, lady, come; you have lost the heart of Signior Benedick.

Beatrice. Indeed, my lord, he lent it me awhile, and I gave him use for it, a double heart for his single one…. Marry, once before he won it of me with false dice; therefore your Grace may well say I have lost it.

(II. i. 273-279)

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In this moment she moves close to the atmosphere of the more somber Sonnets. The exploitation of the "usury" of love and of the dialectic of hearts recalls some of the opening Sonnets as well as the more intense poems to the Dark Lady.

Although the technique of wit in Beatrice's speech is good, it seems unimportant except as a revelation of motive or "tendency", in Freud's language. Nowhere else does Beatrice reveal so much of the reason underlying her war with Benedick, merry on the surface but now clearly shown to be serious underneath. If the seriousness were not there, she could scarcely keep her place as the wittiest of Shakespeare's characters. Beatrice had given her heart to Benedick as interest for his, but at the same time he received his own back again. But clearly there was another occasion when Beatrice felt she had been deceived into uncovering too much affection for him. In the nineteenth century such a motivation would bring on a suicide; in Shakespeare's play, it deepens the wit.

Seen as character, wit in Much Ado is awareness and the ability to act discerningly. As is already obvious, the awareness is largely the property of the talkative lovers. Such wit proves to be an Erasmian sensitivity to one's own folly. I have already referred to Benedick's increasing knowledge of his own limitations. Beatrice understands herself earlier. In the first scene she says to the Messenger: 

"[Benedick] set up his bills here in Messina and challenged Cupid at the flight; and my uncle's fool, reading the challenge, subscribed for Cupid and challenged him at the burbolt" (11. 37-40). Dover Wilson thought she might be referring to a jester appearing in an earlier version of the play, but David Stevenson makes the excellent suggestion that the fool is Beatrice herself [in his introduction to Much Ado About Nothing, The Signet Classic Shakespeare, 1964].

Other details strengthen the idea. Beatrice recalls the loss of her heart to Benedick. At another moment she names this heart a "poor fool". She fears that if she yields to Benedick, she will prove the "mother of fools". On which side of the family does she discern the folly? After entertaining the Prince with her merriment, she apologizes by saying: "I was born to speak all mirth and no matter." If she were a professional fool, she would not need to apologize.

Once Benedick and Beatrice have understood themselves, they are ready to act appropriately in the affair of Claudio and Hero. In the marriage scene Benedick immediately senses something deranged in Claudio's heroics, and when Hero faints under slanderous attack, Beatrice immediately reveals her judgment: "Why, how now, cousin, wherefore sink ye down?" (1. 109). Whereas Leonato is completely convinced by the
evidence, Beatrice is certain that Hero has been "belied".

Only after Beatrice has spoken out does the Friar join the defense of Hero. He has accurately read her character in her face.

Call me a fool;
Trust not my reading nor my observations,
If this sweet lady lie not guiltless here.…

(IV. i. 163-168)

At this moment he alone shares the wit of Benedick and Beatrice. Significantly, he is ready to be called a fool.

If wit marks the style and characterizes the dramatic persons in varying degrees, it is also the key to the "action"—taking this word in the Stanislavskian sense as that focussed drive which unites all the larger and smaller activities of the play. From this point of view, the action of Much Ado is the struggle of true wit (or wise folly) in alliance with harmless folly against false wisdom. Don John, Borachio, Don Pedro, Claudio, and even Leonato represent in very different ways the false wisdom which deceives others or itself; Benedick, Beatrice, and the Friar embody the true wit which knows or learns humility. If we group the characters in this way, the conclusion of the play becomes more than the discovery of the truth about Hero followed by the double marriage but includes the triumph of true wit over false wisdom. The dominant tone of the play, however, finally softens the dichotomy I have suggested. The stupidities of the fine gentlemen are half-forgotten in the festive spirit of the close.

This interpretation of the basic action throws light on moments which might otherwise seem weakly articulated. One of these is the apparently rambling recital of Borachio to Conrade, as the Watch listen. These men, of course, stand for harmless folly as Borachio represents false wisdom. It was he who devised the entire plan to destroy Hero and who said, "My cunning shall not shame me" (II. ii. 55). His long digression under the penthouse emphasizes that although fashion—here equated with appearance—"is nothing to a man" (III. iii. 119), young hotbloods will be deceived by it as Claudio had been deceived by Margaret's disguise. Borachio is shrewd enough to see the shallowness of the Claudios whom he can deceive but not wise enough to avoid boasting of his success.

Various references to fashion constitute a minor theme related to the theme of wisdom true and false. Preoccupation with fashion is a sign of immaturity or lack of wit. The unconverted Benedick is laughed at for being over-conscious of fashion, but in the climactic scene Beatrice flays the Claudios of society for their superficial and chic manners; "manhood", she says, "is melted into cursies, valor into compliment, and men are only turned into tongue, and trim ones too" (IV. i. 317-319). In his quarrel with Claudio, Antonio makes the same point. Antonio, who is often seen as a farcical dotard, strongly attacks "scambling, outfacing, fashionmonging boys" (V. i. 94). Properly read, the speech puts this old man on the side of wit as opposed to shallowness and takes its place in the not always obvious hierarchy of wisdom and folly.

A good play, like a good witticism, has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Much Ado is not only like wit; it can be seen as a witticism in tripartite form—the joke, of course, is on Claudio. In Freud's study of wit, there is a classification called "representation through the opposite". Like many other kinds of wit, this kind has three parts. It makes an assertion, seems to reaffirm it, but then denies it. A good example occurs in the following exchange from Henry IV, Part I:

Glend. I can call spirits from the vasty deep.
Hot. Why, so can I, or so can any man;
But will they come when you do call for them?
Other witty exchanges can be reduced to the form: no, maybe, no—as here:

Leonato. You will never run mad, niece.
Beatrice. No, not till a hot January.

(I. i. 89-90)

Beatrice agrees, seems to have doubts, then agrees doubly. Many other examples of this tripartite form could be cited. I shall merely refer again to the comparison of wooing, wedding, and repentance to three dance steps. Here the witty sketch is a three-act play in little.

In the examples just given, the final proposition is not, of course, a simple denial or affirmation of the first. If the wit is to succeed, the climax must gain power through an obliquity which deceives expectation. The same method appears in some of the more ingenious Sonnets. Sonnet 139, "O call not me to justify the wrong", has the following structure: (1) The lover asks the Dark Lady to refrain from wounding him by her straying glances. (2) He argues that she is kind in looking aside since "her pretty looks have been mine enemies". (3) He concludes that since her eyes have almost slain him already, they might as well kill him "outright" by looking straight at him. The conclusion returns to the opening, but with a crucial variation.

The beginning, middle, and end of Much Ado are not hard to name. The beginning is the successful wooing of the pure Hero. The middle is Claudio's conviction that she is impure: "Out on thee, seeming! I will write against it" (IV. i. 55). The end is the exoneration of Hero; but notice the words of Claudio:

Sweet Hero, now thy image doth appear
In the rare semblance that I loved at first.

(V. i. 252-253)

By this time the audience is convinced that the fashionmongering boy will never penetrate the reality lying beyond semblance. This is the joke on Claudio. He and his bride do not see the point, but the audience can hardly miss it.

As the play draws to its festive close, one may ask whether the friendship between Benedick and Claudio has essentially altered. The last scene would hardly be the place or time to say so. But in a final exchange, Benedick says: "For thy part, Claudio, I did think to have beaten thee; but in that thou art like to be my kinsman, live unbruised, and love my cousin." He must know that it will take some wit to do so.

Ralph Berry (essay date 1971)


[In the essay below, Berry separates the situations in Much Ado about Nothing into three categories—"those arising from practice, from chance, and from the necessities of life"—and assesses how these situations relate to the "exploration of the limits and methods of humanly-acquired knowledge."]

Much Ado About Nothing serves as well as any play to mark the useful limits of analyses confined to imagery. On Much Ado, Clemen has nothing to say; and [Caroline] Spurgeon, whose abstractions of iterative imagery so often initiate fruitful trains of thought, points to the images of swift movement, of sport, and of nature [in her Shakespeare's Imagery, 1935]. Now these observations add up to a perfectly fair critical comment, that the play's atmosphere suggests sparkling contention in an essentially outdoors and reassuringly normal
environment. But this comment does not provide a clue to the play's mechanism. It offers no real start to the question: what is *Much Ado* about? The approach to *Much Ado* through language is, seemingly, closed or inhibited by Ifor Evans' verdict [in *The Language of Shakespeare's Plays*, 1952]: '... *Much Ado* has thus no new approach to language, in the verse, nor any of that continuity of intention in the imagery, discovered already in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* ...'

But a linguistic approach other than through imagery or verse/prose analyses is possible. The publication of the latest concordance to Shakespeare [*A Complete and Systematic Concordance to the Works of Shakespeare*, edited by Martin Spevack, 1968] serves to remind us of the immense resources now available to support an enquiry. These now include a computerized record of every word—with Act, scene, line references—in the canon, broken down into plays and into characters. And the simplest way to use this massive auxiliary is to consider the words most frequently used in a play, and to follow the train of thought thus initiated.

In the case of *Much Ado*, we can make the usual eliminations. We can dismiss words that have purely the status of syntactical necessities—'have', 'shall', and so on. A couple of very common words—'man', and 'good'—need not detain us. We then arrive at what is generally understood, that the most frequently used significant word in *Much Ado*, as in the comedies generally, is 'love'. Since love is the subject matter of all the comedies, and has been extensively analysed by John Russell Brown in his book on Shakespeare's comedies [*Shakespeare and his Comedies*, 1962], I pass by this word without more comment. We then arrive at what is not generally understood, that the second most frequently occurring of the significant words is the verb 'to know'.

'Know', in all its forms ('knowest', 'know', and so on) occurs 84 times in *Much Ado*. Granted that this is a common enough verb, and that characters on the stage will always be asking each other questions as 'Knowest thou this man?'. eighty-four seems still an excessive number. And this impression is confirmed if we check with the plays immediately preceding and succeeding *Much Ado* in the canon. *Midsummer Night's Dream* has 31; the *Merchant of Venice* 60; *Henry IV* Parts I & II, 55 and 48; *Henry V* 61; the *Merry Wives of Windsor* 65; and *As You Like It* 58. At this period of his life, Shakespeare's use of the word reaches a peak in *Much Ado*. The conclusion is inescapable; 84 references denotes no mere statistical curiosity, but indicates an important area of Shakespeare's concern in *Much Ado*. The simple word 'know'—so banal, so profound—is a major part of the play's verbal texture, and the key to the structure of *Much Ado*. I now propose to relate this element of the verbal texture to the structure, so far as it can be discerned, of the play.

'Structure' is always, in Shakespeare, a difficult concept. This is apparent if one tries to apply the concept in the crudest possible way, by analysing the plot of *Much Ado*. Even on this primitive matter, the critical consensus breaks down. For example, John Dover Wilson [in *Shakespeare's Happy Comedies*, 1962] sees the play as having only two plots, Hero-Claudio and Benedict-Beatrice. He has virtually nothing to say of the Dogberry Scenes, and sees them simply as comic business, not plot. This is the position of M. C. Brad-brook [*Shakespeare and Elizabethan Poetry*, 1964], also a believer in 'two plots' plus 'straight comic relief.' But John Wain [*The Living World of Shakespeare*, 1964], while seeing the play as starting out with two plots, regards them as Hero-Claudio and Dogberry-Verges. For him, the central plot then emerges as Benedict-Beatrice, 'that make[s] the operatic main plot seem absurdly unreal, and thus makes the Dogberry plot curve away into its own isolation. The play falls into three pieces'. Such a view, rejecting the thematic unity of *Much Ado*, is not A. P. Rossiter's. While insisting on the presence of three plots [in his "Much Ado About Nothing", in *Shakespeare: The Comedies*, edited by Kenneth Muir, 1965], he detects the essential relevance of the Dogberry scenes: 'But misprision and misapprehension are present here too, in a different guise'. On the whole J. R. Brown is in agreement: while speaking of 'the twin stories of Much Ado About Nothing', he recognizes that 'the introduction of Constable Dogberry and the men of his watch, also contributes to presenting and widening the underlying theme of the whole play'. In sum, the critics quoted do not agree on the number of plots, on the identity of the 'main' plot, or on the relevance of the Dogberry scenes. Those who claim a structural relevance for the Dogberry scenes (and this is the view I accord with) are obliged to view the play's
structure as a theme which is articulated in all three of the actions, and which is thus advanced in nearly all of the scenes.

On this line of approach, then, we must think of the play's structure as manifest in a series of episodes, or rather situations, which have the status of variations on a theme. But what is the nature of these 'situations', and how can we characterize them? Bertrand Evans' line is at first attractive: the essential device for him, is the 'practice', and he notes [in Shakespeare's Comedies, 1960]: 'All the action is impelled by a rapid succession of "practices"—eight in all …'. My objection to this is not that it is untrue, but that it is misleading. Mr. Evans' approach emphasizes the importance of the 'practice', and de-emphasizes or ignores those parts of the play that have nothing to do with 'practice'. A practice is a deliberate attempt to foster error. But an important part of Much Ado consists of gratuitous falling into error; and another important part is the correct assessment of truth, some of which process is embodied in quite minor passages. 'Error', whether provoked or not, will simply not cover the activities of Much Ado. Suppose, then, that we conceive of the theme of Much Ado as an exploration of the limits and methods of humanly-acquired knowledge. Such a conception allows us to shift the emphasis from the motives and techniques of instilling error, to the reactions of the dramatis personae in assessing those phenomena. It enables us to seek the principle of the play's unity in a number of very varied scenes. In all this the word 'know' acts as a small, insistent reminder of the target of the play's probing.

We can conveniently consider the play's 'situations' (this is much better than 'scenes') as falling into three groups: those which originate from 'practice', those which afford without previous direction a source of error or revelation of truth, and those which dramatize a sifting of evidence, an assessment of appearance and reality.

1. The eight practices in Much Ado are best regarded as stimuli to provoke interesting reactions. They are not, in themselves, interesting events; and the most notable of the practices, the deception of Don Pedro and Claudio, takes place off-stage. Moreover, Shakespeare develops no study of the motivation of the practices. The practices are of two sorts, benevolent and malevolent. The benevolent ones have as motive the tautology of well-wishing; there is no more to say. The malevolence of Don John is a study deferred, for some half-dozen years, until Iago can provide a suitable dramatic focus. In this play Shakespeare declines to be drawn into a prolonged analysis of evil, and presents Don John purely as a sketch: 'it must not be denied but I am a plain-dealing villain' (II, i, 32-4), To speak, therefore, of the quantity of 'deceit' in Much Ado is misleading. 'Deceit' is an active word, and the dramatic interest lies elsewhere than in the activators of deception.

The point need not be laboured, but some important illustrations are worth citing. Thus, Claudio's reaction to Don John's report that Don Pedro is enamoured of Hero is typical:

Claudio. How know you he loves her?
Don John. I heard him swear his affection.
Borachio. So did I too …
Claudio. Thus answer I in name of
Benedick,
But hear these ill news with the ears of
Claudio.
'Tis certain so; the prince woos for himself.
Friendship is constant in all other things
Save in the office and affairs of love:
Therefore all hearts in love use their own
tongues;
Let every eye negotiate for itself
And trust no agent …

(II, i, 176-88)

Naturally this exchange reveals Claudio's uncertainty and inclination to jealousy. But there is an underlying point. Claudio asks for the sources of knowledge, and is told: the senses, the ear. He then abjures all intermediaries and places his faith in sensory knowledge—a means of knowledge which, as we shall see, is quite inadequate. This is fully demonstrated in the practice played upon Benedick by Leonato, Claudio and Don Pedro. The three discuss in Benedick's hearing Beatrice's love for him. Benedick, stupefied, hears every word clearly. There is no question of sensory deception. He must assess the situation. His first reaction is that old men are unlikely to play tricks—'I should think this a gull, but that the white-bearded fellow speaks it' (II, iii, 132-3). Later he refers to the verisimilitude of the charade: 'This can be no trick: the conference was sadly borne' (II, iii, 239-40). Beatrice indeed, puts up even less resistance in the parallel scene. She, and Benedick, are both right and wrong. Their judgment of the overheard conversations, a matter primarily of the senses, is at fault; their underlying grasp of the truth of the report is surely sound. As it happens, both have excellent intuitive judgment—a fact borne out elsewhere. But in this specific instance, their senses have certainly misled them.

And this is at the heart of the play's central error. Don John, laying charges against Hero's honour, offers to provide 'evidence' of the senses: 'If you will follow me, I will show you enough; and when you have seen more and heard more, proceed accordingly'. Claudio responds on the same level, emphasizing (as before) the eye: 'I should think this a gull, but that the white-bearded fellow speaks it' (II, iii, 132-3). Later he refers to the verisimilitude of the charade: 'This can be no trick: the conference was sadly borne' (II, iii, 239-40). Beatrice indeed, puts up even less resistance in the parallel scene. She, and Benedick, are both right and wrong. Their judgment of the overheard conversations, a matter primarily of the senses, is at fault; their underlying grasp of the truth of the report is surely sound. As it happens, both have excellent intuitive judgment—a fact borne out elsewhere. But in this specific instance, their senses have certainly misled them.

This position leads Claudio logically to his denunciation of Hero. Preceded by a tremolo on 'know'—the Friar, by virtue of his office, asks the question that launches 'know' on a minor flurry of repetition—Claudio delivers his speech on 'seeming' (IV, i, 30-42). And his affirmation of knowledge comes down to 'Are our eyes our own?' (IV, i, 72). In this he is backed up by Don Pedro: 'Myself, my brother, and this grieved court, / Did see her, hear her …' (IV, i, 90-1). The senses, without judgment, are seen to be useless.

The point is underlined by Leonato's behaviour. He takes her profusion of blushes as evidence of guilt:

Could she here deny
The story that is printed in her blood?

(IV, i, 123-4)

Beatrice's absence from Hero's bedchamber evokes 'Confirm'd, confirm'd!' (IV, i, 152). And finally, his judgment rests on the standing of other people:

Would the two princes lie?

(IV, i, 154)

His method of confirming evidence is grossly at fault, and is at odds with his cool and sceptical reception of the servant's news in Act I, Scene 2.

The true value here is provided by the Friar. He, like the others, has used his eyes, 'By noting of the lady' (IV, i, 160). But he relies not only on his senses, but on his experience of life. His judgment is sounder; and better still, he has a sounder method, for the matter will need to be put to further tests. Hence his key statement of the knowledge-method:

Trust not my reading nor my observations,
Which with experimental seal doth warrant
The tenour of my book; …
If this sweet lady lie not guiltless here
Under some biting error.

(IV, i, 167-9, 171-2)

'Experimental seal' is the touchstone of knowledge. And this thought is allowed to penetrate even the following passage, the coming together of Beatrice and Benedick. The heart of it is

**Benedick.** I do love nothing in the world so well as you: is not that strange?

**Beatrice.** As strange as the thing I know not.

(IV, i, 271-3)

How, indeed, can Beatrice 'know' in the full sense what her instinct assures her to be the truth? Her own version of the 'experimental seal' follows shortly: 'Kill Claudio' (line 294). Several points converge in this terse imperative other than the purely theatrical. It is a version of 'If you love me, then prove it …'. Moreover, the issue is symbolic. 'Kill Claudio' is to kill the Claudio in oneself—to kill the force of distrust. It is to yield to the value of trust, formed on a sufficient appraisal of another, and implicit faith. *Enfin*, it is to love. Beatrice will accept nothing less, and Benedick—after a decent hesitation—is right to grant it.

The practices, then, initiate a series of situations in which the victims regularly co-operate in their own gulling. Their senses play no tricks; but reliance on the senses, without reference to the controls of judgment, experience and method simply defines a limit of knowledge.

- Certain situations arise in which error, or revelation of truth, occur without being consciously provoked. These extend the range of tests to which the dramatis personae are exposed. Such a test occurs in the play's second scene; really it is two situations compressed into a tiny, but important episode. First, there is the servant's overhearing of the Claudio-Don Pedro conversation. He reports that the Prince has confessed his love for Hero. The man, plainly, has heard perfectly correctly—as a glance at the preceding scene demonstrates. A line such as 'And in her bosom I'll unclasp my heart' (I, i, 333) is, taken in isolation, extremely suggestive. But the man has heard only a fragment of the conversation, taken out of context, and thus has totally misconstrued it. The second situation is the contrasted reaction of Leonato and Antonio. Antonio is inclined to lend the report some credence, but willing to wait upon the event; Leonato is more sceptical, demanding corroboratory evidence:

  **Antonio.** But, brother, I can tell you strange news that you yet dreamt not of.
  **Leonato.** Are they good?
  **Antonio.** As the event stamps them: but they have a good cover; they show well outward.
  **Leonato.** Hath the fellow any with that told you this?
  **Antonio.** A good sharp fellow: I will send for him; and question him yourself.
  **Leonato.** No, no; we will hold it but a dream till it appear itself …

(I, ii, 4-9, 18-23)

Leonato's sceptical attitude here is at variance with his later behaviour. And his unwillingness to interrogate (brought out in the Church scene, and his refusal to preside over the examination of Conrade and Borachio) fixes a standard of improper conduct. This points, subtly but unmistakably, towards a favourite Shakespearean
technique: a model of human behaviour is located among clowns and rustics.

The following scene (I, iii) between Don John and his minions provides a neat inversion of the theme. Error has been allowed to grow into proven truth, or no: now truth—Borachio has heard the Claudio-Don Pedro dialogue quite correctly—is promoted to foster error. Leonato, ... 'no hypocrite, but prays from his heart' (I, i, 158-9), now yields place in the patterned manoeuvring to Don John, 'I cannot hide what I am ... I am a plain-dealing villain' (I, iii, 14, 33-4). But the situation is grasped and developed with a malignant competence. Knowledge in Much Ado is largely the property of the villains and clowns. The intelligent sophisticates miss it most of the time.

The clowns receive their windfall in III, iii. Since Borachio and Conrade expose themselves fully to the listeners, there is no question of mishearing or misinterpretation. The actual process of revelation of truth proceeds without obstacle. Apart from the clothes-imagery of the Borachio-Conrade exchange ('Thou knowest that the fashion of a doublet, or a hat, or a cloak, is nothing to a man', III, iii, 124-5) which classically embodies the idea of appearance-reality, there is little interest attached to the content of the actual revelation-episode. The real point has emerged earlier, in the discussion of methods of detection employed by the Watch. This has to come before. It is useless afterwards, because there is no problem of comprehension involved in the drunken babbling of Borachio. The methods employed by the constabulary will certainly survive scrutiny, if their command of language will not. We can note the chain of tests.

1. Challenge any suspicious character: upon which, as Verges correctly observes, 'If he will not stand when he is bidden, he is none of the Prince's subjects' (III, iii, 32-3).
2. 'Make no noise in the streets' (III, iii, 35-6): that is, a sort of plain-clothes technique in which trouble is allowed to raise its head.
3. As for drunks, order them off to bed. If they are incapable 'let them alone till they are sober: if they make you not then the better answer, you may say they are not the men you took them for' (III, iii, 48-51).
4. In the case of suspected thieves, the procedure is 'Softly, softly ...'. The Second Watchman has raised the key issue with the question containing the key word: 'If we know him to be a thief, shall we not lay hands on him?' And Dogberry's answer is a model of detective's circumspection: 'Truly, by your office, you may; but I think they that touch pitch will be defiled. The most peaceable way for you, if you do take a thief, is, to let him show himself what he is and steal out of your company' (III, iii, 58-64). In analysis, if not in performance, we should not allow ourselves to be taken in by the superb comedy of the trouble-shunning Watch and their majestic leader. In truth, a model procedure is outlined before us in the Watch's catechism. The logic of the procedure for detection is impeccable. In their system, a hypothesis must be checked against a sufficient body of confirmatory data. It is the true counterpart of the Friar's 'experimental seal'. Their procedures make the Watch cousins-german to the man who, as T. W. Craik correctly observes [in 'Much Ado About Nothing', Scrutiny, XIX, 1953], is the 'new point of reference' in the play. It is clear that the Watch's social superiors make a basic error in detection and apprehension: that of striking too soon.

In fine, the Watchmen's discovery of Borachio and Conrade rounds off a series of three casual and unforced overhearings. Knowledge has been supplied to the sophisticates, the villains, and the clowns. This, in two of the three instances, has served as peg for disquisitions on the methods of securing knowledge, of confirming likely hypotheses. These discussions link the situations with those provoked by the practices. And the true model for these occasions emerges from Dogberry's words (as, from the practices, it emerges from the Friar's). Malapropism is not a comic extravaganza, it is a central verbal device for advancing the play's theme. Dogberry's language is a burlesque of truth, but not a denial of it. His Watch, for all their naiveté and incompetence, have the root of the matter in them. They precisely counterpoint their betters in command of words and situations.
• The eight practices and three overhearings provide a series of situations in which discussion of truth is, as it were, a formal necessity. These situations compose the framework of the plot. They would, in themselves, justify the assertion that a main area of the play's interest lies in the dramatized exploration of the verb 'to know'. But these situations do not yield the total of the play's structure. *Much Ado* contains, in addition, several passages which lightly and flexibly extend the theme which has been uttered; and two set-pieces (the masque and the examination) which provide an emblem or symbol of the play's business. The extension of the play's concerns into the informal and emblematic reveals, I believe, Shakespeare's techniques even more clearly than the product of the foregoing analysis.

1. We can perfectly well begin with the opening line of *Much Ado*: Leonato's 'I learn in this letter ...'. It is Shakespeare's habit to strike to the heart of the play's concerns as rapidly as possible. (For example, Harry Levin's study of *Hamlet* [*The Question of Hamlet*, 1961] is based on the idea that the play's conceptual structure, a question, is revealed in the opening line 'Who's there?'). One cannot, obviously, make too much of the necessary question-and-answer that speed an exposition. The news of the battle, and the status of the visitors, must be transmitted to the audience as soon as possible. Still, the opening lines suggest the underlying theme very well. The initial talk is of *learning*, of *assessing* people and faces (lines 24-9). Benedick's opening line presents theme-through-jest (the same technique that we have observed in the Dogberry scenes): 'Were you in doubt, Sir, that you asked her?' (lines 110-11). The opening episode ends with Don Pedro accepting the invitation to stay as genuine, since he judges Leonato to mean his words: 'I dare swear he is no hypocrite, but prays from his heart' (lines 158-9). In short, the opening passage has moved rapidly from the communication of factual knowledge to the problem of *knowing* people.

2. The matter is then developed into the colloquy between Benedick and Claudio, which follows immediately. The two friends have considerable difficulty in deciding how serious the other is. Claudio asks for Benedick's opinion of Hero, and receives an offhand jesting answer. Claudio, misconstrued, says: 'Thou thinkest I am in sport: I pray thee tell me truly how thou likest her' (I, i, 185-6). Benedick cannot decide the issue at all: 'But speak you this with a sad brow or do you play the flouting Jack ... ?' (I, i, 190-2). The problem of knowing when one's friend is in earnest is, for the moment, too much for these two.

3. The arrival of Don Pedro complicates and intensifies the discussion. The conversation now turns on the difficulties of assessing one's own feelings, as opposed to those of others. The distinctions are delicately separated.

*Claudio*. You speak this to fetch me in, my Lord.

*Don Pedro*. By my troth, I speak my thought.

*Claudio*. And in faith, my Lord, I spoke mine.

*Benedick*. And by my two faiths, and troth, my Lord, I spoke mine.

*Claudio*. That I love her, I feel.

*Don Pedro*. That she is worthy, I know.

*Benedick*. That I neither feel how she should be loved nor know how she should be worthy, is the opinion that fire cannot melt out of me …

(I, i, 233-42)

The alignment of 'knowing' and 'feeling' is the axis of the crucial scenes in Act IV. Intuition (sound) governing knowledge is the standard advanced later by Benedick and Beatrice; intuition allied to a proper
experimental approach to knowledge is the even better synthesis proposed by the Friar. Claudio has no
judgment and no method. The opening passages, then, reveal him ominously prepared to accept 'love' as
consequent upon the opinion of others; and as ominously, scattering the word 'liked' in the midst of his talk of
'love' (I, i, 309, 310, 315, 324). To sum up hereabouts, the play's opening passages parse the difficulties of
knowing one's own feelings, and those of others. The key words are 'know', 'feel', 'opinion', 'think'. This
dialogue (I, i) is the clou of the play.

• The masque episode, as in Love's Labour's Lost, presents a central symbol. The mechanics of the
masque are organized to different ends, however. The earlier comedy exhibits, in the masque, a
consistent scheme of the perceptive ladies penetrating the disguise of the men; the fantasists are
effectively unmasked by the realists. This scheme, equally, is apparent in the scene's core of language,
conceit exposed by what we should today term Johnsonian criticism. Now in Much Ado, the masque
reveals a pattern of penetrated disguises, but no longer reflecting a simple male-female opposition.
The centre of interest is the key word 'know', used eight times in this short passage. Thus, Ursula and
Antonio play an elegant variant on the tune:

  Ursula. I know you well though; you are
         Signor Antonio.
  Antonio. At a word, I am not.
  Ursula. I know you by the waggling of your
         head.
  Antonio. To tell you true, I counterfeit him.
  Ursula. You could never do him so ill-well,
         unless you were the very man. Here's his
         dry hand up and down: you are he, you are
         he.
  Antonio. At a word, I am not.
  Ursula. Come, come: do you think I do not
         know you by your excellent wit? Can virtue
         hide itself?

         (II, i, 118-30)

Hypothesis yields to experimental confirmation. This badinage presents the stuff of the play as plainly as the
better-known passages in the 'big' scenes. And Claudio, confronted by Don John, twice touches the telling
word—once as a lie, once as a question directed towards a lie:

  Don John. Are you not Signior Benedick?
  Claudio. You know me well; I am he …
         How know you he loves her?

         (II, i, 169-70, 176)

Reduce the masque to its verbal core, and it resolves into two simple syntactic units; the statement, 'I know
you', and the question, 'How do you know?' The texture of the dialogue,—light, repeated references to
'know'—suggests unmistakably the concept dominating the scene.

• The raillery of Act III, Scene ii, keeps the theme going. Don Pedro and Claudio twit Benedick on his
outward signs of love—his clothes, his melancholy, his beardless face, and so on. The talk is all of
identifying Benedick's sickness from outward signs:

  Claudio. If he be not in love with some
         woman, there is no believing old signs:
And the matter is virtually formalized into the expected constellation of 'knows':

**Claudio.** Nay, but I know who loves him.

**Don Pedro.** That would I know too: I warrant, one that knows him not.

(III, ii, 40-1)

On the entry of Don John, the word becomes a trill—it is almost operatic:

**Don John.** Means your Lordship to be married tomorrow?

**Don Pedro.** You know he does.

**Don John.** I know not that, when he knows what I know.

(III, ii, 65-7)

And he goes on to give his reasons. In this scene as elsewhere, 'knowledge' is defined empirically—the concept is studied through the means of defining it.

- The mirror image of the Don Pedro-Claudio examination of Benedick occurs in III, iv. Beatrice is quizzed by Margaret on the import of his 'sickness'; and Margaret correctly diagnoses a state for which *Carduus Benedictos* is the cure. The conspirators, like their male counterparts, are in the know and have no difficulty in reading the signs. Psychologically these two passages form a welcome relief from the situations in which the dramatis personae make much heavier weather of the business of assessing truth.
- Yet again, the problem of assessing people concerns a minor but perfectly congruent passage. Benedick, convinced by Beatrice of Hero's innocence, comes to deliver the challenge to Claudio. Almost any other dramatist here would have made Benedick deliver the challenge briskly, concentrating on the powerful effect of the actual challenge speech. But not Shakespeare. He positively loiters over the passage, allowing Benedick a hundred lines between entrance and exit. (V, i, 108-201). The passage is lengthened out to provide a quite different sort of interest; eventually it is a prolonged test by Claudio and Don Pedro to discover if Benedick be in earnest or not. A series of maladroit jests, embarrassing in their oafishness, evoke only the same iron response from Benedick. The climax of the passage occurs not in the delivery of the challenge, but the unwilling realization of the jesters that Benedick really means it: Don Pedro's simple, deflated 'He is in earnest' (V, i, 202) acknowledges the truth that appearances (for once) do not deceive. Thus, the dialogue is constructed not so much to make an immediate dramatic point, as to extend further the fabric from which *Much Ado* is woven.
- The examination of Borachio and Conrade by Dogberry and his minions is a set-piece that re-states and synthesizes the play's concerns. It blares forth with a stridency of brass and provocation of bassoon the theme of *Much Ado*. But take away the glorious inanities of Dogberry and we are left with, in essence, a model procedure. It is for the Watch to do the work neglected by their betters. Leonato, failing in this as in other business, has left his functions to be delegated to Dogberry. The Watch—with intelligent help from the Sexton and Verges—pull their superior through. It is precisely this—the marshalling of evidence and formation of proper judgment—that the Watch succeed in, and the others fail in. To speak of these scenes as 'comic relief' is to misjudge entirely Shakespeare's design. Borachio can see the point: 'I have deceived even your very eyes:' (so much for evidence based solely on the senses) 'what your wisdom could not discover, these shallow fools have brought to light' (V, i, 243-5).
The transposition of theme from serious to comic is, as always, a basic Shakespearean technique. The Dogberry Scenes provide a remarkable instance of Shakespeare's easy command of material, that is, his capacity to pursue an idea throughout a play across scenes varying very widely in mood, dramatis personae, and (apparently) situation. It may well be, as many critics have suggested, that a vital stage in Shakespeare's development was marked by the arrival of Robert Armin with the company. In other words, the wise fools of the later comedies—Touchstone and Feste—depended for their creation on an actor of intelligence and distinction capable of projecting these demanding roles. This may well be, but I point out that such a step is perfectly implicit in the comic work in *Much Ado*. The difference between Dogberry (a part that does not demand an actor of intelligence) and Feste is one of consciousness. Feste knows his own significance to the main action, Dogberry does not. But that is the only difference. Shakespeare has planted Dogberry among the Messinians with a full awareness of his relevance: a parodic point of reference, a Friar's zany.

We have, in sum, a number of passages, not directly connected with the practices or with the eaves-droppings, that relate the same fundamental situation. The situation poses always the question: how do I know? How can I be sure that A. is telling the truth, that B. is a villain, that C. loves me, that D. is lovesick? How can intuition be confirmed? These variants of the central question are exhibited, with complete formal mastery, in virtually every scene in *Much Ado*.

**Elliot Krieger (essay date 1979)**


In this essay, Krieger examines the two social codes of Messina—domestic and military—and contends that "one of the primary motivations in *Much Ado* is to combine the two codes into a more comprehensive aristocratic ideal."

The distinction between appearance and reality is articulated as a theme in Shakespeare's comedies in two distinct ways: (1) fortune, or some other external force, imposes on the characters some incorrect perception of reality, and, as the plot proceeds, that misperception rectifies itself (e.g. *Comedy of Errors*, *Twelfth Night*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*); or (2) some characters voluntarily create deceptions that impel the plot, initially by deceiving other characters about reality and ultimately by demonstrating the necessity of distinguishing appearance from and achieving useful knowledge about reality (e.g. *Love's Labour's Lost*, *As You Like It*, *Measure for Measure*, *The Tempest*). *Much Ado About Nothing* fits neither pattern, for the series of deceptions that compose the plot, although created by the characters, are lived through en route to other deceptions, and are not overcome; false perception characterizes rather than disrupts the norm of the society depicted in the play. The characters adopt superficial attitudes toward what, in other dramas, might have been metaphysical crises; their overt considerations never become epistemological, as will those of Hamlet, Troilus, and Othello—the latter two at least involved in similar plots but in radically different societies. In short, although philosophic problems of 'noting' and 'knowing' can be abstracted from the plot of *Much Ado About Nothing*, the characters, when viewed in relation to the plot, are marked by their exceptional lack of concern with the philosophic implications of their series of deceptions. The crucial question about *Much Ado*, then concerns not how the characters learn to perceive reality and to see beyond deception, for it is not at all clear that they can do so even at the play's 'festive' conclusion, but what about the society of Messina both allows its inhabitants to create deception as a continual menace and at the same time leaves them unable to recognize and to forestall the deceptions with which they are confronted.

The significant aspect of deception in Messina is its casual mundanity, its normalcy. The catastrophes of *Much Ado* differ in degree but not in kind from its society's accepted social diversion; in fact, the kind of crises in which the characters find themselves are not the totally fantastic and unique confusions such as in *Comedy of Errors* or *Twelfth Night*, but are only exaggerations of the way the social relations of this play's
world are normally developed. For example, the central crisis of the play is that which concerns Hero's chastity (IV, i ff), but the audience is forestalled from seeing it as a crisis because it follows on the heels of a similar disaster that had merely concerned her fidelity. In addition, there follows the double-trap set for Beatrice and Benedick, and the trick of Hero's 'death' set to win back Claudio, both deceptions that, through their supposedly benevolent plotting, help to frame—and thus to distract apprehension from—the play's central misperceptions.

The incorporation of all kinds of deception into the everyday life of Much Ado emphasizes the way in which the social relations of Messina can 'naturally' lead to crises, and explains the failure of the characters to consider the most serious personal accusations and disasters as anything more than factors that will alter their social relations. The society of Much Ado is prevented from becoming philosophically absorbed in the epistemological problems raised by the denunciation of Hero because this exact sort of event has been quite typical of its daily life. Characters shift loyalties and relations throughout Much Ado with a fluid ease, quite different from the radical jolts of alignment or rigid loyalties that typify characters in other Shakespearean comedies. The difference is that here the characters are attentive to the surface of their situations, and do not care much about the deeper ramifications of feeling. Claudio falls in love quickly but not deeply; Beatrice and Benedick can easily have their strongly held attitudes modified when they are made to perceive slight changes in the matrix of attitudes in their society; Leonato is ready to denounce very quickly his own daughter; and so on. Messina is a world in which 'appearances… are necessary to the social solidarity'.

In a world so dependent on appearance, and on conformity, it is small wonder that the determining and most significant relation for the inhabitants is not that between appearance and reality, but between different appearances. The continual deceptions of Messina have a social explanation—appearance can continually deceive only in a society that does not question the worth and the validity of appearances. To achieve their social ends the Messinians do not search behind appearances for a 'truth', but attack and manipulate appearances, attempt to get their society into new configurations.

Claudio, in his denunciation of Hero at the altar, could be cited as the exception to this behavioral dictum, for he does launch out on two supposedly powerful declarations against the dependence upon appearance (IV, i, 55-60, 99-107). But both of these 'outbursts' are almost painfully conventional, the first with its arch classical references:

\[
\text{You seem to me as Dian in her orb,} \\
\text{As chaste as is the bud ere it be blown;} \\
\text{But you are more intemperate in your blood} \\
\text{Than Venus …}
\]

the second with its precious quibbling and outrageous farewell to love:

\[
\text{O Hero! What a Hero hadst thou been,} \\
\text{If half thy outward graces had been placed} \\
\text{About thy thoughts and counsels of thy heart!} \\
\text{But fare thee well, most foul, most fair!} \\
\text{Farewell,} \\
\text{Thou pure impiety, and impious purity!} \\
\text{For thee I'll lock up all the gates of love….}
\]

The whole denunciation scene, especially when one considers Don Pedro's cueing line (28), has about it the air of a set-up. Moreover, there is something more than a little grating about a denunciation of observation that results from a completely superficial and distanced observation of an event. It is not that Claudio's outrage is implausible; it is only that he adopts the argument to make his own appearance look good—he has not
achieved any knowledge, as his continuing superficial behavior throughout the rest of the play testifies.

Appearances in *Much Ado* are measured for their 'correctness' against two separate social standards or codes of decorum: the domestic and the military codes. The domestic code is concerned with demonstrations of social status, and is represented in the play by the natives of Messina—Leonato, Antonio, and their households—who take pains to appear 'in great haste' (I, ii; III, v) and who delight in contriving masked entertainments or formal ceremonies (II, i; V, iii). The military code, represented by the returned soldiers whose 'war thoughts have left their places vacant', becomes exaggerated by its contrast with the predominantly domestic concerns of Messina. Whereas the domestic code is concerned with social status, the military code is concerned with personal status, with honor as manifested in loyalty and in fidelity. Occasionally the military code is asserted in jocular good humor, as when Benedick asks to be commanded:

- **Don Pedro.** What secret hath held you here, that you followed not to Leonato's?
- **Benedick.** I would your Grace would constrain me to tell.
- **Don Pedro.** I charge thee on thy allegiance.
- **Benedick.** You hear, Count Claudio; I can be secret as a dumb man, I would have you think so; but on my allegiance, mark you this, on my allegiance, he is in love.

(I, i, 176-82; see also)

but also, especially later in the play, in harmful configurations, as when Don Pedro, Don John, and Claudio ally themselves in a dubious camaraderie (in IV, i), or when Claudio and Don Pedro consider so carefully their own reputations upon discovering that their accusations of Hero were unjustified:

- **Claudio.**
  I know not how to pray your patience,
  Yet I must speak. Choose your revenge yourself;
  Impose me to what penance your invention Can lay upon my sin; yet sinn'd I not
  But in mistaking.

- **Don Pedro.** By my soul, nor I….

(V, i, 257-61)

The potential for the military code to dominate the domestic code is diminished, however, as the military standards are abused by one of the play's excluded characters, Don John. The easily enough threatened system of loyalty among the soldiers is shown by juxtaposition to be only a step away from the service that Don John exacts from his men for a fee (II, ii, 48).

The two social codes remain separate, and one of the primary motivations in *Much Ado* is to combine the two codes into a more comprehensive aristocratic ideal, not to test either code, or to measure one code against the other. The need to combine the two codes without ethical exploration of either, symbolized and actualized in the play by the marriages between members of the two separate aristocratic groups whom the two codes represent, further distinguishes *Much Ado* from Shakespeare's other comedies: whereas most of Shakespeare's comedies are initiated by an enforced separation of subject from object (lover from beloved, as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; heir from inheritance, as in *Twelfth Night*; ruler from domain, as in *Love's Labour's Lost, Measure for Measure, or The Tempest*; or all three separations, as in *As You Like It*), in *Much Ado* the separated groups form naturally complementary parts, and the separation of the two, at least until well
into the play, is presented as an etiology, but not as a problem. The initial assumption seems to be that since
the two groups form sexual complements—the one group being eligible bachelors and the other fathers and
their eligible daughters—separation will be overcome through the natural process of sexual attraction and its
ritual acceptance in matrimony.

The sexual attraction is, however, subsumed by a more general social attraction between the soldiers and the
Messinians. Both see in each other a perfected and ennobling reflection of themselves. The Messinians feel
graced and honored by a visit from the brave warriors; the soldiers feel graced and honored to be treated with
such respect and deference. They write a mutual fiction by which either group finds its own value—reflected in
the opinions of its counterpart—caught in a spiralling inflation. The egotism of the soldiers derives from the
superficiality of the Messinians—the offer of the luxury of absorption in games of courtship and domestic
intrigue is a great compliment to the soldiers. The two conclusions that they can draw from their heroic
reception are that their martial labors were great enough to earn them the leisure of 'at the least a month' (I, i,
127) in which they might fleet the time carelessly, and that the role of soldier does not have military victory as
its only, or even as its primary, end. The impression given in this play is that war is fought entirely to increase
one's honor, and thus to increase one's eventual standing in domestic society; war is fought for domestic ends.

The love and eventual marriages that might result from this reflective egotism could have drastic
consequences (cf. *Othello*), for the love is narcissistic, is based on concern for the self rather than for the
beloved. As the two groups unify in their plans for marriage, there develops an increasing isolation of both
groups from any ethical standards or even value-judgments that might be shared by any or all excluded
groups, classes, or individuals. The aristocracy creates within itself its own standards of decorum and desire.
The aristocrats find it more and more impossible to believe that any, particularly any of their cohorts, could
dissent from their code of behavior. Their egotistical blindness can thus leave them wide open to attacks of
villainy and, as we see very early in this play, usually deaf to villainy's exposure.

Formal and elegant marriage becomes the pinnacle of achievement for both the domestic and the military
sections of society. For the former it incorporates a semblance of military dynamism into their otherwise
relatively static society. (The sense of a leisure class springing into activity upon the arrival of guests is very
precise in act I.) For the soldiers, use of military 'honor' in amorous pursuits gives them the illusion of having
a goal that derives from but transcends their 'everyday' existence. By devoting themselves to thoughts of
marriage, they give their mundane society what appears to be a teleology—they simultaneously apotheosize
themselves and make a heaven of hell, for, as Don Pedro wistfully declares, 'we are the only love-gods' (II, i,
349).

Playing 'love-god' becomes the only respectable occupation in Messina, as the equilibrium of the society
begins to depend on the successful matches being achieved and consummated. The characters pretend to be
diverting themselves—with dances, songs, jests, and plots—whereas in fact they are openly courting. In this
respect *Much Ado About Nothing* is again quite different from such comedies as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
and *As You Like It*, for here the society demands marriage among its youth as an emblem of its stability. The
initial problem is how to bring the two aspects of the aristocracy together most publicly, not the escape by the
young lovers from public ritual. In *Much Ado* the disguises are really revelations, and the intrigues are really
declarations of intent. The whole society pretends to be working in secret, but its true goal is public
manifestation of love—and concurrently of the aristocracy's lavish wealth and power.

In *Much Ado* we are faced with the familiar illusion of the double-plot as analysed by William Empson [in his
Some Versions of Pastoral, 1950], although here we do not see two 'levels' of society and thus suspect that we
have seen the 'entire' society; rather, we see a social class divided into two sections, and thus we have the
illusion that the one class composes the entire society. The more public demonstrations the aristocracy gives
of its wealth and wit, the more secure—to them and to us—does its domination of society appear. The
appearance of course is what the Messinians want, for theirs is a society where the ocular proof is all that is

161
necessary—no one cares to go much deeper.

Messina is the aristocracy's ultimate vision of the second world, the forest brought home. The escape to the forest has never been an escape to nature—the penalty of Adam has been one of the hardships willingly endured by noble exiles. The attraction of the forest has been its (supposed) freedom from conflict and care. Yet none would doubt that, could the same freedom be achieved by the aristocracy in its native society, the opportunity would have been seized—the ultimate goal of the 'golden world' comedies has been to return 'restored' to the society with which the play began. Much Ado About Nothing, with its dramatic focus on the public occasions during which the reconciliation of the separated components of the ruling class occurs, is a play about exactly the kind of problems by which the aristocracy enjoys being confronted—the problems of arranging entertainments and marriages, of assuring chastity and penance, all of which confirm rather than challenge the power and authority of those whom the problems involve.

This sense of control and of domination—of equanimity—pervades the mood of the play: the sense of having built an ideal from one's own society is different from that of having left home to find an ideal. The latter situation, that of the exiles in As You Like It, for example, creates a mood of tenuous poise. Here the society, although less fantastic, is also less threatening, and the aristocratic poise becomes consequently more secure. Action is cushioned not with the desperate antinomies of verse—as in Love's Labour's Lost and A Midsummer Night's Dream—but in the easy repartee, as A. P. Rossiter says [in Angel With Horns, 1961], of equivocation.

Equivocation is a further way of solidifying the aristocracy, for it gives all of its participants 'equal voice', while completely excluding those who will not or cannot join in the 'skirmish of wit'. The language of Much Ado is marked particularly by the in-joke and doubleentendre, never by raucous humor or outright bawdy punning. It is a language that has been appropriated by a privileged group of people, so that they can demonstrate to each other their confederacy—that they can understand each other across great distances. As it is used here, 'wit', as G. K. Hunter writes [in William Shakespeare: The Late Comedies, 1962], 'is a weapon for the strong', only those with the 'poise to remain balanced and adaptive' can have the privilege of the comic vision.

Of course since the ability to talk naturally in equivocations is a way of demarcating the ruling class, the inability to do so is a way of isolating those who are not members of this privileged group. The classic instance is the riotously malapropriate language spoken by Dogberry, who, in aspiring to emulate the gentry in their speech as in other things (IV, ii, 74-80) over-reaches his own vocabulary. Dogberry speaks with just the opposite of the aristocratic use of double-entendres—his roughshod use of fancy speech cramps completely unrelated or only phonetically related words into the same meaning. Dogberry seems to enjoy his own speech, but of course its humor escapes him. Even if he were 'as pretty a piece of flesh as any is in Messina … and a rich fellow enough', his failure to use language dextrously would exclude him from the Messinian aristocracy.

In fact, for several characters in Much Ado the use of language determines their degree of proximity to the aristocracy. Don John, who is excluded above all because of his dubious lineage, and who additionally excludes himself by his anti-social actions throughout the play, is, in the first scene, marked as different from his companions by his refusal to engage in artful use of language: 'I thank you; I am not of many words, /But I thank you' (lines 134-5), his response to Leonato's welcome, are his significant first words. In a play in which words are such an important method of social discrimination, his cursory attitude immediately sets him off as aberrant.

Hero's attendant Margaret does quite well at imitating her 'betters' with language. Both Beatrice and Benedick are surprised at the arrival of this newcomer to the aristocracy's formerly exclusive domain of wit:

Beatrice. O, God help me! God help me!
How long have you profess'd apprehension?
Margaret. Ever since you left it…
(III, iv, 59-61; see also)

They react as though their personal, or at least their class, privileges had been encroached upon. It is probably the general respect Margaret has earned through her wit that allows the aristocracy to accept her as sort of an equal and to think the best of her, insofar as they allow her to escape the whipping that she thoroughly deserves. Another minor character, the Messenger of the first scene, also makes a good impression by his elegant use of aristocratic language; his speech gives the opening moments a serene quality rather than the mechanical fumbling by which Shakespeare's typical messenger-setting-the-scene passages are usually beset. That this Messenger cannot keep pace with Beatrice's wit is surely no strike against him.

Yet for all the talk of those who disqualify themselves from being Messina's 'leading lights' by their insufficiently witty language, and, conversely, for all the praise of the wit that exists in Much Ado, I am sure that I am not alone in finding the brilliant language spoken for the large portion of the play not particularly useful as a source for illustrative quotation. It may be a rash generalization, but it seems to me that those who write on Much Ado quote from the text less than do those writing on other Shakespearian dramas. What's more, a large percentage of passages quoted from the text are selections from Claudio's outbursts against Hero, moments whose linguistic tone is really at odds with the tone of the balance of the play. Claudio, at the altar, is striking out against the integration of his society, and his denunciation speeches, in their derivative way, are exceptional—but they are so particularly as set against the integrated aristocratic language of the rest of the play. As much as the subtleties of wit on display here help to define subtle differences and distinctions between characters, seldom does any one bit of dialogue, when lifted out of dramatic and placed into a 'critical' context, seem any more important than the next. The wit and intelligence for which the characters of Much Ado are so well known are not traits that they employ to help them think.

This is not meant to detract from the intelligence made manifest in the aristocratic speech, but to indicate that the intelligence is operating on only one level of concern. The speech of Much Ado About Nothing is used neither for discussion nor for the exploration of ideas; rather, it centers upon the two related fixed ideas of proving self- (and social class-) value and of courtship—wit makes one more desirable and hence more eligible. Even the soliloquies—such as Benedick's in II, iii:

… but til all graces be in one woman, one woman shall not come in my grace. Rich she shall be, that's certain; wise, or I'll none; virtuous, or I'll never cheapen her (and so on, 11. 8-32),

or:

I hear how I am censured: they say I will bear myself proudly if I perceive the love come from her; they say, too, that she will rather die than give any sign of affection. I did never think to marry. I must not seem proud; … (an excerpt from 11. 201-23)

are concerned with self-image and with courtship in a most pragmatic way, and are not at all probing or metaphysical. The aristocracy, in its achieved complacency, does not need or wish to use its hair-splitting linguistic abilities to explore the moral antitheses of situations, but only to arrange for its youth suitable marriages with all of the attendant rituals and public displays of wealth.

The actions of the play, of course, do not afford the characters opportunity for moral exploration until quite late, until Claudio rejects Hero at the altar. It is only then that the separation of the two social groups and their attitudes—one world of military decorum and masculine loyalties and the other of domestic merriment and warmth—is presented as an opposition instead of as a symbiosis. The whole play had been moving toward unification of the two groups, symbolized by the marriage ceremony, for which the differences between the groups and their codes presented a necessary and a positive set of counterpoised elements. When Hero is
rejected and the two groups separate, each exaggerates its differences from the other so that what had seemed complementary now becomes irreconcilable. Don Pedro and Claudio assume and assert an implicit military loyalty and jovial masculine camaraderie. They take their leave of Leonato, fully expecting him to treat them with all due courtesy, even to acknowledge that they had acted honorably in denouncing his daughter (V, i, 45-109). (Don John, who had none of their illusions about class solidarity, had by that time already fled from Messina.) Moreover, they find it nearly impossible to believe that one of their own fellow-soldiers could hold their 'honorable' actions against them on any moral grounds, as Claudio jokingly dismisses Benedick's challenge of him, and as he and Don Pedro try to bring Benedick into their coterie again, prodding him for a misogynist response with their barracks humor (V, i, 155-177), while letting him know that he has them to thank for his recent success in love (11. 172-173). They suspect, in short, that Benedick is being so sullen with them not out of any positive moral principle, but entirely 'for the love of Beatrice' (1. 188).

At the same time Leonato, whose original instinct was to take the masculine side and to join with the soldiers in denunciation of his daughter:

Hath no man's dagger here a point for me?

O Fate, take not away thy heavy hand!
Death is the fairest cover for her shame
That may be wish'd for
(IV, i, 108, 114-16; see also )

shifts back to the domestic world and becomes a strong advocate of reputation and family honor. I think that we are meant to feel that his unconsolable grief (V, i, 3-32) and his challenge of Claudio (1. 66) are excessive under the circumstances; he knows that Hero is still alive, and that he and Antonio are seeking revenge for their family's scandalized reputation, not for Hero's life. (By the same score, Claudio's rejection of the challenge, 'Away! I will not have to do with you', is haughty and presumptuous, as he thinks that his denunciation of Hero was fatal.)

Both aristocratic groups react to the crisis by assertion of their social codes, their separate ideals, but each assertion is mechanistic, the two reactions are purely reflexive. The comedy here approaches a comedy of humors and of received ideas, although Shakespeare's treatment of the situation is decisively nonJonsonian, in that the mechanistic actions of the characters are not given sufficient play to lead them into folly—or into anything else. Within the same enormously active scene Claudio is twice challenged, the plot against Hero is discovered and she is vindicated, Claudio and Don Pedro are reconciled with Leonato, a final deception is devised against Claudio, and once again plans are established for a wedding. It is in part this curtailment of the severance of the ruling-class components and of the hostilities and misunderstandings that suddenly surface among the characters that gives the drama its insulation from 'inquisitions into values,' which Rossiter first observed. But I think that Rossiter was wrong in his explanation of this insulation; it does not occur because 'serious … situations' are 'handled "lightly"'. Serious matters in Much Ado are handled seriously and realistically—but by Shakespeare, not by his characters. We can rectify Rossiter's observation if we keep this distinction in mind. The play is an inquisition into the values of a society that refuses to question its values.

The mechanistic refusal to question convention that dominates the action of the play is counterpoised by two reactions to the play's scandalous catastrophe that are separated from the society's usual concern for appearances and for decorum, and that, by contrast, emphasize the lack of perception that characterizes the aristocratic society in Messina. The Friar—an outsider, neither soldier nor family—calms the hysteria after Hero is rejected. He does so, as he says, by observing Hero in order to comprehend the deeper significance of her appearances; he uses appearance as a way to attain knowledge about reality (IV, i, 157-72). As it happens, his empirical 'observations' of Hero correctly discern her innocence; his psychological observations and speculations, however, are not proven accurate, for his plan to win Claudio back to Hero through her feigned...
death goes completely by the board:

She dying, as it must be so maintained,
Upon the instant that she was accused,
Shall be lamented, pitied, and excused
Of every hearer. For it so falls out,
That what we have we prize not to the worth
While we enjoy it; but being lacked and lost,
Why, then we rack the value, then we find
The virtue that possession would not show us
While it was ours. So will it fare with
Claudio.

(11. 216-24)

There the Friar is completely wrong; Claudio loves Hero (and even then not convincingly) when she is proven innocent, not before. The Friar's separation from the ultimate aristocratic realignment emphasizes the difference between simple deception, the manipulation of appearances, and perception, examining appearances for a deeper psychological understanding of reality.

The other counterpoised non-conventional reaction to the wedding crisis is that of the society's licensed non-conformists, Beatrice and Benedick. Although their outward scorn of the society's obsession with marriage might lead us to expect they would adopt a fashionably cynical attitude toward chastity and fidelity—*così fan tutte*—nothing prepares us for the force with which they go directly against the moral codes of their society. Barbara Everett [in 'Much Ado About Nothing', *Critical Quarterly*, 3, 1961] may be right in singling out Benedick's 'How doth the lady?' (IV, i, 112) as the most important line of the play; his turning toward the woman instead of with his cohorts indicates his willingness to challenge society's standards and expectations (to the point of incredulity: see Don Pedro and Claudio's jovial reaction to Benedick's 'earnest' challenge, V, i, 197-206), in an attempt to act upon what he believes to be, rather than to appear to be, right. Similarly, Beatrice's call for revenge against Claudio does not come from a predetermined convention (literary or social) but from her revulsion against the trivial attitudes and the social codes in her society:

Manhood is melted into curtseys, valor into compliment, and men are only turn'd into tongue,
and trim ones too.

(from 11. 312-20)

But this incipient moral inquisition, like the Friar's rudimentary psychological exploration, is never resolved, it is dis-solved by the chain reaction of discoveries and events that abruptly brings the play to its conclusion.

Several readers have pointed out that the trivial vulgarity and sexual snobbery with which Claudio finally accepts marriage:

I'll hold my mind were she an Ethiope.

Which is the lady I must seize upon?

Why, then she's mine. Sweet, let me see your face.

(V, iv, 38, 53, 55)
undermine the expected harmony of the comedy's conclusion. I think it is important to realize that it does so not because of a moral deficiency in Claudio's character, but because it deflects the two moral inquisitions that the crisis had initiated. The Friar, despite his final protestations, is directly shown to have been quite ignorant of Claudio's character:

Friar.
Did not I tell you she was innocent?
Leonato.
So are the Prince and Claudio, who accused her
Upon the error that you heard debated.
(V, ii, 1-3)

Claudio's arrogant hostility toward Hero's 'memory' before her restoration to grace does not matter. Similarly, Benedick's challenge of Claudio, initiated by Beatrice's will, is transformed from a challenge of the social standards on which Claudio bases his honor into a challenge merely caused by a circumstantial event; the circumstances having changed, the challenge fades into subject for boisterous jocularity:

For thy part, Claudio, I did think to have beaten thee, but in that thou art like to be my kinsman, live unbruised and love my cousin.

(11. 115-18)

Further, Benedick relinquishes his unconventionally hostile attitude toward marriage, and, now that they are to be a respectably married couple, he (symbolically, I assume) 'stops' Beatrice's mouth with a kiss (1. 98).

It is usually out of place to speculate subjunctively about the plots of Shakespeare's comedies, but I cannot help wondering what Much Ado would be about if Hero were slandered much earlier in the play instead of well into the fourth act. We might, in such a play, expect a drama with a specifically moral component—moral in the Bradleyian (via Hegelian) sense. Surely the germ of a moral tragedy is evident in Benedick's challenge of Claudio—the 'good' in a society (compassion and love) challenging the 'evil' (egotism) that is produced by the same society, yet in the process of the challenge threatening certain associated aspects of the 'good' (the standards of brotherly loyalty, or the wit and chiding on which this society thrives). No such dialectic develops in Much Ado; the challenge, which at first isolates the moral vacuum of the society, is later itself reabsorbed into the society once the counterpoised parts of the society's codes are rebalanced. In addition, since the catastrophe of misperception is preceded by the lengthy series of voluntary and relatively inconsequential deceptions, we are made to feel that the crisis at the altar differs only in degree from the normal social behavior in the world of the play. Consequently, Benedick's challenge of Claudio, as a reaction to an event that exaggerates without distorting the social norm, is portrayed as itself abnormal; Benedick's perception and Beatrice's vengeful morality appear as socially deviant behavior, which the concluding events of the comedy must reabsorb into its appearance of harmony.

In part this interpretation implies that the behavior of the characters during the play's conclusion is superficial and that Much Ado raises more problems than it can resolve save on the level of plot, an interpretation that incorporates both Rossiter's theory about the play's insulation and similar theories that emphasize the superficial devotion to appearances characteristic of life in Messina. The play itself, however, is not 'insulated' from inquisitions into values, for it is designed so as to off-set and defuse the epistemological inquiries that develop directly from the dramatic events. Moreover, having taken the important step beyond Rossiter's theory and determined that the insulation is within and not around Much Ado, and is self-imposed, I still find it inadequate to conclude that therefore Much Ado is a play about trivial and egotistical people whose concerns will remain superficial because of the quality of their personalities. In Much Ado About Nothing, as
throughout Shakespeare, personality is a function of social status, and the emptiness of the aristocratic personality in *Much Ado* is a function of the lack of opposition that the aristocracy faces as a class, the absence of difficulty in delineation of social boundaries. The triumph over deception that marks the harmonic conclusions of Shakespeare's other comedies is simultaneously a triumph over a challenge to the social order; similarly, epistemology becomes thematically paramount in Shakespeare's tragedies because the protagonist's knowledge about his situation within society is severely challenged by the social and political circumstances within that dramatized society.

In *Much Ado* the challenges to the social order—Dogberry's and Don John's—are deliberately excluded, as buffoonery and cardboard villainy, in the terms of the dramatic action, for no social superiors accept the 'honor' of Don John in place of the deposed family honor of Leonato, nor do they accept Dogberry's perceptions as competent in place of their own failures at apprehension. Dogberry and Don John propel the plot, but their actions do not affect the qualities of the protagonists' characters. The oppositions through which character is forged in *Much Ado* are neither the social order and its antithesis, nor reality and mere appearances, but are those between the two distinct socially accepted aristocratic standards against which appearances are measured and whose reconciliation in marriage is the play's final assertion of aristocratic hegemony. In this idealized version of what constitutes a dramatic problem or conflict (could this, after all, be what Rossiter meant in calling *Much Ado* 'a fantasy of equivocal appearances'?) Shakespeare presents his clearest dramatic statement of the difficulty a ruling class faces in its attempt to isolate itself from inquiry into the traditions and appearances on which it has constructed its scale of values, and of the qualitative loss—on the level of morality and of character—that such an isolation entails. Perhaps this sense of loss is the 'nothing' of the play's title.

Appearance Vs. Reality

**Peter G. Phialas (essay date 1966)**


[In the following essay, Phialas explores the use of deceptive appearances in *Much Ado* about Nothing to advance the romantic action of the two plots and unify the overall structure, theme, and tone of the play, and also assesses the play's attempt to elicit complex reactions from its audience.]

Of the three "joyous" comedies *Much Ado About Nothing* has been called the least perfect by reason of its alleged failure to integrate successfully the two stories which make up its plot. Strangely enough in this particular point it is thought to be less perfect than *The Merchant of Venice*, although in truth it far surpasses that play in excellence of structure and unity of tone, as well as in the relative emphasis it places upon the love story and the antagonistic motive represented by Don John. In *The Merchant of Venice*, ... unusually heavy emphasis is placed on that part of its plot which deals with strife and conflict, that is, with the absence of love in human relationships, a theme Shakespeare made indispensable in his comic structure. But in the proportion of that emphasis the romantic theme of the play seems to suffer relative neglect. For instance there is wooing in *The Merchant of Venice* but the only extensive instance of it occurs in the opening of Act V, and by that time Lorenzo has won the heart of Jessica; for that reason their scene in the gardens of Belmont, though one of wooing, has the air of recapitulation. If we now turn to the Bassanio-Portia love story we shall find something very similar to this. Their wooing consists of a brief encounter before Bassanio addresses himself to the caskets. In the whole scene Portia's role is completely passive, while Bassanio's great speech preceding his choice has the air of semi-formal definition. It is true that in addition to defending the choice of the leaden casket the speech extends the idea of Nerissa's song and thus suggests the nature of true love. But in truth Bassanio's own courtship has scant occasion to mature an external attraction into the ideal attachment which, as he says, is based on inner beauty and worth. What is crucial here is Bassanio's reason for his choice. And although the speech further insists that in love also choice should be based on something more than external
beauty, the idea is not made part of Bassanio's own experience of falling in love with Portia. Bassanio wins her without wooing her, and although she had given him "fair speechless messages," there is a cold, almost mechanical quality in his winning her. In short, she is not won through wooing, and this in a romantic comedy must be accounted a deficiency. But it is a deficiency the dramatist will not allow us to notice in the acting of the play, for he engages our interest in absorbing action of one sort or another, including an elopement, which in a love comedy is a great asset.

Now love based on external attraction only is taken up in *Much Ado About Nothing* and made part of the Claudio-Hero story, where Claudio, having seen Hero, wishes to make her his wife but is unwilling to woo her and instead enlists Don Pedro to do his wooing for him. And here it appears we have yet another motive which one would find alien to the spirit of romantic comedy. But there is wooing enough in the play, though of a special sort, in the love affair of Benedick and Beatrice. The point here made is that *Much Ado About Nothing* has rather strong and intriguing connections with *The Merchant of Venice*, at least with its romantic action. Furthermore, we may note that the play takes up a theme attempted in *Love's Labour's Lost* but here given a fuller treatment both in scope and quality. This is the rejection or pretended rejection of romantic love and wedlock by Benedick and Beatrice, a theme repeated in Phoebe's attitude in *As You Like It* and Olivia's in *Twelfth Night*. It is indeed a fundamental, an indispensable, motive of Shakespearean romantic comedy, and its absence in *The Merchant of Venice* is a further deficiency of its romantic action. Finally, *Much Ado About Nothing* carries further than any other comedy before it the attempt to elicit from its audience highly complex responses to its stage action, something Shakespeare had achieved in good measure in *The Merchant of Venice*.

First we should note that the play deals with the fortunes of two love affairs, and though the two pairs of lovers differ significantly—they are deliberately contrasted—their stories run a rough and slow course: one leads to quick union, then separation, and then reunion; the other is slow and deliberate from beginning to end. Both stories are obstructed, prevented from swift and happy conclusion, by the errors of mere seeming, by the deception of appearance. And this circumstantiality of seeming threads the two stories together in both action and thematic significance. We shall note also that as visual and more significantly "oral" appearance is the means of obstructing love in the play, its technical or stage agency for advancing the action is over-hearing, accurate or inaccurate, and eavesdropping. We shall see that appearances are either put on by characters themselves, as Benedick and Beatrice do, or are created by others, as those practiced by Don John and Don Pedro. What results from this is an action made up of a series of deceptions. For a short while Don Pedro's initial intrigue to woo Hero for Claudio deceives nearly everybody, including Antonio, Leonato, and Benedick. And Don John, likewise misled, convinces Claudio, whom he pretends to take for Benedick, that Don Pedro is wooing Hero for himself. But the two brothers, incorrigible intriguers that they are, attempt further deceptions, again the one aiming to unite lovers, the other to sever them. Don Pedro directs his intrigue against Benedick and Beatrice, whereas Don John mounts his against Claudio and Hero. It should be noted here that both intrigues depend upon the deception of appearances. In the scene witnessed by Don Pedro and Claudio it seemed that Hero received a lover at her window; in the other, Benedick and Beatrice are informed that though they seem to dislike each other, they are in truth in love. In the church scene after the accusation Hero seems dead, which leads to the Friar's intrigue aimed to deceive Claudio and Don Pedro; and in the final scene Leonato introduces his own little deception by presenting a masked Hero as a cousin.

In addition to this series of deceptions which bind the two stories and advance their action, we should note two points not sufficiently stressed by critics. First, we must remember that in both plots circumstantial appearances, false or otherwise, have to do with love; and second, Benedick's reason for eschewing marriage is his pretended belief that no wife is faithful, that every husband is a cuckold. But this, it turns out, is what Don John seems to believe also and attempts to demonstrate in his intrigue against Hero.

The play opens with Leonato receiving news through a messenger that he will soon be visited by Don Pedro of Arragon, accompanied by his brother Don John and two Italian lords, who, we are told, have done "good
service" during a recent military campaign. Of the two Italian lords Claudio, the Florentine, is seriously described as having "borne himself beyond the promise of his age, doing in the figure of a lamb the feats of a lion." This report of Claudio's achievement, besides indicating his youth and valor, associates him with tears of joy, tears shed by his uncle in Messina upon learning of his nephew's military accomplishments. In addition Claudio's description contrasts him with Benedick, his friend and companion, to whom the earliest allusion, made by Beatrice, is as disparaging as the messenger's reference to Claudio is laudatory. Beatrice calls Benedick "Signior Mountanto," that is, "Signior Duellist," and adds that he is anything but heroic: in truth "a very valiant trencherman," a braggart and a coward. "I pray you," she asks the messenger, "how many hath he killed and eaten in these wars? But how many hath he killed, for indeed I promised to eat all of his killing" (I, i, 42-5). As is appropriate to the content of her speeches, Beatrice's tone is mocking, but without bitterness, indeed gay, and that tone, together with Leonato's comment thereon, precludes overhasty judgment on our part. Claudio and Benedick are thus contrasted in the earliest allusions to them: the one is brave, heroic, associated with tears, honored by Don Pedro; the other is said to be a braggart, unheroic, with scarcely "wit enough to keep himself warm." The one portrait is romantic, the other satiric. The episode shows, furthermore, Beatrice's interest in Benedick, though ostensibly her reason is to heap ridicule upon him.

After the indirect introduction, through the messenger and Beatrice, of Claudio and Benedick, the play brings these two on the stage, together with Don Pedro and Don John the Bastard. During this episode Claudio is not given a single speech, and the actor must of course indicate his interest in Hero, who likewise remains silent in the course of the episode. Their silence is emphasized by the clever and witty dialogue of Benedick and Beatrice, who now take the stage, resuming their unfinished skirmishes of old, and protesting a "dear happiness" that they are not in love with each other. Before leaving the episode we should note two important details. First, the irony in Leonato's protestation to Don Pedro: "Never came trouble to my house in the likeness of your Grace, for trouble being gone, comfort should remain; but when you depart from me, sorrow abides and happiness takes his leave" (I, i, 99-102). Second and far more important, Shakespeare introduces through Benedick the important theme of conjugal infidelity in this early episode. To Don Pedro's question if Hero is his daughter, Leonato replies: "Her mother hath many times told me so." Benedick, unable to resist the opening, asks: "Were you in doubt, sir, that you asked her?" This is, of course, a brief reference to the theme, but though brief it is the first in a long series of allusions to it by Benedick, for, as noted earlier, he gives his fear of wifely infidelity as the reason for his pretended aversion to the opposite sex, love, and wedlock. This then is the first note, struck early in the play, to be followed by Benedick's comic elaboration, which in turn leads to Don John's making infidelity the basis of his intrigue against Hero. For Don John seems to believe what Benedick pretends to believe about the woes of marriage. What is of note here is that Benedick and Don John are concerned with the same idea, though their attitudes toward it differ. But their concern with the same motif contributes its share towards the play's thematic as well as structural unity.

The third movement of the long opening scene extends and establishes more firmly the contrast between the romantic and satiric attitudes towards love and wedlock as represented by Claudio and Benedick. Having seen Hero twice, Claudio has fallen in love with her though he has evidently exchanged no words with her. He has chosen "by the view," and on her appearance alone he has begun to idealize her. What might have been a more passionate expression of his love for her is held down to hesitant acknowledgment by Benedick's strictures on such matters. It should be noted here that Benedick makes the revealing admission that though he can speak with "simple true judgment" about women, his custom is to be "a professed tyrant to their sex." In the face of this, Claudio is content to call Hero first a "modest young lady," then a "jewel," the "sweetest lady" that he ever looked on. Hero, says Benedick, may be handsome, but Beatrice "exceeds her as much in beauty as the first of May doth the last of December." But this is not the reason he tries to dissuade Claudio from marriage. The reason is that a husband is surely a woeful, a pitiful thing. "Is't come to this? In faith, hath not the world one man but he will wear his cap with suspicion? Shall I never see a bachelor of threescore again? Go to, i' faith, an thou wilt needs thrust thy neck into a yoke, wear the print of it, and sigh away Sundays" (I, i, 199-204).
Even when Don Pedro returns to the stage a moment later, Claudio retains his timidity and guarded expression of his love for Hero, for he is not certain of Don Pedro's attitude. Later on, left alone with him, he is assured of the latter's more sympathetic response, Claudio breaks out into a much freer account of his feelings and does so in blank verse, the first in the play. But while the three are together on the stage, he is an easy target for the aroused Benedick, who with an assumed tolerance for his friend's infirmity accuses Claudio of being in love. And on his side, Benedick vows, he "will live a bachelor," for although a woman conceived him, none will deceive him: "... that I will have a recheat winded in my forehead, or hang my bungle in an invisible baldrick, all women shall pardon me. Because I will not do them the wrong to mistrust any, I will do myself the right to trust none" (11. 242-46). It is his strongest protest against wedlock, what we may call his comic error anticipating his later capitulation which is likewise forecast by Don Pedro's conviction:

I shall see thee, ere I die, look pale with love.

And a line or two later he adds:

In time the savage bull both bear the yoke.

But Benedick insists on his choice and the reasons for it: "The savage bull may; but if ever the sensible Benedick bear it, pluck off the bull's horns and set them in my forehead." Even Claudio adds his own allusion to horns in saying that, if after all this Benedick should take a wife, he would be "horn-mad."

The episode deals in the main with Benedick's over-protesting both his own heresy towards love and his disapproval of Claudio's surrender to it. For this double offense against Cupid he will pay dearly, and all this is ironically anticipated. But of great significance is Benedick's persistence upon the theme of cuckoldry, an idea made part of the general atmosphere of the play. For in accusing all womanhood of infidelity he is introducing the very basis of Hero's later undoing, though ironically Benedick is one of only three characters who are convinced of her innocence. Not only this, but we should note that in the concluding episode of the play Claudio fears Benedick himself would be a "double dealer" if Beatrice "do not look exceedingly narrowly" to him.

As we noted above, when he is left alone with Don Pedro on the stage in the concluding movement of this scene, Claudio leaves no doubt of his love for Hero. This is indicated by the use of verse but more clearly by Claudio's avowal that upon his return

war-thoughts  
Have left their places vacant, in their rooms  
Come thronging soft and delicate desires,  
All prompting me how fair young Hero is…

(11. 303-6)

Don Pedro, fearing that Claudio will be like a lover and "tire the hearer with a book of words," offers to help, to which Claudio responds in the accents of the lover indeed:

How sweetly you do minister to love,  
That know love's grief by his complexion!

Having presented a timid Claudio as the romantic lover in love with one he knows little about, Shakespeare introduces in the space of a half dozen lines the first instance of deception, the stage device which will propel and control the action of both stories in the play. Don Pedro will assume Claudio's part, will woo and win Hero for him. With this, the long opening scene comes to a close.
Don Pedro's plan to woo Hero for Claudio yields at least two by-products, both ultimately ineffectual, or rather rendered so by the discovery of the error of appearances. The first unforeseen result of Don Pedro's deception is recorded in the brief second scene with Antonio's report to Leonato that a man of his had overheard Don Pedro's plan to woo Hero for himself. The second outcome of Don Pedro's plan to woo Hero in Claudio's name occurs a little later in Act II, scene i, where Don John, pretending to take the masked Claudio for Benedick, tells him that Don Pedro woos for himself. Both of these episodes are brief and their effects are checked later in the same scene when Don Pedro, having won Hero, gives her to Claudio. But these two instances of the errors in seeming serve significant ends; they show how easy it is to be deceived by appearances, visual or oral. Antonio and Leonato are convinced that Don Pedro is wooing Hero for himself, and later so does Benedick. But what is far more important, Claudio, who knows Don Pedro's plan, likewise believes the report of the latter's betrayal of him. Now the fact that three other characters are deceived along with him is intended to mitigate but lightly Claudio's error, for unlike the others he is in on Don Pedro's secret. More significantly the episode lays emphasis on the general ease with which appearances can deceive and anticipates the later and much graver deception of Claudio and Don Pedro by Don John.

The opening scene of Act II, besides Don John's abortive plan to vex Claudio, which occurs at the end of the masked ball, includes Beatrice's own comic hamartia which parallels Benedick's, the masked ball, the union of Claudio and Hero, and Don Pedro's announcement of a second plan in Cupid's behalf: "to bring Signior Benedick and the Lady Beatrice into a mountain of affection the one with the other." And he plans to do it through deception.

The scene opens with Beatrice recording her instinctive distrust of Don John and commenting upon his tart looks and excessive reticence. And she adds that a combination of Benedick, who tattles evermore, and Don John, who is "like an image and says nothing," would result in a handsome husband. And when she is told that if she remains shrewish and "too curst," she will never get a husband, she replies:

I shall lessen God's sending that way; for it is said, "God sends a curst cow short horns;" but to a cow too curst he sends none.

Leonato. So, by being too curst, God will send you no horns.

Beatrice. Just, if he send me no husband; for the which blessing I am at him upon my knees every morning and evening. Lord, I could not endure a husband with a beard on his face! I had rather lie in the woolen!

(Ii, i, 23-32)

Her protestation, aside from ironically anticipating her later conversion and thus paralleling Benedick's, resumes and maintains before us his insistence upon cuckoldry. Presently the revellers enter, all masked, and soon they move in sequent pairs within hearing of the audience. In each pair there is pretense of hidden identity, and Benedick and Beatrice, taking advantage of that pretense, ridicule each other without mercy: he by saying that she has had her "good wit out of the 'Hundred Merry Tales'"; and she by calling him the prince's jester, whose gift is in devising "impossible slanders." As with the theme of cuckoldry so the idea of slander is introduced early, to be repeated again and again by different characters until the very air of the play is filled with it. It is after this that Don John tries his initial and briefly successful assault upon Claudio, to be followed by Benedick's concurrence, both to be put aside shortly by Don Pedro's explanation.

Before concluding, the scene records two brief episodes of interest concerning the reluctant lovers. In the midst of his complaints to Don Pedro against Beatrice's ridicule of him during the ball, Benedick suddenly exclaims: "I would not marry her, though she were endowed with all that Adam had left him before he transgress'd." Equally revealing is Beatrice's own surprising allusion, a moment after Hero and Claudio are
united, to her own single state, hitherto by her own description a state of "dear happiness": "Good Lord, for alliance! Thus goes every one to the world but I, and I am sunburnt. I may sit in a corner and cry "Heighho for a husband!" (11. 330-32) Having heard both, Don Pedro concludes the scene by proposing his second scheme, to undertake one of "Hercules' Labours," to "practice" on Benedick and Beatrice so that they shall fall in love.

In the following scene Don John under Borachio's prompting initiates the parallel intrigue aimed at separating Claudio and Hero even as Don Pedro's aims at uniting Benedick and Beatrice. Both intrigues are to employ appearances, visual and oral, and in both the victims are gullied by being made to believe they have the advantage over those on whom they are eavesdropping.

Don Pedro's intrigue aiming to unite Benedick and Beatrice commences in Act II, scene iii, opening and closing with long and important soliloquies by Benedick, who is the subject of the episode. In his opening soliloquy he states in somewhat formal fashion his comic hamartia, and in attacking love and Claudio's romantic metamorphosis he anticipates a similar attack upon his own later change; at the end of the scene he will be another Claudio. Aside from this structural function the passage is of the greatest significance in that it defines Claudio's change through his love for Hero, a subject upon which much has been written. It is true that Benedick cites no long list of conventional lovers' maladies visited upon Claudio, but he nevertheless isolates pointedly certain details in Claudio's deportment which leave no doubt as to his change and the reasons for it. So far as Benedick is concerned, Claudio's falling in love is both incredible and intolerable: "I do much wonder that one man, seeing how much another man is a fool when he dedicates his behaviours to love, will, after he hath laugh'd at such shallow follies in others, become the argument of his own scorn by falling in love; and such a man is Claudio." (II, iii, 7-12) What Benedick stresses here is not merely that Claudio has fallen in love but that, like himself, he had earlier scorned and laughed at the folly of it in others. Claudio had been quite different, then, before seeing Hero. "I have known when there was no music with him but the drum and the fife; and now had he rather hear the tabor and the pipe. I have known when he would have walk'd ten mile a-foot to see a good armour; and now will he lie ten nights awake, carving the fashion of a new doublet. He was wont to speak plain and to the purpose, like an honest man and a soldier; and now is he turn'd orthography; his words are a very fantastical banquet, just so many strange dishes." (11. 12-22) Unless we accept these lines as expressing the facts in Claudio's behavior, the speech can possess no significance. Professor [Charles T.] Prouty has argued [in The Sources of Much Ado About Nothing, 1950] that "such tirades are a part of Benedick's humor as an enemy of love and are not necessarily true." But if these things are not true, why is Benedick so deeply concerned with them and why does he rehearse them in a soliloquy? As we have noted above, the point to bear in mind is that Claudio is here presented as another Benedick, laughing at lovers and scorning love: and now look at him, Benedick says. He has become "Monsieur Love"! (1. 37) But what really convinces us that Claudio has indeed suffered a lover's changes is Benedick's question: "May I be so converted, and see with these eyes?" It is inconceivable that Benedick should ask if he could "be so converted," that is, as Claudio has been, if he knew all the time that Claudio had not been converted at all. The point is that, in spite of his protestations, Benedick is not certain that he can long resist love, for he answers his own question thus: "I cannot tell; I think not. I will not be sworn but love may transform me to an oyster; but I'll take my oath on it, till he have made an oyster of me, he shall never make me such a fool." (11. 23-28) It is true that thus far he has resisted love, yet the possibility of his submission is clearly implied in his conclusion: "... till all graces be in one woman, one woman shall not come in my grace. Rich shall she be .... virtuous .... noble .... of good discourse, an excellent musician, and her hair shall be of what colour it please God." (11; 30-37) Thus in addition to pointing to his own imminent change in his censure of Claudio, Benedick's soliloquy announces his readiness for such change. For it would not do for Shakespeare to show Benedick suddenly and unexpectedly admitting his love for Beatrice. The soliloquy suggests a psychological state in him which is appropriately receptive to the revelations soon to be made of Beatrice's love of him.

At this point Benedick sees "Monsieur Love" approaching, accompanied by Don Pedro and Leonato, and Balthasar with a lute. And of course Benedick, in hiding in the arbor, does precisely what they want him to do. In the episode which follows, the introduction of music is of the greatest significance, not simply thematic but
psychological as well. And yet Balthasar's song has been curiously misunderstood by critics, some of whom make scant allusion to it. As is his habit Shakespeare associates music with love and wooing, and music has become an indispensable symbol of harmony in the plays. And in addition the introduction of music here enables Shakespeare to write a light dialogue between Balthasar and Don Pedro, with much talk of wooing and wooers and noting-nothing, which critics have tended to overinterpret. In passing, it may be noted also that the "atmospheric" term "slander" drops casually from Balthasar's lips (1. 47), doubtless intended for our subconscious. Furthermore Balthasar's lute music elicits Benedick's appropriately anti-romantic, irony-laden response: "Is it not strange that sheeps' guts should hale souls out of men's bodies? Well, a horn for my money, when all's done."

But what of the song itself? Although its lines are addressed to "ladies," the words are really meant for Benedick, but its general meaning reaches beyond him and touches the others on the stage, particularly Claudio and Don Pedro:

Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more,
Men were deceivers ever.…

Not only Benedick, then, but others as well have deceived or are about to deceive their loving ladies, for men "were deceivers ever," to "one thing constant never." How fittingly ironic that Benedick, who has hitherto made it his duty to question ladies' fidelity, should be addressed with such lines! And presently those on the stage will hint that his hard heart has brought Beatrice close to acts of self-violence! Such men are unworthy, the refrain sings, of ladies' tears.

Then sigh not so, but let them go.…

The second stanza, more clearly than the first, not only alludes to men's deception generally and to the one aimed at Benedick in particular, but also pointedly anticipates Don John's fraud aimed at Hero:

Sing no more ditties, sing no moe,
Of dumps so dull and heavy;
The fraud of men was ever so,
Since summer first was leafy.

It cannot be maintained that Balthasar's song converts Benedick, but on the other hand it is clear that it creates a distinct impression, if not directly upon Benedick, certainly upon his subconscious, and indeed our own as well. Its content, then, is relevant both in its allusions to episodes, past and future, and also in creating the right psychological context which puts Benedick on the defensive, so to speak. Furthermore its refrain, with its strongly anticipatory "sounds of woe," forecasts also a comic resolution by asking ladies to convert such sounds into "Hey, nonny, nonny." Finally, the two stanzas with their refrain contribute to the play's over-all unity of tone and atmosphere by placing the two stories in the same thematic and psychological context.

The song having in a sense helped prepare Benedick for the deception, Don Pedro, in an anticipatory note, requests Balthasar to prepare "some excellent music" to be sung "tomorrow night … at the Lady Hero's chamber-window." And then Don Pedro and his two associates turn to the attack. The general tone they create is a master-stroke of psychology which convinces Benedick that Beatrice is indeed enamored of him. Benedick's first response is that "this is a gull," but he then dismisses the thought since so old and grave a "reverence" as Leonato could scarcely practice such "knavery." But Benedick's dismissal of any suspicion has already been determined, so to speak, by the three practicers. Two of them pretend that Beatrice may merely "counterfeit" her passion for Benedick, but Leonato's answer is proof enough: "O God, counterfeit! There was never counterfeit of passion came so near the life of passion as she discovers it." (II, iii, 109-11) Benedick is satisfied. Furthermore, their allusions to him, alternating between censure and praise, between his
"contemptible spirit," and his "good outward happiness," have such an air of casual and incontestable truth about them that he is put completely at his ease, and disarmed thus he believes all he "overhears."

Benedick's soliloquy which follows the deception balances his opening speech by answering some of its questions. He may, indeed, be "so converted" and by a lady fair and virtuous, two of the attributes he had stipulated in the earlier passage. In the face of Beatrice's imaginary tears, Benedick capitulates, and he records his response to her love in an exquisitely jesting, half-hearted effort at self-deception: "I may chance to have some odd quirks and remnants of wit broken on me, because I have rail'd so long against marriage; but doth not the appetite alter? A man loves the meat in his youth that he cannot endure in his age.... No, the world must be peopled. When I said I would die a bachelor, I did not think I should live till I were married."

The passage is one of the most significant in the entire play, for it records with Benedick's individual humor the recognition of his comic error. What must be borne in mind when treating the matter of the play's unity is that Benedick's comic error is precisely what Claudio's had been, for he too, we have seen, had scorned love and its cares in favor of the more becoming occupation of the soldier. Benedick's submission to love follows Claudio's and is in turn followed by Beatrice's. The long scene comes to a close with the entry of Beatrice upon the stage to bid Benedick come to dinner. And suddenly Benedick can "spy some marks of love in her," and can also detect "a double meaning" in what she says. This is so and not so. Beatrice may be enamored of him but there are no marks of love in her, nor does he interpret accurately her double meaning, though her speech may not always reveal her feelings towards him. Certainly she "seems" and "sounds" different to him, but he is deceived!

The opening scene of Act III spreads the same net for Beatrice that has caught Benedick, with Hero leading the hunt. In place of the song with its emotional and psychological contribution, the present scene is written entirely in verse, and it includes the first instance of Beatrice's speech in that medium. Like Benedick, she is made to think that she is eavesdropping whereas she is merely intended to overhear what Hero and Ursula are saying. Their talk is of Benedick's love for her, and they praise his worth while censuring her pride, her wit and scorn. And as they pretend to believe that Beatrice would doubtless flout Benedick if she knew of his love, Hero resolves not to tell her of it.

No; rather I will go to Benedick
And counsel him to fight against his passion;
And, truly, I'll devise some honest slanders
To stain my cousin with.

(III, i, 82-85)

The passage parallels much of the earlier scene with Benedick, and Hero's pretense at "slander" not only repeats Balthasar's earlier use of the term before his song, but also intensifies the irony of her own imminent calumny. In brief, Beatrice, who was not unprepared for the change, forswears pride and scorn, and vows to requite Benedick's passion, adding the significant "To bind our loves up in a holy band." Don Pedro's practice upon the reluctant lovers has succeeded in revealing to them their love for each other, and in this there is a fine sense of irony since the trick played upon them had little to do with causing them to fall in love. In other words, there is a kind of self-deception in Don Pedro's notion that bringing Benedick and Beatrice "into a mountain of affection" would be one of "Hercules' labours."

In the following scene of Act III Benedick's conversion into a lover is presented as identical with Claudio's and this of course confirms the parallel between the two men which we noted above. Claudio's strange metamorphosis, so stoutly ridiculed by Benedick earlier in the play, is precisely the change Don Pedro, Leonato, and Claudio now ridicule in him. He is sadder than he was wont to be, though Don Pedro explains the cause thereof as want of money. But there are other symptoms: he has a "fancy ... to strange disguises," affecting a variety of costumes. He "brushes his hat o' mornings," "the old ornament of his cheek hath already stuffed tennis-balls," "he rubs himself with civet," he washes his face, and paints himself. He must be in love,
they conclude, and "the greatest note of it is his melancholy." For "his jesting spirit … is new-crept into a lute-string and now governed with stops." Are not these the very changes Benedick had bewailed and ridiculed in Claudio? The notion that Benedick's tirades against Claudio are not true finds no support here, for the very changes Benedick attacks in Claudio are visible symptoms in himself. His dress, the loss of his beard, his assumed gravity, his reticence—all these we see on the stage, and they are all attributes of the lover. It was certainly necessary for Shakespeare to show these matters in only one of them, and of the two Benedick is the right choice, for he is conceived in a comic vein whereas Claudio is not. And the mocking of the mocker is part of the comic idea of the play. Thus Benedick, who earlier in the play had heaped scornful mockery upon Claudio's love, in the present episode loses his perspective completely. And it is surely the height of comedy to hear his affectedly laconic speech to Leonato: "Old signior, walk aside with me. I have studied eight or nine wise words to speak with you...." Alas, Benedick the lover has no idea how ridiculously serious he looks and sounds!

Benedick and Leonato having retired to consider Benedick's "eight or nine wise words," Don John enters the stage and accuses Hero of infidelity and offers Don Pedro and Claudio proof "tonight." Since Benedick, in spite of his earlier thrusts at wifely infidelity, would probably reject the accusation—and he does when he hears it in the church scene—he is kept ignorant of the charge against Hero, Don John's "proof," and Claudio's plan to disgrace her at the altar. Furthermore, his exclusion makes it easy for Benedick to align himself with Beatrice in Hero's behalf. And he not only agrees with her and the Friar that there "is some strange misprision in the princes," but divines the cause. "The practice of it," he says, "lives in John the Bastard."

But conviction that Hero is innocent cannot clear her good name. That is done by Dogberry and his fellows created by Shakespeare for that purpose, perhaps with hints from Lyly's Endymion. And what should be noted is that they overhear Borachio describe his slander of Hero. That the watch should accidentally penetrate to the truth while some of the clever ones are duped carries its own simple ironies. But what is far more important is that the watch fails to reveal their discovery before the wedding scene. Thus our suspense and anticipation are maintained, albeit on a lower pitch now since we are most certain that Dogberry will come out with the truth. The scene reveals to us both Borachio's success and Claudio's vow to shame Hero "before the whole congregation," as well as Borachio's apprehension by the watch.

While these matters are thus proceeding, Hero, aided by her maids, makes ready for the wedding. Scene four of Act III is in two parts: the first half deals with Hero's preparation, suddenly clouded by a strange premonition which is soon relieved by Margaret's bawdry; and the second half takes up the teasing of the love-melancholy Beatrice by Hero and her maids, an episode intended to balance the earlier taunting of Benedick by his friends. The final scene of Act III, one of the most ironic in the play, brings Dogberry and Verges to Leonato's house, but though they are possessed of the truth they fail to communicate it to Leonato, for they are tediously deliberate and he is preoccupied and inattentive, and he is shortly called away from them by a messenger who reports the wedding is at hand. That the watch are at least attempting to reveal the truth reduces our anxiety and keeps it on a manageable level, both here and in the wedding scene which follows. Though the emphasis here is upon the comic incongruousness between the inherent ridiculousness of the watch and their assumed dignity, the scene nevertheless anticipates the ultimate righting of Hero's wrong in Leonato's request that Dogberry take the examination of the culprits himself and bring it to him later. Whereupon Dogberry commands his associate to get him "to Francis Seacoal, bid him bring his pen and inkm horn to the gaol...."

The wedding scene is the most difficult in the play and it has caused much controversy among the critics. Some defend Claudio's role while others find it utterly inexcusable. And more serious than that, most students of the play discover here the division in tone and atmosphere to which E. K. Chambers alludes in his essay on the play [in Shakespeare: A Survey, 1925]. Is it true that the play's "harmony of atmosphere," as he puts it, suffers from the fact that the Claudio-Hero story moves in a melodramatic plane while the story of Benedick and Beatrice moves in a comic plane? Is this distinction between the two stories valid? An examination of the
scene refutes Chambers' contention. And although in the foregoing analysis of the play thus far we have seen a blending of the two stories in terms of both theme and structure, the wedding scene is a crucial test of the notion that the play does indeed possess "unity of atmosphere." By way of introduction to our analysis, let us note that the scene presents episodes in the two stories dealing with the same melodramatic motive: Claudio is said to have killed Hero with his accusation, and Benedick, commanded by Beatrice, vows to kill Claudio. And Benedick will come no closer to killing Claudio than the latter comes to killing Hero. That this melodramatic theme is common to both stories is incontestable; yet the fact seems to have escaped those critics who see a fatal division in the atmosphere of the play. The initial episode of the scene presents Claudio, in a somewhat self-dramatizing attitude, rejecting Hero before the altar, asserting that she is "but the sign and semblance of her honour." For Claudio, having himself engaged in an action wherein things were not what they seemed—the deception of Benedick—fails to consider that the scene at Hero's window may have been another instance of that same "truth." Aside from the irony inherent in this lapse on his part as well as Don Pedro's, what is of great significance here is the fact that Claudio, though he has fallen in love with Hero, knows nothing about her. There had been no courtship, and he had chosen "by the view" alone: "by the view" he chose Hero and "by the view" he rejects her. No doubt Claudio deserves censure for both choosing and rejecting Hero merely on the basis of externals. And as we noted earlier, this motif relates the play with The Merchant of Venice, wherein Bassanio, as well as Nerissa's song, had insisted upon an understanding of inner worth as the basis of a happy union. For love based on show alone is but fancy "which alters / When it alteration finds." But the injunction not to "choose by the view" does not imply that appearances need be deceptive, and certainly Hero is as true and loyal and innocent as she appears.

Claudio is no doubt an easy mark for Don John's aim, yet Shakespeare provides that our censure of him must not be too severe, for he must not appear utterly undeserving of Hero. To that end Shakespeare makes the evidence against Hero of such strength that not only is Claudio convinced but Don Pedro also and for a while even Leonato. And this last, though it does not completely justify Claudio's conduct at the altar, surely explains much of it. Furthermore, the fact that the cause of the conflict is the work of Don John takes much from whatever force there may be in the charge that Claudio is irresponsible, callous, and cruel. For it must be kept in mind that he is the target of Don John's devilish scheme. Claudio, though not quite the "slandered groom," is nevertheless the one whose happiness is undermined by the slander of Hero.

What Shakespeare is clearly pursuing here is a complex emotional response by the audience. Though we are made unhappy by the rejection of Hero we know that the whole matter will be made right soon, and though we feel that Claudio is somewhat hasty and an easy gull, yet we see two others being gulled with him, and one of them, Leonato, should know—he should certainly feel—that Hero cannot be guilty. The point, then, is a simultaneous experience of conflicting, though not mutually cancelling, emotions on our part. The very same conflict of emotions makes up our response to Beatrice's instant rejection of the accusation and particularly her command to Benedick to kill Claudio. We approve of her vehemence against Hero's accusers and especially Claudio, but we do so knowing all along that the truth is even now being taken down by the officious Dogberry. We know that although Hero has been struck a fearful blow by the rejection, she is not dead; we respond to Beatrice's spirit and her flaming words in defense of Hero; yet we at no time subscribe to her call for Claudio's death. In her command "Kill Claudio!" there is the same melodramatic note which characterizes the rejection of Hero at the altar. And surely Claudio's "sad invention" and Balthasar's song sung over a tomb which the audience knows is empty are no more melodramatic than Benedick's challenge to Claudio in order to avenge Hero's death. In both there is a strong undercurrent of the comic beneath the seeming gravity of appearances.

This complexity of our emotional response to the scene is maintained to the end and particularly in Benedick's deliberate acceptance of Beatrice's command. Though the audience wishes Benedick to challenge Claudio, the knowledge that Hero is alive and that she will soon be vindicated modifies our feelings so that instead of grave apprehension we experience the double pleasure of first having Benedick do what we want him to do—that is to challenge Claudio—and also of knowing that all will be well.
Our controlled anxieties are further relieved by the action of the second and final scene of Act IV, for here the imperious Dogberry, in the company of Verges and appareled in the robes of office, examines Conrade and Borachio, and their deposition reassures us that Hero was indeed wrongfully accused, and adds the very important note that Don John "is this morning secretly stol'n away."

The opening scene of Act V is in three parts, the first two presenting challenges issued to Claudio and the third cancelling these by its revelation of the truth concerning Hero. Nevertheless the first two episodes maintain the complexity of our emotions, for they present first Antonio and Leonato and then Benedick challenging Claudio to a duel. Our response to the challenges is maintained at the level of immediate stage interest rather than of serious apprehension, and there is in both episodes an element of comedy. This is particularly true of Benedick's challenge, wherein he resumes, or rather maintains, his highly self-conscious gravity and laconic speech, both of which present an amusing contrast to his customary ways. To those earlier ways of his, allusion is made in the taunts of Don Pedro and Claudio, who insist that love has "transshaped him" and who threaten to "set the savage bull's horns on the sensible Benedick's head." Their speech, in content and form, contrasts sharply with Benedick's and throws into sharp relief the change love has wrought in him. In all this the intention is to create a comic impression which overlays the apparent gravity of the challenge, and to that impression is added again the casual note that Don John has fled from Messina. The result is that the two episodes elicit the same complexity of emotions to which we alluded earlier, and then with the entry of Dogberry and the watch with their two prisoners our chief anxiety is at long last completely dissipated. But while this is the effect of Borachio's confession upon our feelings, the effect upon Don Pedro's and Claudio's is quite the reverse, for they are now deeply shocked by the knowledge that Hero died innocent. Although there has been an important change in the emotions of both characters and audience, Shakespeare maintains a balance between the apparently serious and the comic. Leonato with apparent gravity requests of Claudio two acts of expiation, the singing of an epitaph over Hero's tomb and the promise to marry Antonio's daughter in lieu of Hero. To Leonato's assumed gravity Claudio adds his own, but of course the scene is kept from becoming maudlin by Dogberry's presence and also by the fact that the audience as well as most of the characters on the stage know that Hero is alive.

Scene iii of Act V extends the favorable turn of events in the preceding scene and points to the happy resolution of the plot. It opens with a colloquy between the irrepressible Margaret and Benedick, who sounds almost like his old self again in the bawdy exchange with her. Their brief episode is followed by a halting song and comment thereupon by Benedick. And here we should notice that Shakespeare is presenting us a somewhat different Benedick. He is in love, he cannot compose or sing love songs, he suffers much more pain than ever Leander did. But Benedick is a lover with a difference, and of course so is Beatrice. Here in his soliloquy he reveals something of Shakespeare's intention, namely to present Benedick as one in love who like Berowne before him is capable of seeing more than the romantic side of love. In other words Benedick is the sort of lover in whom the romantic attitude does not replace what had earlier seemed like an anti-romantic point of view. Instead, the two attitudes are juxtaposed in him. Surely only such a lover would rehearse his ill success in writing sonnets as Benedick does: "I can find out no rhyme to 'lady' but 'baby,' an innocent rhyme; for 'scorn,' 'horn,' a hard rhyme; for 'school,' 'fool,' a babbling rhyme; very ominous endings." (V, ii, 36-39) We should note that Benedick is in love, that he wants and tries to compose a love sonnet but finds it beyond his poetic capabilities. The notion that Benedick yields to the convention only on the surface since he is unable to write a sonnet cannot be accepted. Although he finds the writing of love poems difficult, he persists, and in the closing scene there is reported a

… halting sonnet of his own pure brain,
Fashion'd to Beatrice.

In this he is not very different from other lovers, who, though possessing greater facility, produce less than perfect love poems. Certainly such are Orlando's ditties to Rosalind, and Hamlet himself is by no means happy with his "numbers." What matters is not the merits of these lovers as love poets but the fact that they
attempt love poetry, and the attempt is an incontestable attribute of the romantic lover. The comic tone of the episode is briefly interrupted by the entry of Beatrice and Benedick's report to her concerning his challenge of Claudio, but it is resumed by Ursula's intelligence that "my lady Hero hath been falsely accused … and that Don John is the author of all…." And the scene closes appropriately with Benedick's bawdy reply to Beatrice's request that he accompany her to hear further of "this news": "I will live in thy heart, die in thy lap, and be buried in thy eyes; and moreover I will go with thee to thy uncle's."

The play's penultimate scene takes us to the churchyard and Leonato's monument for Claudio's mourning rites over Hero. The episode, as we said above, bears some analogy to the challenges offered Claudio earlier in the play particularly in a sense of emptiness occasioned, in both cases, by the fact that Hero has only seemed dead. Furthermore the brief scene in the churchyard, while ostensibly concerned with Hero's memory, is actually a prelude to the happy conclusion now at hand. And this is suggested by Balthasar's song and later by Don Pedro's description of day-break:

The wolves have prey'd; and look, the gentle day,
Before the wheels of Phoebus, round about
Dapples the drowsy east with spots of grey.

(V, iii, 25-27)

The concluding scene of the play begins with Leonato and Benedick expressing their relief at Hero's vindication, and when presently Claudio and Don Pedro enter the stage, Benedick and Claudio extend the feeling of ease and merriment by their bawdy exchange, which, be it noted, reverts for its humor to the cuckold's horn. The ladies are led on stage masked, Claudio takes his bride's hand who then un_masks and shows herself as the real Hero. To their union is then added that of Benedick and Beatrice, both of whom pretend to take each other for pity. But their assumed reluctance is defeated by the evidence of verses which they have composed for each other. Indeed Benedick proves a most philosophic lover when he contemplates his earlier apostasy, alluded to by Don Pedro: "In brief, since I do purpose to marry, I will think nothing to any purpose that the world can say against it; and therefore never flout at me for what I have said against it, for man is a giddy thing, and this is my conclusion." (V, iv, 104-9) Benedick's "conclusion" is one of the great utterances in Shakespearean comedy. But lest that moment of gravity should linger overlong, Shakespeare mixes it with the lighter satiric note in Claudio's charge that Benedick may prove a double-dealing husband. And Benedick on his side insists on merry-making, music, and dance before the marriage ceremony. Finally upon spying Don Pedro alone he offers him words of wisdom. "Prince, thou art sad; get thee a wife, get thee a wife. There is no staff more reverend than one tipp'd with horn." Much comfort in that staff, yet Benedick is in love and about to be married. The ironic juxtaposition of attitudes is maintained to the very end.

The foregoing analysis of Much Ado About Nothing shows that its two stories are closely related in structure as well as theme and tone, particularly the last, since this aspect of the play has been seriously questioned. Not only are the two stories concerned with the same idea, that is, the effect of appearances on the fortunes of lovers, but also the working out of the several episodes in the two plots is so managed that our responses to them are the same. For instance, we have noted that our general attitude toward certain scenes, and indeed to the play as a whole, is a complex one. And this is particularly true of the way we respond to the deportment of the chief characters. We may approve of Beatrice's defense of Hero but of course we are never at ease with her command that Benedick kill Claudio. Similarly, we are relieved to hear Benedick accuse Don John of responsibility for Hero's abuse, and we are happy to see him align himself with Beatrice; yet we are not quite at ease with his melodramatic resolve to challenge Claudio, especially since he appears convinced that someone else is to blame. Our feelings are complicated further by another matter: though on the moral side we disapprove of Benedick's challenge, our disapproval is greatly dissipated by two details. First, we are never in doubt that all will be well, and second we enjoy Benedick's comic metamorphosis through love, for it is most amusing that this "professed tyrant" to the female sex should now take arms against Claudio, and all for love.
This complexity of response to the story of Benedick and Beatrice is the same as our response to the story of Claudio and Hero, and particularly to the actions and words of Claudio and Leonato. The characters in both plots exhibit ambiguous attitudes and through them elicit complex responses on our part. Claudio is duped by Don John into believing what seems true, yet the way in which he accuses Hero is such that he seems her slanderer. And both the manner and the simple fact of his accusation justify in part Beatrice's vituperation. The same complexity appears in Leonato's response. His attitude towards Hero is mixed, combining easy credulity, despair, and vengefulness. He grieves over Hero's alleged misconduct, yet he is angered by it into wishing her dead indeed; and at the same time he longs to avenge her disgrace.

Whether revealed through direct speech or action or both or obliquely through the incongruity of style in a particular passage, ambiguity or complexity of effect is certainly an incontestable feature of Much Ado About Nothing. In the broadest terms, this complexity of effect, present in both stories and identified as a mixture of the comic and melodramatic, is responsible for a single pervasive tone, the most effective and most subtle means of achieving far greater unity than most critics are willing to admit.

The question of the play's unity of atmosphere is by far the most serious one, but there are other problems concerning Much Ado About Nothing which have a just claim upon our interest. One of these is Professor Prouty's interpretation of the Claudio-Hero story and its relationship to the Benedick-Beatrice plot. The foregoing analysis of the play has, either through direct allusion or by implication, dealt in part with Professor Prouty's view that the Claudio-Hero union is a marriage of convenience, that is, a realistic, non-romantic affair, and that Benedick and Beatrice, another pair of realistic lovers, "are not really enemies of love: they are enemies of the dreary conventions." According to Professor Prouty, we have here "two couples completely opposed to the romantic tradition and these two couples are, in turn, representatives of opposite ideas: for the one, love is a real emotion, for the other, a business arrangement."

Although Claudio early in the play inquires of Don Pedro if Hero is Leonato's only heir, he makes no other reference to the matter, and in the remainder of the play no episode can be cited which supports the view that Claudio is seeking a marriage of convenience. It is true that Claudio does not woo Hero in person, but this is a necessary detail showing that he is in love with Hero without really knowing her. Furthermore, we should note that although Claudio does not woo Hero himself, she is wooed in his person by Don Pedro. But wooed Hero is, and Don Pedro promises Claudio that he will do it in the romantic manner:

I know we shall have revelling to-night.  
I will assume thy part in some disguise  
And tell fair Hero I am Claudio.  
And in her bosom I'll unclasp my heart  
And take her hearing prisoner with the force  
And strong encounter of my amorous tale.  
(I, i, 322-27)

And in the next line Don Pedro makes clear that the union will not be one of convenience, for he will broach the subject to Leonato after the wooing, after Hero has been wooed and won:

Then after to her father will I break....

In addition to this, it is clear from a number of passages that Claudio's feelings are indeed engaged. Certainly the lines describing Hero's attraction have nothing to do with a "business arrangement":

But now I am return'd and that war-thoughts  
Have left their places vacant, in their rooms  
Come thronging soft and delicate desires,
All prompting me how fair young Hero is….

And when Don Pedro shows the sort of compassion Benedick had refused Claudio, the latter adds:

How sweetly you do minister to love,
That knows love's grief by his complexion!

Furthermore that Claudio is indeed in love is shown by the strange changes in him, for according to Benedick he has become a different man: his speech, his dress, his taste in music—all these have changed. And this cannot be one of Benedick's tirades against love and therefore false. If what he says were not true, Benedick would have no reason to rehearse Claudio's changes in a soliloquy, and, more important, he would never ask if he, too, might so change. And of course Benedick does change, and in that particular he repeats Claudio's experience. What both do is first scorn love and lovers, then become lovers themselves, and precisely the same is true of Beatrice. Neither she nor the other two ever attack the conventions of romantic love; they attack love and the opposite sex. And although Claudio's reasons for scorning love are not given in detail, they are said to be those of Benedick, and these are certainly underscored. For the latter, the chief deterrent to marriage is the fear of being cuckolded, which is made as explicit as Shakespeare can make it, and it is one of the themes connecting the two plots. Nor is Beatrice really concerned with the dreary conventions. She makes no allusion to them, and she insists that she is grateful to God for sparing her, not from the conventions, but from a husband.

It is true, of course, that Benedick and Beatrice maintain to the end their negative attitude towards the fashionable code of love-making; in this they do not change. But that attitude is not dramatically exciting, and it is not shown in conflict with any action within the play itself. For instance, such an attitude would be dramatically effective and meaningful if it were contrasted with the attitude represented by Claudio and Hero. But these two are nowhere in the play given the extravagant hyperboles of such lovers as the sonneteering lords of Love's Labour's Lost. The reason is that Shakespeare's concern here is with something else about their love and its contrast with that of Benedick and Beatrice. What is central to the thought of the play is the approach or attitude toward love of the two pairs and the way that attitude changes in the course of the play. For Claudio and Hero love, first swift and superficial, and based entirely on "the view," is slowly and after much pain matured into something of inner worth and permanence. In contrast, Benedick and Beatrice begin by scorning love and each other and they end by falling in love. Thus both pairs of lovers are shown developing, though differently: Claudio and Hero grow towards understanding each other, while Benedick and Beatrice grow towards understanding themselves.

The chief event in the play, then, is the achievement by the lovers of self-awareness and a mature attitude towards love and each other. And the emphasis on this change is yet another step in the evolution of Shakespearean romantic comedy. For here the inner development of the lovers, especially Benedick and Beatrice, is made much more explicit than in both earlier as well as later romantic comedies. In Love's Labour's Lost, for instance, the change in the king and his lords is merely projected rather than achieved at the conclusion of the play. On the other hand, having fully dealt with the theme in Much Ado About Nothing, Shakespeare allows it far less scope in Phoebe's conversion in As You Like It and Olivia's in Twelfth Night. But in these plays he creates Rosalind and Viola who are already possessed of the self-awareness and mature view of love which Beatrice achieves at the conclusion of her play. The psychological exploration of Beatrice's character leads to the conception of the other two heroines, a conception presupposing and transcending her own.

B. K. Lewalski (essay date 1968)

In the essay below, Lewalski discusses the influence of Neoplatonic and Christian concepts on Shakespeare's treatment of appearance vs. reality in Much Ado about Nothing and the notion of love's ability to distinguish between the two.

The titles Shakespeare gave to his great romantic comedies—Much Ado About Nothing, As You Like It, Twelfth Night, or What You Will—suggest that the works are mere divertissements, light entertainments. Naturally enough, Shakespeare's own unassuming pose has often been taken at face value. Critics have been quick to pay tribute to the charm and sheer delightfulness of these works—the witty, graceful, loveable heroines, the atmosphere charged with music and song, the wise humaneness of Shakespeare's perspective—but they have also been quick to invoke the supposed non-serious purpose of these plays to account for their alleged looseness of structure, incredible action, and mingling of realistic and flat characters.

Much Ado especially has elicited such a response. While everyone is enamored of Shakespeare's original characters—Beatrice and Benedick, Dogberry, Verges, and the “Watch”—much disparaging commentary and facile apology has been directed toward the derived Hero-Claudio plot. Even critics who find important unifying motifs in the imagery of deceptions, eavesdroppings, and masques, often argue that the substance of the play is indeed "much ado about nothing," that the love tangles are "all a game." John Russell Brown [in Shakespeare and his Comedies, 1957] is one of a small minority who find serious thematic elements in the play:

Shakespeare's ideas about love's truth—the imaginative acting of a lover and the need for our imaginative response to it, the compulsion, individuality, and complexity of a lover's truthful realization of beauty, and the distinctions between inward and outward beauty, appearance and reality, and fancy and true affection—are all represented in Much Ado About Nothing; they inform its structure, its contrasts, relationships, and final resolution; they control many of the details of its action, characterization, humour, and dialogue.

Recognition of such concerns in no way denies or undermines the gaiety and lightheartedness of the play, but only suggests that the comic gaiety has a firm underpinning of thematic and intellectual richness. This observation should seem less remarkable now that Northrop Frye [in "The Argument of Comedy," from English Institute Essays, 1948, 1949, reprinted in Leonard F. Dean, Shakespeare: Modern Essays in Criticism, 1957] and others have accustomed us to discern the profoundly serious ritual patterns of struggle, death, and rebirth which underlie comedy as a mode. Much Ado sets forth, I believe, a complex theme concerning the various levels of knowledge and love in relation to the confusions of appearance and reality in this world. The theme is grounded in neoplatonism, fused, as was usual in the English Renaissance, with Christian concepts. Such ranges of meaning are evoked through patterns of action, structural contrast, language, and visual image, giving the play both intellectual vigor and structural cohesion.

One important fact sharply distinguishes the comic world of Much Ado from that of Shakespeare's other great romantic comedies: it does not make use of what Frye has happily termed the "green world" or the "second world"—a locale which in some respects suggests the original golden age and which therefore provides a perspective from which to judge the real world. A Midsummer Night's Dream displays the fairy world of the forest; As You Like It has the forest of Arden; Twelfth Night is set entirely in the land of Illyria; The Merchant of Venice presents Belmont as an idealized contrast to the sordid commercial world of Venice. Much Ado, however, like the problem comedies, takes place entirely in the "real world." Messina emphatically does not take on the character of an ideal haven and place of festivity for Don Pedro's victorious forces, as it rather promised to do at first, but instead it remains quite recognizably the real world of intrigues, "practices," confusion, calumnny, malice. Yet unlike the problem comedies Much Ado has a kind of "second world" which is a spiritual state rather than a place: the principal characters in both of the plots arrive, after some false starts, at the "state" of true love, and in that idealized condition achieve the heightened perception needed to dispel error and to reorder the confusion rampant in their world.

181
As several critics have recognized, the predominant feature of life in the world of Messina is the inability to distinguish between appearance and reality, illusion and truth, seeming and being. The wise and the witless, the prudent and the foolish, the rational and the passionate, the good and the bad are alike liable to misapprehension and mistaking, and alike engage in deliberate duping and pretense. This condition of life, knitting together the Claudio-Hero plot, the Beatrice-Benedick plot, and the Dogberry-Verges action, is displayed especially in the four central masque or playacting sequences.

The first of these, the masquerade revels at the house of Leonato, takes place in Act II, Scene i, but has been in preparation throughout the entire first act; its primary function with reference to theme is to involve almost all the characters in the problems of pretense, deception, and faulty apprehension. When Don Pedro early in the play promises Claudio that he will woo and win Hero for him in Claudio's disguise, the mere voicing of the plan touches off a chain reaction of misapprehension. Leonato's brother Antonio receives a garbled account of it from an eavesdropping servant to the effect that Don Pedro himself loves Hero and plans to propose to her; Antonio passes on his misinformation to Leonato, who in his turn passes it on to his daughter. The villain Borachio has "whipped him behind an arras" while the plans were being discussed and then tells his erroneous version to Don Pedro's jealous Machiavellian brother Don John, to the effect that Don Pedro plans to "woo Hero for himself, and having obtained her, give her to Count Claudio" (I.iii.55-56). The masquerade then presents successive vignettes of masked dancers in various postures of pretense, disguise, and misinterpretation: Hero pretends that she does not recognize Don Pedro; Margaret and Benedick do not recognize each other; Beatrice pretends not to know the disguised Benedick and he is taken in by the pretense. This atmosphere establishes the condition for Don John's deliberate lie telling the masked Claudio (whom he affects to mistake for Benedick) that Don Pedro is wooing Hero for himself, and for Benedick's similar warning to Claudio based upon his misinterpretation of the tête-à-tête of Hero and Don Pedro during one of the masquerade dances. Though this contretemps is easily resolved when Don Pedro makes up the match between Hero and Claudio, it has been graphically shown that mistake, pretense, and misapprehension are of the very substance of life in Messina.

The second masquerade, or more properly, play-acting, consists of the two scenes acted by the friends of Benedick and Beatrice to cause those witty scorners of love to fall in love with each other, by convincing each one of the other's passion. Ironically, neither the well-meaning gullers nor the principals themselves realize that the deception is based upon a truth, that Benedick and Beatrice have already revealed more than casual feeling for each other. The third masquerade is the nocturnal impersonation by Margaret and Borachio of Hero bidding farewell to a lover on the night before her wedding. Margaret was evidently deceived as to the import of her role, thinking perhaps that she was simply impersonating the "bride of tomorrow" in an innocent pretense which according to folk superstition would bring luck to her own affair with Borachio. This scene is not dramatized but related: by a brilliant stroke the audience hears Borachio brag to Conrade of the plot's success in deceiving Claudio and Don Pedro, and at the same time sees the feckless "watch" eavesdropping and so discovering the treachery—though their witlessness points up the fact that in the world of this play even overt statement of the truth brings no guarantee that it will be understood or will prevail. The fourth masquerade, Hero's pretended death and restoration, is in three parts: first, the wedding pageant in which Don Pedro and Claudio play the roles of persons intending to participate in a wedding ceremony but then cast off these roles and denounce the bride's supposed unchastity; second, the pretense of Hero's death, culminating in the ceremony of mourning carried forth by Claudio at her supposed tomb; third, the new wedding pageant at which Claudio accepts a veiled lady whom he believes to be Hero's cousin but who of course Hero herself.

Obviously in Messina the conditions of perceiving and knowing are inordinately complex. They are, moreover, inextricably linked to conditions of loving, and as I suggested above, the "state" of true love provides an ambiance in which heightened knowledge of reality can be obtained. These are neoplatonic commonplaces, similar to those which John Vyvyan [in Shakespeare and Platonic Beauty, 1961] finds in some other Shakespearean comedies and cogently analyzes in terms of such Renaissance neoplatonic discourses on love as Marsilio Ficino's Commentary on Plato's Symposium, Spenser's An Hymne in Honour of
Beautie, and especially [Baldassare] Castiglione's [The Book of the Courtier, translated by Sir Thomas Hoby, 1561]. Also, although the question of direct sources hardly matters in dealing with neoplatonic Renaissance commonplaces Vyvyan has shown the strong possibility that Shakespeare knew The Courtier directly.

I hope to demonstrate that several of the concepts set forth in Bembo's classic discourse on love in the fourth book of The Courtier provide surprisingly apt categories for analyzing the various levels of action in Much Ado. One such concept is Bembo's relation of kinds of loving or longing to ways of knowing:

Love is nothing else but a certain coveting to enjoy beautie: and for so much as coveting longeth for nothing but for things known, it is requisite that knowledge go evermore before coveting…. Therefore hath nature so ordained that to every vertue of knowledge there is annexed a vertue of longing. And because in our soule there be three manner waies to know, namely, by sense, reason, and understanding: of sense there ariseth appetite or longing, which is common to us with brute beastes: of reason ariseth election or choice, which is proper to man: of understanding, by the which man may be partner with Angels, ariseth will.

A second important concept is Bembo's observation that "most deepe errours" attend the modes of knowing and loving most usual with the young, who tend to be principally attracted to physical beauty and to rely for knowledge chiefly upon the "judgement of sense." Also relevant is Bembo's view of the ascending scale of perfection in knowledge and love which the wise and mature man may climb. Such a man will begin as all lovers do by an attraction and devotion to the physical beauty of some one woman; at the next stage he will be able to recreate his lady's beauty wholly in his imagination, needing thus to rely less on her physical presence; then he will achieve an apprehension of and devotion to all physical beauty conceived as a unity; next he will awaken to the higher beauty of mind and spirit which can be seen only with the eye of the mind; at length he will love this inner beauty and will be led by this loftier love to a higher mode of knowledge, intuitive understanding: "And therefore burning in this most happie flame, she [the soul] ariseth to the noblest part of her which is the understanding, and there no more shadowed with the darke night of earthly matters, seeth the heavenly beautie." The remaining two stages of the scale comprise the lover's apprehension of and fusion with absolute beauty, or God.

Though these neoplatonic commonplaces have offered Shakespeare a framework for developing the themes of the play and for the articulation of its structure, I do not believe that the play becomes a quasi-allegorical treatment of the neoplatonic scale of love, such as Vyvyan finds, for example, in A Midsummer Night's Dream and As You Like It. Rather, in Much Ado (and I think also in the other plays where they are relevant) Shakespeare uses the neoplatonic commonplaces with a radically different emphasis. The neoplatonic focus is upon the progression from the love of particular beauty to apprehension of the universal concept of beauty and finally to union with absolute Beauty itself, whereas Shakespeare always focuses upon the dramatic microcosm. The difference may be demonstrated in the passage in which Benedick relates himself to but also reverses Bembo's stage three. While still a scorner of love Benedick insists that all the excellencies he has hitherto seen in various women must be united in one woman before he will love, and then he discovers to his amazement that they are already so united in Beatrice: instead of forming an abstract concept which will draw together all varieties of beauty into one as Bembo advises, he finds that universal embodied in a living woman. Shakespeare's characters may thus represent stages of or attitudes toward love and knowledge which approximate some of the neoplatonic distinctions, and they may be involved in a progression from less to more perfect modes of loving and knowing, but Shakespeare normally incarnates the ideal states in the "real" characters and cosmos of the drama. Also, as I will argue later, the allusion to Christian archetype at the climax of the play at once points to the ultimate pattern for the incarnation of the ideal in the real, and also suggests the source of those other categories of knowing and loving which are seen in the play to supplement, and in a sense to transcend, the neoplatonic levels.
The clowns are not affected by love but they are part of the knowledge pattern of the play. They occupy a level below, or at least beside, the neoplatonic levels of reason and sense, for they do not attain to knowledge by either path. They cannot apprehend the obvious meanings conveyed to them through hearing and seeing, to say nothing of the higher processes of wit and reason, as their own speech makes clear. Dogberry selecting Seacole to take charge of the watch commends him with a delightfully apt malapropism as "the most senseless and fit man for constable of the watch" (III.iii.21-33), and he also describes Verges, in terms which Leonato turns back upon himself, as one whose "wit is out" (III.v.33). After overhearing a full account of the plot against Hero the watch cannot "make sense" of it; they can only seize upon isolated words and worry them about, as when out of a casual interchange between Borachio and Conrade about the "deformed" fashions of the day they create for themselves that notable character, the thief "Deformed." And their constant malapropisms further confuse the little knowledge they do have when they seek to communicate it to Leonato and others.

Their discovery of the plot and seizure of the villains is in fact a matter of sheer instinct—a true instinct somehow miraculously granted to fools in the very throes of their folly. That this is the level they occupy is evident when they suspect Borachio and Conrade of treachery before anything at all suspicious has been said or done: Borachio's first innocuous remark to his companion, "Stand thee close then under this penthouse, for it drizzles rain, and I will, like a true drunkard, utter all to thee," provokes the watch to immediate, instinctive judgment, "Some treason, masters" (III.iii.97-100). Fools though they are, it is given to them to be in spite of themselves the discoverers and ultimately the revealers of the truth: As Borachio puts it, "What your wisdom could not discover, these shallow fools have brought to light" (V.i.220-221).

Beatrice and Benedick endeavor to come to terms with the world through wit, intellect, reason: both are frequently described by their friends as wits, and they engage in constant skirmishes of wit between themselves. As witty, sophisticated rationalists both consider that love produces foolish, mad, fantastical behavior which is quite unworthy of them. Leonato thinks that his niece Beatrice will "never run mad" with love (I.i.85), she herself lays claim to "cold blood" (I.i.120), and she delights in piercing the illusions of romantic love with such realistic comments as the following:

Wooing, wedding, and repenting is as a Scotch jig, a measure, and a cinque-pace: the first suit is hot and hasty like a Scotch jig (and full as fantastical); the wedding mannerly modest (as a measure), full of state and ancientry; and then comes Repentance and with his bad leg falls into the cinque-pace faster and faster, till he sink into his grave.

(II.i.64-70)

Similarly Benedick professes himself a "tyrant" to all the female sex (I.i.157), claims that he will never "look pale with love" (I.i.227), and declares that he will never be brought by love to such foolish and absurd behavior as Claudio displays:

I do much wonder that one man, seeing how much another man is a fool when he dedicates his behaviors to love, will, after he hath laughed at such shallow follies in others, become the argument of his own scorn by falling in love; and such a man is Claudio.… He was wont to speak plain and to the purpose (like an honest man and a soldier) and now he is turned orthography: his words are a very fantastical banquet, just so many strange dishes. May I be so converted and see with these eyes? I cannot tell; I think not. I will not be sworn but love may transform me to an oyster, but I'll take my oath on it, till he have made an oyster of me he shall not make me such a fool.

(II.iii.7-23)
But despite all claims to clear sight by the avoidance of folly and passion, Benedick mistakes and misrepresents Don Pedro's conversation with Hero at the masquerade; both Benedick and Beatrice are taken in by each other's exaggerated railing and scorn; and most important, both are in danger of failing to see the whole rich reality of love, being put off by its foolish appearances.

Beatrice and Benedick are awakened to love through the play-acting of their friends. In the skits acted for their benefit each is told that the other is nearly mad with passion for him, and on the basis of this belief is moved to self-condemnation for the harshness of his own wit and to pity for the other. These allegations are false, for neither Benedick nor Beatrice is ever the slave of passion: love does not turn either of them into an oyster. Yet the falsehood reveals an important truth to each of the lovers—the fact that, despite appearances, the other party does indeed love. Even more important, the skits demonstrate to each that the other party is a rational object of choice for one laying claim to wit and rationality.

The development of these two lovers reflects in general terms but with some significant variations the scale of love and knowledge ascended by Bembo's wise and rational lover. Though preserved by his wit from the usual responses of the sensual lover, Benedick had in fact entered unawares upon the first stage of love, the attraction to his lady's physical beauty above all others: at the outset of the play he testifies that Beatrice exceeds Hero "as much in beauty as the first of May doth the last of December" (I.i.178-179). Just before the play-acting scene Benedick jestingly offers his revised version of the third stage of the scale as his excuse for not loving any particular lady, declaring that he will not love until he finds one possessed of all the excellencies now scattered among several: she must be rich, wise, virtuous, fair, mild, noble, of good discourse, an excellent musician, and must not dye her hair (II.iii.23-30). This catalogue includes inner qualities as well as external graces, especially in the stipulation that the lady be "wise" and of "good discourse." Benedick has testified his unwillingness to begin by loving one particular lady having only some elements of beauty in the normal neoplatonic way, and he certainly does not expect to find a lady who is the embodiment of all. But in their play-acting Don Pedro and Claudio describe Beatrice as having just the traits Benedick has mentioned, especially emphasizing that she is "exceedingly wise" (II.iii.150). Benedick, reflecting, agrees to every point, not only on the basis of their opinion but by reference to his own very considerable knowledge of her: "I can bear them witness" (II.iii.210-211). Thus immediately upon recognizing that he is in love Benedick is brought to a higher love based chiefly upon the inner qualities, and he promptly affirms this love as a conscious choice based on knowledge: "I will be horribly in love with her" (II.iii.213). Beatrice's development follows the same general pattern. In their playacting her friends accuse her of "Scorn," "Disdain," and self love, declare that these traits have kept her from recognizing true worth in others, and then praise Benedick as just the person who should approve himself to her intelligent choice:

She cannot be so much without true judgment,
Having so swift and excellent a wit,
As she is prized to have, as to refuse
So rare a gentleman as Signior Benedick.

(III.i.88-91)

On reflection Beatrice condemns her past conduct, agrees that she knows Benedick's desert herself "better than reportingly" (III.ii.117), and determines to love by conscious choice: "And Benedick, love on; I will requite thee, / Taming my wild heart to thy loving hand" (III.ii.112-113).

Benedick and Beatrice have thus acted out the pattern of Bembo's rational lovers, attracted by physical beauty but regarding the inner qualities of the soul more highly, basing love on genuine knowledge, and accepting it not in terms of mad passion but by conscious choice. This higher love immediately results, as Bembo declared it would, in a new mode of knowledge, a heightened perception of reality. First of all the lovers display an expanded and humanized self-knowledge and knowledge of human nature: though they strive with delightful comic effect to uphold the old raillery and rational standard, and though even at their wedding each declares
that he loves the other "no more than reason" (V.i.76), the bad sonnets that they have tried to write to each other testify that they do indeed love on another plane than that of reason. Convicted, Benedick explicitly renounces foolish consistency, and his observation that "man is a giddy thing" (V.i.108) signals the lovers' new affirmation of the whole range of human life and activity. Love also enables them to gain a heightened understanding of the confusions of appearance and reality in their world. Specifically, having learned of the deceptions of appearance in their own affair, they are ready to affirm Hero's innocence against all the supposed evidence of the senses. Schooled by the love of her cousin and of Benedick, Beatrice seems to attain in this case to the level of intuitive understanding which in Bembo's categories is above reason; the language of the play alludes to this knowledge as a certitude located in the soul rather than in the reason or the senses. Very soon after Claudio's accusation of Hero and before anyone else queries the judgment Beatrice declares, "On my soul, my cousin is belied" (IV.i.145). Later, when Benedick asks, "Think you in your soul that Count Claudio hath wronged Hero?" she answers instantly, "Yea, as sure as I have a thought or a soul" (IV.i.324-326).

Benedick must act in this case in terms of faith rather than of intuitive insight (after all he does not know Hero well). But through the medium of faith he also attains to the truth hidden to most of the others. Shortly after the accusation he tells Beatrice, "Surely I do believe your fair cousin is wronged," and his love of Beatrice is made the medium for firmly establishing his faith, for she commands him just after his first open avowal of love to "kill Claudio" in a duel in defense of Hero's innocence. He agrees at length, relying firmly and explicitly on Beatrice's declaration of her "soul-knowledge" against the ocular evidence attested to by his good friends; the earlier description of Benedick as one hesitant to fight a duel further emphasizes the strength of this faith. Though the challenge to the duel is not permitted to become serious (we know that the Watch have already made their discoveries) yet Benedick by this gesture shows his readiness to risk himself totally, as well as his friend, in the service of an unproved inner certitude revealed to intuition and faith and wholly opposed to the seeming evidence of the senses.

Claudio and Hero approach knowledge and love in terms of the evidence of the senses. The focus is upon Claudio: Hero is little more than an object for his affections at the beginning of the play, and at the end she is a means by which Claudio's education in love is completed. Nevertheless her "silence" paralleling that of Claudio (II.i.281-286) and her evident eagerness to be married at once (III.i.101) suggest that she is also a lover acting primarily in terms of sense and passion.

Claudio fits the pattern of Bembo's typical "young" lover who acts primarily in terms of sense knowledge rather than reason, and is moved by desire and passion rather than the higher love—one who, in short, does not advance beyond the first stage of the scale. The language of the play identifies Claudio quite precisely as such a figure. In him the irascible and the desiring portions of the soul (to invoke Plato's terms) are especially developed: he has just returned from the war where he did the "feats of a lion" (I.i.15) and he is attracted to Hero chiefly in terms of the beauties apparent to his eye, "In mine eye she is the sweetest lady that ever I looked on" (I.i.174-175). He terms his attraction to her "my passion" (I.i.201); his comment, "That I love her, I feel" (I.i.210), indicates that the attraction is located in feeling rather than in knowledge; and his hesitancy to use the word "love" to describe his feeling, preferring rather to speak of his liking and his desires, is evident in his explanation to Don Pedro:

    O my Lord,
    When you went onward on this ended action,
    I looked upon her with a soldier's eye,
    That liked, but had a rougher task in hand
    Than to drive liking to the name of love;
    But now I am returned, and that war-thoughts
    Have left their places vacant, in their rooms
    Come thronging soft and delicate desires,
All prompting me how fair young Hero is,
Saying I liked her ere I went to wars.

(I.ii.272-280 [italics mine])

At length, when the marriage is arranged, Claudio appeals to his "silence" as evidence of his love (II.i.277-280), though the marked contrast of this behavior to the constant speech of Benedick and Beatrice suggests that the silence is appropriate to feeling grounded in sense rather than in reason. He also uses the term "dote," suggestive of the force of his passion, though his declaration, "I give away myself for you" suggests a basis which might develop into true love. The strongest evidence that Claudio is propelled chiefly by desire is the answer he immediately blurs forth to Don Pedro's question as to when the marriage shall take place: "Tomorrow, my lord. Time goes on crutches till Love have all his rites" (II.ii.322-323). In striking contrast to Beatrice and Benedick, Claudio does not know his Lady's inner qualities and obviously feels no need to discover them through discourse of reason; significantly, he neither suspects nor expects his lady to be wise. Rather, he simply assumes that the fair exterior connotes and images forth her inner beauty and virtue.

His language makes clear that Claudio is propelled by desire and sense attraction, that he is not simply making a "mariage de convenance" as Charles T. Prouty suggests [in The Sources of Much Ado]. Yet Claudio is not naive: if reliance on sense knowledge leads him on the one hand to passion and desire (with all the errors which may attend these states) it leads him on the other hand to a prudent testing of the appearances to assure himself that they are indeed what he thinks them to be. Thus he solicits Benedick's opinion of Hero's modest demeanor and fairness, inquires delicately of Don Pedro regarding her wealth, and welcomes Don Pedro's good offices in speaking for him to Hero and Leonato.

But this alliance of desire and prudence carried forth on the basis of sense knowledge leads not to true love and true knowledge but to constant mistaking and misapprehension. Claudio mistakes and mistrusts Don Pedro on the basis of Don John's lie and Benedick's mistaken impression at the revels. And both Claudio and Don Pedro are taken in by what appears to be the clear evidence of their own eyes when Borachio and Margaret masquerade as Hero and a lover. Accordingly, the greatest irony of the play as well as a precise statement of its problem is carried in Don John's speech as he prepares them to mistake that masquerade: "If you dare not trust that you see, confess not that you know.… When you have seen more and heard more, proceed accordingly" (III.ii.105-108). In the world of this play, precisely what one dare not do is to trust the evidence of the senses and to proceed on the assumption that sense perception is true knowledge.

The interrupted wedding ceremony displays the bankruptcy of sense knowledge. Claudio thinks that he has now repudiated appearances and seemings, but in fact he only substitutes belief in one appearance (the scene supposedly showing Hero's infidelity) for belief in the "appearance" of her virtue as imaged in her physical beauty, to which he originally gave credence. His thoughts now run constantly on the opposition of seeming and being: "She's but the sign and semblance of her honor. / Behold how like a maid she blushes here! / O what authority and show of truth / Can cunning sin cover itself withal" (IV.i.31-34). Or again, "Would you not swear / All you that see her, that she were a maid / By these exterior shows? / But she is none" (IV.i.36-38).

Or yet again, "Out on the seeming! I will write against it. / You seem to me as Dian in her orb, / … But you are more intemperate in your blood / Than Venus" (IV.i.54-58). He ends with a complete repudiation of external beauty as an evidence of virtue and renounces all trust in sense as a means to understanding: "For thee I'll lock up all the gates of Love, / And on my eyelids shall conjecture hang, / To turn all beauty into thoughts of harm, / And never shall it more be gracious" (IV.1.103-106). But ironically, for all his repudiations he is now more seriously confused than ever by appearances, since the external appearances of beauty and virtue in Hero are indeed a sign of true inner beauty. And he compounds his mistakes by interpreting Hero's silence and her swooning at his accusation as further indications of guilt, and by his ready belief in the false report of her death. Don Pedro is also taken in by all the errors: the alliance of desire and prudence judging in terms of sense knowledge can find no way out of the impasse of the confusing appearances.
Claudio's instruction in the better ways of knowledge and love is in two stages, both developing from the Friar's proposal that Hero feign death. The Friar himself, it ought to be noted, is not deceived by appearances, but neither does he totally repudiate them: as a good Platonist he takes the lady's physical beauty as a sign of her inner virtue, and regards her blushes and tremors as evidence of her innocence, but he interprets these external signs not merely at their face value but in the perspective provided by his age, his studies, his long experience, and his religious calling. The Friar's expectation as regards Claudio is stated in rather specific Platonic terms, to the effect that his brooding upon Hero's reported death will aid his advance along the scale of love. The Friar expects that this brooding will bring "into his study of imagination" not the false appearances of Hero's guilt but rather what he really knows of her "if ever love had interest in his liver," namely, the true Platonic form or essence of her virtue, "the Idaea of her life" which was imaged forth in "every lovely organ" of her physical beauty. And he expects that Claudio will finally come to see this not with physical sight or even with imagination but with "the eye and prospect of his soul" (IV.i.222-232). Something like this neoplatonic process of coming to recognize the inner reality does seem at length to work upon Hero's father Leonato, who believed her guilty at first but later affirms her innocence on the basis of heightened "soul-knowledge," declaring, "My Soul doth tell me Hero is belied" (V.i.42). He is ready to fight a duel to prove this, and is joined in the gesture by Antonio, who presumably has come to a similar insight. Claudio, however, can come to his Platonic recognition of the true "Idaea" of Hero's interior and exterior beauty only after the discovery of the deception: "Sweet Hero now thy image doth appear / In the rare semblance that I loved it first" (V.i.238-239). At this point he awakens, albeit belatedly, to the higher love.

But although he at last becomes a more perfect lover, with his eyes directed to the inner beauty, Claudio cannot advance to the higher stages of perception and love directly, because his former reliance on sense has led to "sin" which, though deriving from a "mistake" is yet culpable. His offer to Leonato clearly states his recognition of that fact, "Choose your revenge yourself; / Impose me to what penance your invention / Can lay upon my sin. Yet sinned I not / But in mistaking" (V.i.259-262). As these lines suggest, Claudio's advance in the ways of true knowledge and true love must now proceed through repentance, penance, and faith, and his new insight must be tested. Leonato's conditions and the new marriage constitute that penance, that advance, and that test; the many critics who complain of Claudio's insensitivity or shameful conduct in agreeing to the new marriage so soon after Hero's supposed death have not, I think, fully understood the thematic and symbolic function of these incidents.

Leonato's conditions seem surprisingly easy: Claudio is to clear Hero's reputation, to spend a night mourning at her tomb, and then to marry her cousin who is "almost the copy" of Hero and heir to a yet larger fortune. But in fact the conditions are aptly suited to the "sin." Claudio has relied hitherto solely on the knowledge of the senses; his desire for Hero had been grounded upon her external beauty, and he has wholly mistaken her nature because of such reliance and such focus. He must take the "new" lady wholly on faith, with no sensory confirmation of or prudential inquiry into the truth of Leonato's promises. His language shows that he recognizes the test for what it is: he offers to "dispose" of himself wholly in accordance with Leonato's wishes (V.i.282), and resolves to carry through the marriage "were she an Ethiope" (V.iv.38). He is offered, however, not an Ethiope but a veiled lady whose face he may not see until after he has promised to wed: the senses are not to be mortified but are to be superseded by the gesture of faith involved in accepting the veiled lady. This gesture brings Claudio to true knowledge and the reward of his now perfected love when the lady stands revealed as Hero herself.

Hero's agonizing trial, her "death" and restoration may represent her own education in the higher love and knowledge, but this motif is not developed. Rather, here as almost always throughout the play she functions chiefly as an object for Claudio's response. Her feigned "death," the ceremony of mourning at her tomb, her reappearance under a veil, and her final revelation in all her former loveliness constitute a sequence of events to which Claudio must relate by a gesture of faith and which become thereby the means for his reclamation and growth in love. The Friar had earlier suggested something of the significance of this masquerade: "Come, lady, die to live" (IV.i.252), and again, "But on this travail look for greater birth" (IV.i.212). At one level
Hero's masquerade would seem to incorporate an allusion—an allusion simply; we are not in the realm of allegory—to Christ's death, burial, and resurrection, displaying thereby to Claudio the meaning of his own experience in terms of its ultimate archetype. Christ's death and resurrection presents the archetype of sacrificial love for the restoration of others, and of divine reality veiled in human form so as to be wholly invisible to sense perception and revealed only to faith.

This allusion, at this climactic moment, underscores the fact that the neoplatonic scale has been modified in the play by the addition of other categories which make it more relevant to the human condition of sin, weakness, and error. Now at the apex of the ladder of love is the concept of love as redemptive sacrifice (imaged forth in Hero); and intersecting with the Platonic categories of knowledge are two other levels—the true instinct granted to the foolish Watch, and the faith exhibited by Benedick and Claudio. Only because of these new terms—love as redemptive sacrifice and knowledge as faith—is the Platonic ascent possible to such as Claudio. These terms receive illumination not from Bembo but from St. Paul:

For the … cross is to them that perish foolishness, but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.

For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.…

God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise.

(I Cor. i:18-19,27)

Beatrice And Benedick
Larry S. Champion (essay date 1970)


[In the following essay, Champion asserts that the "merry war" between Beatrice and Benedick is the central action of Much Ado about Nothing, contending that "the Hero-Claudio affair functions as a veil of fiction which maintains the clarity of the viewer's comic perspective on Benedick and Beatrice."]

In Much Ado about Nothing, Benedick, Beatrice, and Don John are depicted on the level of identity. The personality of Don John … does not alter in the course of the play, but the action results in exposing him to the surrounding characters for the hypocrite and would-be villain that he is. On the other hand, Benedick and Beatrice do develop; at the outset both consider themselves impervious to love—indeed their greatest pleasure is in mocking the opposite sex—and each regards marriage as the most purgatorial experience conceivable. The action of the play humorously mocks them from this unnatural position, and, although there is no basic transformation of spiritual values such as will occur in the final comedies, the result is nonetheless a development or growth in self-knowledge. Each, convinced he is the object of the other's adoration, chides himself for prideful disdain and, though not without some difficulty, accepts the affection and amazingly finds himself reciprocating.

To be sure, Shakespeare has previously capitalized upon the humor of love's mocker becoming love's victim. But … the characters of the earlier comedies, like Valentine and Biron, for example, are maneuvered from a position of antilover to that of Petrarchan fawner or from a posture of fawning fidelity to one of crass infidelity in such broad and rapid fashion as to discourage any credibility of characterization. With no credible motivation, the emphasis is upon the humor of the situation; the characters are merely pawns whose changes in attitude are peremptorily announced, not lived through. Moreover, in the cases of Ferdinand, Biron,
Longaville, and Dumain, the drastic alteration in their attitude toward romance is not immediately accepted by
the opposite sex, though by implication it will be reciprocated one year later; the unnatural pledge of social
abstinence for one year sworn by the king for the sake of love at the end of the play is, after all, only two years
less ridiculous than a similar unnatural pledge for three years against love at the beginning. In any event, if
there is indeed a growth in social wisdom which is ultimately to make the lords and ladies compatible in love,
it is, as implied by the ladies, a character development which will occur outside the play during the year's
penance, after which each lady will accept her lover if he has remained true to his vow. The effectiveness of
the play again arises from the stylized inconsistencies of one-dimensional characters who are funny because
of the situation in which they are placed.

Benedick and Beatrice, however, are presented as realistic human characters, who with credible motivation
develop in their attitude toward love during the course of the play. Instead of creating broad comedy at the
expense of plausible characterization, the playwright dramatizes the stages of their social maturation, and the
humor arises from character rather than from action.

In the opening scene, the "merry war" between these two mockers is clearly established as the dominant
theme. Certainly before tacitly accepting Hero and Claudio as the main characters of the play, we should
reconsider the centrality of Benedick and Beatrice to the plot. For one thing, Shakespeare specifically
introduces the theme of the sparring mockers before the theme of melodramatic romance. Nowhere else does
he give such primary emphasis to a "subplot"; obviously, when all principals first come on stage together, our
major interest is not in the love-at-first-sight which develops between two relatively pallid characters, but in
the development of the "merry war" between the witty sparks. For another thing, it is Benedick and Beatrice
who sustain our dramatic interest through the mid-portion of the play; once their comic traps are set, we, as
spectators merely bide our time for the next private encounter of Benedick and Beatrice as we observe the
fortunes and misfortunes of Hero and Claudio. And, quite frankly, it is their fate which much more viably
concerns us than that of the gullible "hero" and the passively victimized "heroine."

Beatrice's first words mock her male adversary and squarely establish the comic foundations for their
subsequent verbal parrying. As a messenger informs Leonato, Governor of Messina, of the imminent arrival
of the Prince of Arragon and his forces, she mockingly inquires: "I pray you, is Signior Mountanto return'd
from the wars or no? … I pray you, how many hath he kill'd and eaten in these wars? … for indeed I promised
to eat all of his killing" (I, i, 30-31, 42-45). Obviously her tilt with this "very valiant trencherman," this
"stuff'd man" (51, 58-59), antedates the play. In their last encounter, she reports, "four of his five wits went
haling off … if he have wit enough to keep himself warm, let him bear it for a difference between himself
and his horse; for it is all the wealth that he hath left to be known a reasonable creature" (66, 67-71). " … not till a
hot January" will she ever abide him or any other man! When Benedick comes on stage, her railing tongue is
quick to continue the attack. He has no more than opened his mouth when she blurts: "I wonder that you will
never see a bachelor of three-score again? … Because I will not do them the wrong to mistrust any, I will do
myself the right to trust none; and the fine is, for the which I may go the finer, I will live a bachelor" (199-202, 244-248). Should he ever fall victim to love, he
proclaims that the bull's horns are to be set on his head and that he is to be placed on exhibit with the
appropriate placards: "Here is good horse to hire … Here you may see Benedick the married man" (268-270).
While the actual skirmish between the antilovers is brief, Benedick and Beatrice have clearly revealed that they have far more than a casual interest in one another but that their pride will never allow them to admit it. Act II provides repetition and intensification of this theme just prior to the central exposure scenes. Each antilover appears to restate his convictions to a friend who is contemplating marriage, and again a momentary encounter adds spice to their charges. Beatrice, chiding Hero as love's fool, asserts that she thanks God morning and evening that he has sent her no husband. She can "not endure a husband with a beard on his face" (II, i, 30-31), yet a youth without a beard is too young for her. By remaining a maid she will avoid hell and gain heaven. Not until men are made of something more valiant than dust and not until she is convinced that a man, descended like her from Adam, is not her kindred will she be "fitted with a husband." As a realistic and pragmatic person, she prides herself on being able to "see a church by daylight" (85-86): "wooing, wedding, and repenting, is as a Scotch jig, a measure, and a cinque pace; the first suit is hot and hasty, like a Scotch jig, and full as fantastical; the wedding, mannerly-modest, as a measure, full of state and ancientry; and then comes repentance and, with his bad legs, falls into the cinque pace faster and faster, till he sink into his grave" (76-83). As for Benedick, smarting from Beatrice's remarks during a masked ball that he is "the Prince's jester, a very dull fool" (142), he would not marry this "infernal Ate in good apparel" (263), "though she were endowed with all that Adam had left him before he transgress'd" (258-260). He would undertake any mission "rather than hold three words' conference with this harpy … I cannot endure my Lady Tongue" (279-280, 283-284).

The playwright, in effect, has provided both antilovers sufficient rope to become totally ensnared in their unnatural postures. Yet he applies the slip knot in such a way as to make their victimization by Cupid thoroughly plausible. Each thinks the other dotes on him and suffers as a consequence of the unrequited passion; hence, each, gratifying his own ego, is able to justify through reason the attitude to which passion is leading him. At least for the moment, neither is forced to swallow his pride whole cloth. Benedick overhears that Beatrice "loves him with an enraged affection" (II, iii, 104-105); she is up "twenty times a night" falling, weeping, sobbing, beating her heart, tearing her hair, praying, cursing: "O sweet Benedick! God give me patience!" (154-155). Beatrice, in turn, over-hears that Benedick loves her "entirely"; he is "Consume[d] away in sighs, waste[d] inwardly" (III, i, 37, 78). She hears herself branded "self-endeared," hardhearted, disdainful, and scornful (49-56). With her "carping" she

\[
\text{turns … every man the wrong side out,} \\
\text{And never gives to truth and virtue that} \\
\text{Which simpleness and merit purchaseth.} \\
(68-70)
\]

Both profit from the net prepared for them. Forced to admit their stubborn pride to themselves, they for the first time can recognize affection for what it is. As Benedick exclaims in soliloquy: "Love me! why, it must be requited … I did never think to marry. I must not seem proud. Happy are they that hear their detractions and can put them to mending … I will be horribly in love with her … When I said I would die a bachelor, I did not think I should live till I were married" (II, iii, 232, 236-238, 243-244, 250-252). So likewise Beatrice in soliloquy proclaims:

\[
\text{Stand I condemn'd for pride and scorn so much?} \\
\text{Contempt, farewell! and maiden pride,} \\
adieu! … \\
\text{And, Benedick, love on; I will requite thee,} \\
\text{Taming my wild heart to thy loving hand.} \\
(III, i, 108-109, 111-112)
\]
If the spectator is to be convinced of the validity of this change in attitude, the verbal warriors must successfully overcome two obstacles: the next confrontation with their friends, who can be expected to mock them mercilessly, and their next private meeting, in which for a critical moment each will probe for signs of affection in the other while his own wit will be poised for self-defense. Benedick's first test comes almost immediately, and, in the face of his companions' laughter, his forthright intentions to reveal all ("Gallants, I am not as I have been" [III, ii, 15]) wither to a transparent subterfuge ("I have the toothache" [21]). But he swallows his pride and by submission admits the truth as his friends mock his new clothes, his combed hair, his shaved and scented face, and his subdued wit, "which is now crept into a lute-string and now govern'd by stops" (60-61). Beatrice, too, bites her tongue and her pride a few scenes later. Claiming that she is "out of all other tune," "exceeding ill," "stuff'd" (III, iv, 43, 53, 64), she must abide the mocking prescription that she obtain "distill'd Carduus Benedictus, and lay it to your heart. It is the only thing for a qualm" (73-75).

Shortly thereafter, their brash cynicism gone, they are able, albeit clumsily and hesitatingly, to declare their mutual love: "I will swear by it that you love me; and I will make him eat it that says I love not you" (IV, i, 278-279); "You have stayed me in a happy hour. I was about to protest I loved you" (285-286). Beatrice's sudden command that Benedick prove his love by killing Claudio signals more than the spectator realizes at first glance: having escaped his egotistical shell in which wit was literally a defensive weapon, each is able for the first time to act compassionately on behalf of another—Beatrice, in giving the command, on behalf of the wronged Hero; Benedick, in finally accepting it, on behalf of Beatrice, who has become painfully convinced of Claudio's villainy. Heretofore, the spectator has viewed only the sharply disdainful sides of both mocking warriors. Now Beatrice reveals a sensitivity and concern for her cousin which points significantly toward those finer qualities of spirit with which love is allied. So, too, Benedick's acceptance in all seriousness of the charge to kill Claudio, erstwhile his best friend, graphically indicates the surrender of his previous values to a new control.

To be sure, the merry warriors are trained for combat, not romance, and their wooing is at times woefully inept. Benedick, for instance, attempting to pen his affection for his mistress, can produce only doggerel. In utter frustration he exclaims: "Marry, I can not show it in rhyme. I have tried. I can find out no rhyme to 'lady' but 'baby,' an innocent rhyme; for 'scorn,' 'horn,' a hard rhyme; for 'school,' 'fool,' a babbling rhyme; very ominous endings. No, I was not born under a rhyming planet, nor I cannot woo in festival terms" (V, ii, 35-41). And both would willingly disown the epistles produced by their companions in the final moments of the play—the "halting sonnet of [Benedick's] own pure brain, / Fashion'd to Beatrice" (V, iv, 87-88) and "another / Writ in [Beatrice's] hand, stol'n from her pocket, / Containing her affection unto Benedick" (88-90). To the last the lovers continue their verbal sparring. But the words no longer have a sting; instead the quip—that is, the form of dialogue which is second nature to them—serves as a device for the final personal and public declaration of their love:

_Bene._ Come, I will have thee; but, by this light, I take thee for pity.

_Beat._ I would not deny you; but, by this good day, I yield upon great persuasion; and partly to save your life, for I was told you were in a consumption.

_Bene._ Peace! I will stop your mouth.

[Kissing her.]

(V, iv, 92-99)

Benedick has the apposite concluding remarks. If he is not the man he was at the beginning of the play, "Man is a giddy thing, and this is my conclusion" (108-109). If the fidelity of woman is an uncertain factor, at least "There is no staff more reverend than one tipp'd with horn," so "get thee a wife, get thee a wife" (124-126).
In short, Benedick's and Beatrice's recognition of their true nature as normal, healthy lovers is credibly experienced in the course of the play. The humor arises from the character development which reveals their true identity to themselves. As in The Merchant of Venice and As You Like It, Shakespeare's concern is to create a dramatic structure which will enhance the comic potential of the romantic self-revelation and at the same time will prevent moments of sentimentality from blurring the spectator's comic perspective—in effect, a comic vision which will successfully accommodate character development on the level of identity. To this end, he surrounds the "merry war" with a melodramatic plot so stylized that it is virtually impossible for the spectator to become emotionally involved with any part of the action. In effect, the Hero-Claudio affair functions as a veil of fiction which maintains the clarity of the viewer's comic perspective on Benedick and Beatrice. Then, too, several minor figures, such as Leonato and Don Pedro, function sporadically as comic pointers to direct our laughter upon these mockers of love. Finally, in Dogberry and Verges, the playwright creates the bumbling constables who, like the Keystone Cops later, delight us even while they unwittingly disrupt the law they represent.

The stylized melodramatic action is established immediately following the first skirmish in the "merry war." In the face of Benedick's mockery of love, Claudio peremptorily announces to his friend his romantic interest in Hero ("a jewel" [I, i, 183], "the sweetest lady that ever I look'd on" [189-190]), whom he desires to be "my wife" (198). This passion he relates to Don Pedro who for no ostensible reason proclaims that he will woo her for him by "assum[ing] thy part in some disguise / And tell[ing] fair Hero I am Claudio" (323-324). Into this fantastic scene now stalks Don John announcing that he was "born under Saturn … I cannot hide what I am … I am a plain-dealing villain … seek not to alter me" (I, iii, 12, 14, 33, 39). Welcoming "any model to build mischief on" (48-49) which "may prove food to [his] displeasure" (67-68), he leaps at the least opportunity for evil. The lovesick swain, the pliant and submissive heroine, the proxy wooing, the arrant villain for whom "Any bar, any cross, any impediment will be med'cinable" (II, ii, 4-5), each performing a role for which there is no credible motivation—Shakespeare has indeed taken the kingdom of melodrama by storm.

Furthermore, this material is structured so as to provide maximum comic distancing at significant moments in the Benedick-Beatrice action. Specifically, the two major points of melodramatic complication, occurring as needed to offset any tendency on the part of the spectator to react sentimentally to the young sparrers, fantastically mock the misprisions, the observations, the notings, which direct them first to the height of their disdain, then to the height of their passion. As previously described, both Benedick and Beatrice make two appearances early in the play in which they verbally flail each other with increasing intensity. The second of these appearances involves a masked ball with each, behind the disguise of a vizard, leveling his most telling insults (II, i, 134-136, 142-148); not realizing that his assailant is actually within earshot, each assumes he cannot defend himself with the verbal retort, smoulders over the charges, and swears he will get revenge one way or another. As by deception and misprision their merry war reaches its fever pitch, so by misprision Don John makes his first melodramatic attempt to destroy Claudio's happiness. Learning of Don Pedro's intention to woo Hero for Claudio by proxy, he determines to practice upon Claudio by reporting that Don Pedro actually woos for himself, indeed that the intention is to "marry her to-night" (II, i, 176-177). The playwright makes the confusion all the more fantastic for the spectator through the "honest" misrepresentation of Antonio, who by eavesdropping learns of the wooing, but assumes the prince is to woo for himself (I, ii) and so reports his news to Leonato. Even though Don John knows nothing of this misreporting, he is able, despite his saturnine temperament—which is clearly apparent to all—to lead the gullible Claudio to condemn his friend with incredible rapidity:

'Tis certain so; the Prince woos for himself.  
Friendship is constant in all other things  
Save in the office and affairs of love.  
(181-183)
Both Claudio's suspicion and Don John's intended villainy melodramatically come to nought, as, a few lines later, Don Pedro blithely proclaims: "Here, Claudio, I have wooed in thy name, and fair Hero is won … Name the day of marriage, and God give thee joy!" (309-312). Shakespeare, by obviously ignoring plausible motivation, has stylized the action and thereby provided a kind of comic insulation against the spectator's emotional reaction to the intensity of the wit combat waged by Benedick and Beatrice.

As by "noting," Benedick and Beatrice in the mid-section of the play become convinced of the other's passionate affection, and through the remainder of the action come haltingly to recognize a reciprocal emotion within themselves, the playwright again uses the subplot for comic distancing. Indeed, Don John's second attack upon Claudio is more obviously stylized than the first. Both the lovesick swain and Don Pedro lend a willing ear to the rogue's slanderous charges against Hero and unquestioningly accept as ultimate proof of her guilt a nocturnal scene which they "note," obviously from such a distance that they cannot determine her facial features. By confronting her with her "shame" at the altar and, with Don John's aid, verbally attacking her with pharisaical gusto, they deny her any reasonable opportunity for self defense. That Claudio would choose to shame her by publicly impugning her character at the altar, that the fair Hero would swoon away into such a deep trance that for a time she was presumed dead, that her own father would likewise condemn her peremptorily and pray that she "not ope thine eyes" for fear that he himself would "strike at thy life," that Beatrice would not expose the inconsistency between the charge that Hero is guilty of "vile encounters … a thousand times in secret" and the fact that "until last night, / [she has] this twelvemonth been her bedfellow," that Margaret should not clear up the whole confusion: all such features combine to make the action sheer absurdity by any measure of plausibility. But just such exaggeration of action and neglect of motivation is, of course, the key to successful melodrama. The bewildering bevy of events which follows provides a fitting capstone to this action: Hero's feigned death, the seriatim challenges to a duel which confront Claudio, his maudlin contrition which leads him to serenade her at the tomb, Leonato's incredible request that since Claudio cannot marry his daughter he marry his niece, the almost bizarre production of "another Hero" at the second altar.

Surrounded by this action, the spectator, however much he becomes interested in Benedick and Beatrice as they quite credibly experience the youthful joys and agonies resulting from ego's conflict with romance, is never permitted to lose his comic perspective or detachment. As we have seen, the transition from love's mocker to love's victim clearly is sincere and gradual and not without those occasional moments of personal frustration arising from a character's being forced to eat his words, to recognize and admit his faults of pride and spite, in short, to expose his vulnerability at the very point of his erstwhile strength. It can hardly be a mere coincidence of revision that Shakespeare in this section of the play has so carefully bolstered the comic perspective through the stylized postures of Hero and Claudio.

Apparently for the same reason, Dogberry and Verges are introduced in the last half of the play. If Shakespeare can be criticized for rather clumsily and peripherally thrusting these characters into the action at such a late stage, as is the case later with Autolycus, the results are not debatable. He gets away with it because the bumbling constables, living virtually in a world of their own, comically endear themselves to the spectator through their general stupidity and through Dogberry's specific linguistic ineptness. This material bears upon our present approach to Shakespeare's artistry in two primary ways. First, the buffoons are introduced precisely at the crucial moment at which Benedick and Beatrice begin to experience their self-revelation; their four appearances in the play span the period during which the jesting warriors must make their initial comments of self-recognition and must individually bear up under the taunting gibes of their companions who are responsible for the earlier eavesdropping scenes. By the time the constables make their final exit (V, i), Benedick and Beatrice are well on their way to becoming lovers as they attempt to pen their affection in lyric form only to find themselves virtually as inept as Dogberry in the use of the King's English. In effect, then, Shakespeare has further reinforced the dramatic perspective during this significant portion of the play. Both the high melodrama of Hero-Claudio and the clumsy antics of Dogberry-Verges create the detached comic veil through which we observe the humanization of character without a consequential loss of
comic rapport. Second, Dogberry and Verges, through the verbal misprision that prevents their conveying information concerning Don John's dastardly deeds, create another layer of the mis-noting which prompts much of the action of this play, and which, for example, has earlier served as a romantic catalyst for Benedick and Beatrice. As the end result of one misprision is ultimately to transform Benedick's mockery of love into an admission of love, so the other is to maneuver Borachio from freedom to prison, as he, from sheer frustration at having been arrested and tried in such inarticulate fashion, voluntarily admits his guilt rather than endure any longer the sheer fatuity of his captors. By the time the bumbling constable departs, however—with his malapropian gems, his smug assurance that, in calling him "tedious," Leonato has paid him the highest of compliments, and his furious incredulity that anyone would have the gall to call him an "ass"—he has endeared himself to all in the playhouse save his prisoner.

In addition to these narrative layers, Shakespeare utilizes minor comic pointers who help to focus and to guide the spectator's laughter upon Benedick and Beatrice. No single character serves this function, and the result is an only partially successful scattering of comments from minor characters who at one moment are obviously to be accepted as comic pointers and at another moment as stylized caricatures. Specifically, though, Leonato, Don Pedro, Claudio, Hero, Margaret, and Ursula sporadically provide significant comments as they share with the spectator a practice upon the merry warriors.

In the first portion of the play leading to the eaves-dropping scenes, Leonato and Don Pedro are the comic pointers. Leonato, for instance, caught up at the outset in Beatrice's gibes about Benedick, explains: "There is a kind of merry war betwixt Signior Benedick and her. They never meet but there's a skirmish of wit between them" (I, i, 62-64). He is quick to remind her that, when Benedick returns, she will have met her match (46-47) and later he avers that, despite her shrewd tongue, "I hope to see you one day fitted with a husband" (II, i, 60-61). In similar fashion, Don Pedro taunts Benedick as "an obstinate heretic in the despite of beauty" (I, i, 236-237) and tartly prophesies that "I shall see thee, ere I die, look pale with love … [I]f ever thou dost fall from this faith, thou wilt prove a notable argument" (249-250, 257-258). Leonato and Don Pedro, then, clearly set the personalities for the spectator. And, appropriately, it is they who implement the scheme by which the mockers will be transformed. Beatrice, who "mocks all her wooers out of suit" (II, i, 364-365), "were an excellent wife for Benedick" (366-367); "O Lord, my lord, if they were but a week married, they would talk themselves mad" (368-369). Thus Don Pedro is led to devise the plan as difficult as "one of Hercules' labours": "to bring Signior Benedick and the Lady Beatrice into a mountain of affection the one with the other … I will teach you how to humour your cousin, that she shall fall in love with Benedick; and I, with your two helps, will so practise on Benedick that, in despite of his quick wit and his queasy stomach, he shall fall in love with Beatrice" (380-383, 395-400).

The additional pointers begin to function at the time of the actual deceptions. Though Leonato and Don Pedro provide most of the conversation which feeds Benedick's passion, Claudio inserts occasional asides to sharpen the comic flavor: "stalk on, stalk on; the fowl sits … Bait the hook well; this fish will bite … If he do not dote on her upon this, I will never trust my expectation" (II, iii, 94-95, 113-114, 219-220). Similarly, as Don Pedro has instructed, Hero and Ursula pour Benedick's adoration into Beatrice's willing ears. Hero observes wryly, "Cupid's crafty arrow … wounds by hearsay … Some Cupid kills with arrows, some with traps" (III, i, 22-23, 106). And Ursula, like Claudio, provides sporadic progress reports: "The pleasant'st angling is to see the fish … greedily devour the treacherous bait … She's lim'd, I warrant you. We've caught her, madam" (26, 28, 104). Each group pointedly mocks its victim on the next appearance for the alterations in personality which belie the passion of love, Margaret joining with Hero and Ursula for this purpose (III, ii; III, iv).

The major function of the pointers in the play, then, is to maintain the proper comic perspective while establishing the young mockers as antilovers and then arranging and executing the scheme by which their mockery will be tamed and eventually transformed. Once the practice is applied and each victim humorously derided, the pointers as such are removed from the stage, returning in this guise only briefly in the late moments of the action, mockingly to produce love poems as irrefutable evidence that Benedick and Beatrice
love each other just prior to their final acceptance of and acknowledgment of love:

Leon.
Come, cousin, I am sure you love the gentleman.
Claud.
And I'll be sworn upon't that he loves her;
For here's a paper written in his hand,
A halting sonnet of his own pure brain,
Fashion'd to Beatrice.
Hero.
And here's another

Writ in my cousin's hand, stol'n from her pocket,
Containing her affection unto Benedick.

(V, iv, 84-90)

In sum, while the pointers and the low-comedy characters of *Much Ado about Nothing* lack the total thematic integration which Shakespeare is to achieve in *Twelfth Night*, these devices, along with a stylized, melodramatic subplot, do serve to block the spectator's emotional involvement and thereby to provide him a detached perspective through which to enjoy the humanization of two delightful—if brash and egotistical—young people who pay the price for defying love's powers.

**Michael D. Friedman (essay date 1990)**


[In the essay below, Friedman argues that Beatrice, upon marrying Benedick, "ultimately sacrifices the verbal mastery which constitutes her power in exchange for a hushed existence as Benedick's wife" and suggests a stageable alternative to the play's conclusion.]

In Act II, scene 3 of *Much Ado About Nothing*, Claudio describes to his liege Don Pedro the twilight's quiet mood as they prepare to hear the singer Balthasar: "How still the evening is, as hush'd on purpose to grace harmony!" (II. iii. 38-39). Claudio means, of course, that the stillness of the evening is the perfect setting for the melodious sounds which are to follow, for the ideal listener blesses the musician with silent attendance. But the harmony represented by music in *Much Ado* is a marital, as much as a musical, concord. When Benedick calls for pipers to strike up a dance at the end of the play, the harmony produced is, as A. R. Humphreys has noted [in the Arden edition of *Much Ado About Nothing*, 1981], the "symbol of happy marriage" (218n), a union which I will contend would seem all the more agreeable to the men of Messina if their female partners (particularly Beatrice, "she who blesses") remained "hushed on purpose" to grace the harmony of the relationship.

One can easily imagine the reticent Hero fulfilling this subdued role in her marriage to Claudio, but the talkative, aggressive Beatrice seems, at first glance, to be temperamentally unsuited to such submission. Most studies of *Much Ado* therefore assume that Beatrice will remain indomitable in marriage, finally achieving a truce with Benedick without relinquishing her self-determination. However, feminist critics recently have begun to point out that in Shakespeare's plays, female power, such as that wielded by Beatrice, often paradoxically serves "to consolidate the status quo of male hierarchy." For example, the power displayed by Shakespeare's comic heroines is almost routinely surrendered to their husbands when they marry, for, as Lynda E. Boose has observed [in "The Family in Shakespearean Studies; or—Studies in the Family of Shakespeareans; or—The Politics of Politics," *Renaissance Quarterly* 40, 1987], female roles are "invariably
qualified by Shakespeare's overriding conviction that social harmony requires male control." Indeed, the restoration of patriarchal forces at the end of *Much Ado* coincides with the culmination of a gradual process of muting which Beatrice undergoes on her way to becoming a married woman. I will argue that Beatrice, far from preserving her autonomy, ultimately sacrifices the verbal mastery which constitutes her power in exchange for a hushed existence as Benedick's wife.

The contradiction between the eloquence of Beatrice's original subversive position and the play's representation of the eventual stopping of her mouth creates a tension which is seldom communicated effectively in performance. In fact, almost all major stage productions of *Much Ado* have endeavored to romanticize the reconciliation of the witty lovers and to suggest that any problematic aspects of the conclusion reside in the isolation of Don Pedro, not in the taming of Beatrice by Benedick. Pamela Mason's examination of post-World War II revivals of *Much Ado* at Stratford-upon-Avon [*'Much Ado ' at Stratford-upon-Avon, 1949-76, 1976*] revealed that the most common staging of the play's final moments spotlights Benedick and Beatrice dancing alone, slowly deserted by the rest of the company, while the unmarried Prince looks on forlornly from a distance. The 1982 RSC production directed by Terry Hands followed this pattern and ended the sequence with a fadeout on the dancing pair miming an animated discussion ending in a kiss. Such a conclusion leaves the viewer with the impression that Beatrice and Benedick will live out their married lives embroiled in one long, highly-entertaining battle of wits interrupted only periodically by affectionate truces. As emotionally appealing to modern audiences as this projected outcome is, however, the theatrical signs which convey this notion are wholly the product of Hands's directorial elaboration of the brief stage direction "Dance" at the end of the play.

The relative terseness of stage directions in Shakespearean texts gives a director considerable leeway to refashion the plays in light of contemporary social and political concerns. This procedure results in what Kathleen McLuskie [in her "The patriarchal bard: feminist criticism and Shakespeare: *King Lear* and *Measure for Measure,* " in Political Shakespeare: New essays in cultural materialism, edited by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, 1985] calls "constructed meaning," or "the social meaning of a play [which] depends upon the arrangements of theatrical meaning." Scholarly treatment of this aspect of drama foregrounds the theatrical devices by which an audience's perception of the action of the play is defined. The focus of critical attention, in other words, shifts from judging the action to analysing the process by which the action presents itself to be judged.

Such an approach necessarily emphasizes the range of choices available to a director for staging a particular sequence and the effect any individual selection has on the constructed meaning of the text.

This shift in the object of scholarly attention is clearly exemplified in Harry Berger's recent reformulation of the text-versus-performance controversy epitomized by his critical dialogue with Richard Levin [Imaginary Audition: Shakespeare on Stage and Page, 1989]. While Levin has maintained [in "Performance-Critics vs. Close Readers in the Study of English Renaissance Drama," *Modern Language Review* 81, 1986] that any interpretation of a Shakespeare play that "cannot be conveyed on the stage could not have been intended by the author and so must be rejected," Berger has countered [in "Text Against Performance in Shakespeare: The Example of *Macbeth,* " *Genre* 15, 1982] that the meaning gleaned from central interpretive operations, such as the comparison of widely remote speeches, "cannot be adequately conveyed or picked up" in the theater; thus, performance provides an insufficient representation of the full import of the text and should not constitute a test of critical validity. Although Berger has professed that the psychological limitations of theater audiences need not regulate the complexity of textual readings, in his latest work he redefines his approach to the text as a "literary model of stage-centered reading," which "proceeds by a process of correction toward performance, or at least toward performability, taking account of theatrical circumstances but ignoring the constraints imposed by actual playgoing." In this movement "toward performability" in textual analysis Berger reconsiders the assumption, which he once shared with Levin, that certain readings are by their nature
unstageable. As Berger now claims,

Stage-centered critics often seem to underestimate the good actor's ability to work up and/or stage complex interpretations, and they often ignore the influence of particular styles or traditions of acting on what counts as an actable interpretation.

In response to Berger's revised position, I offer the notion of a reading's performability as a topic in itself worthy of critical inquiry. Given a textual interpretation, the critic profitably may investigate the historical and theatrical conditions, as well as the performance choices, that might contribute to (or detract from) the expression of such a reading. As an illustration of this approach, I detail in the rest of this essay a stageable alternative to the usual staging of the conclusion of Much Ado based on textual evidence that suggests Beatrice renouces her scathing verbal wit as she approaches marriage.

In the opening scene Beatrice demonstrates the strength of her sharp tongue by emerging victorious in her first "skirmish of wit" with Benedick (I. i. 57-58). The vanquished soldier retreats from this initial encounter only to attack again later from behind the shield of his disguise at Leonato's masque. In an attempt to shame Beatrice into curbing her banter, Benedick rumors that a certain gentleman has accused her of deriving her disdainful wit from the Hundred Merry Tales, a collection of vulgar comic stories. This slander backfires, however, for Beatrice recognizes Benedick and launches a devastating barrage of wit against him. As he later describes the onslaught to Don Pedro, "I stood like a man at a mark, with a whole army shooting at me. She speaks poniards, and every word stabs" (II. i. 230-232). Here, as elsewhere in the play, wit is metaphorically depicted as a piercing weapon. Most often it is a dagger or sword, as when Benedick answers Claudio's request that he display his wit with, "It is in my scabbard, shall I draw it?" (V. i. 125). Through its association with penetrating blades, wit is specified as a uniquely masculine weapon which Beatrice has no business brandishing. As Carol Cook has pointed out [in "The Sign and Semblance of Her Honor": Reading Gender Difference in Much Ado About Nothing, " PMLA 101, 1986], Hero's comment on Margaret's verbal thrusts at Beatrice—"There thou prick'st her with a thistle" (III. iv. 71)—suggests that wit retains its phallic, masculine character ("prick'st") even when appropriated by women. Benedick later echoes this notion when he "claims swordlike phallic wit as a masculine prerogative that women wield only through usurpation":

Benedick: And so I pray thee call Beatrice; I give thee the bucklers. Margaret: Give us the swords, we have bucklers of our own. Benedick: If you use them, Margaret, you must put in the pikes with a vice, and they are dangerous weapons for maids. [V. ii. 16-21]

Nevertheless, for the first half of the play, the "vocal Beatrice refuses the subjection of femininity … by placing herself among the men and wielding phallic wit as aggressively as they."

Leonato warns Beatrice that this constant raillery will deter all prospective suitors: "By my troth, niece, thou wilt never get thee a husband, if thou be so shrewd of thy tongue" (II. i. 16-17). Even her future mate Benedick "cannot endure" her when she plays "my Lady Tongue" and tears his masculine ego to shreds (II. i. 257-258). His perfect woman, as he paints out her qualities in the long soliloquy before his gulling scene, is not only "Rich," "wise," virtuous," and "fair," as Beatrice clearly is, but also "mild," which she undoubtedly is not (II. iii. 30-33). Benedick can appreciate female speech in a pleasant and innocuous form, as his additional requirement that his paragon be "of good discourse" indicates (II. iii. 33), but he cannot abide the acute, unrestrained voice of an assertive woman. Margaret Loftus Ranald remarked [in Shakespeare and His Social Context: Essays in Osmotic Knowledge and Literary Interpretation, 1987] with some surprise that Benedick's
hypothetical quintessence of womanhood resembles Hero more closely than Beatrice, but this anomaly is easy
enough to explain: both Benedick and Claudio would prefer a spouse who understands her subservient
position and knows how to modulate her voice in the presence of her husband. Although Hero by habit speaks
kindly to men and only when spoken to, Beatrice must be slowly trained to moderate her speech before she
can become a congenial wife.

Beatrice's resistance to marriage is based in part on her knowledge of the unequal balance of power between
the genders which prevails within it:

Leonato: Well, niece, I hope to see you one
day fitted with a husband.
Beatrice: Not till God make men of some
other metal than earth. Would it not grieve
a woman to be overmastered with a piece of
valiant dust, to make an account of her life
to a clod of wayward marl?

[II. i. 53-58]

This remark is often taken as evidence of what Carol Thomas Neely has called [in her "Broken Nuptials in
Shakespeare's Comedies," in Shakespeare's "Rough Magic": Renaissance Essays in Honor of C. L. Barber,
edited by Peter Ericson and Coppélia Kahn, 1985] Beatrice's "apprehensiveness about the sexual and social
submission demanded of women in marriage," but Beatrice does not question that wedlock, if she chooses it,
requires such subservience. She laments that there are no men of superior substance, by whom she could be
"overmastered" without considering it an insult and to whom she could "make an account of her life" without
being debased. The sharp irony of Beatrice's comments on matrimony reveals that she harbors a genuine
longing for the type of inclusion in society which marriage allows, coupled with resentment that a wedding
ring is a prerequisite for such inclusion. For example, when Hero and Claudio are first betrothed, Beatrice
cries, "Good Lord, for alliance! Thus goes everyone to the world but I, and I am sunburnt. I may sit in a
corner and cry 'Heigh-ho for a husband!'" (II. i. 299-301). Speaking this passage, an actress may utilize the
self-deprecating humor of this lament to expose Beatrice's fear that her habitual disdain of men may someday
condemn her to lonely spinsterhood. As Neely has suggested, "Beatrice's aggressive, witty resistance to men
and marriage … poignantly reveals her desire for both."

Don Pedro's plot to make Beatrice and Benedick fall in love with each other resolves the conflict in Beatrice's
mind between her desire for marriage and her anxiety over the subjection it involves. Jean Howard has
demonstrated [in "Renaissance antitheatricality and the politics of gender and rank in Much Ado About
Nothing," in Shakespeare Reproduced, edited by Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor, 1987] that the
Prince's conspiracy not only brings to the surface the witty combatants' concealed mutual affection but also
completes "their successful interpolation into particular positions within a gendered social order." Whereas the
male conspirators, speaking to be overheard by Benedick, dwell on Beatrice's lovesick torment in an effort to
persuade him to become her master and protector,

the conversation staged for Beatrice only briefly focuses on Benedick's suffering. He is
presented as the good man any woman would be a fool to scorn, but most of his attention
focuses on how unnatural her pride, her wit, and her independence are.

Hero, a bit censorious of her cousin's easy volubility in mixed company, opens the gulling scene by asking
Margaret to draw Beatrice away from her conversation with the Prince and Claudio to eaves-drop in the
orchard. There Beatrice hears herself faulted for the excessively critical view she takes of her male suitors and
the verbal license with which she mocks them:
Disdain and scorn ride sparkling in her eyes,
Misprising what they look on, and her wit
Values itself so highly that to her
All matter else seems weak.

[II. i. 514]

Ursula adds that Beatrice's wit must be "without true judgement" (III. i. 88) because she so often turns it against the rare Signior Benedick, preferring the sport of derision to the appropriate appreciation of his excellences. Once Hero and Ursula convince Beatrice that "Signior Benedick, / For shape, for bearing, argument, and valour, / Goes foremost in report through Italy" (III. i. 95-97), she seems more than willing to abandon her pride and scorn and acknowledge him as the man of superior substance by whom she will allow herself to be overmastered: "And, Benedick, love on, I will requite thee, / Taming my wild heart to thy loving hand" (III. i. 111-112).

Here Beatrice characterizes herself as a domesticated bird, in Hero's phrase, a "haggard of the rock" (III. i. 36), a female hawk broken to her captor's will after having reached maturity in the wild. This epithet clarifies the difference between the two types of subdued spouse favored by Benedick and Claudio, respectively. Just as some falconers prefer the contained fierceness of the haggard, in spite of the difficulty of training it, to the relative docility of a nestling raised in captivity, some men would rather marry a woman like Beatrice, whose independence makes her harder to subdue but who is more spirited within the bonds of wedlock than a domesticated maid like Hero. Benedick's predilection for the more belligerent of the two women aligns him with a group of Shakespearean comic heroes, including Petruchio and Theseus, who battle, conquer, and eventually marry rebellious females. Such men take pleasure in the combative nature of this courtship; as the Duke of Athens proudly reminds his bride, "I wooed thee with my sword, / And won thy love doing thee injuries" (Midsummer Night's Dream I. i. 16-17). Similarly, Benedick may at one point celebrate the contentious quality of his lovemaking with Beatrice—"Thou and I are too wise to woo peaceably" (V. ii. 67)—and yet later feel a self-satisfaction akin to Petruchio's at the thought that his now obedient wife has allowed him to tame her.

Beatrice's confession of her readiness to yield to Benedick's "loving hand" provides the rationale for a shift in the tone of her later comic exchanges with him. After the gulling scenes, Beatrice appears to forsake the piercing wit she used in their earlier caustic skirmishes and move toward a playful, less pointed style of delivery:

Benedick: Sweet Beatrice, wouldst thou come
when I called thee?
Beatrice: Yea, signior, and depart when you
bid me.
Benedick: O, stay but till then!
Beatrice: 'Then' is spoken; fare you well now.

[V. ii. 41-45]

At this point in the play, Beatrice has not said a word since her violent call for revenge against Claudio and her equally vehement condemnation of Benedick's reluctance to undertake it. Following Benedick's resolution to make the challenge which secures their engagement, Beatrice speaks no more "poniards" to stab and wound her lover; instead, she adopts a teasing, deferential attitude formerly reserved for Leonato and the Prince. Although Beatrice might appear to converse mildly in this exchange, as Benedick wishes, her affected courtesy merely masks her subversive but literally obedient manipulation of her future husband's language. Such subversion is one of the few forms of verbal power left open to the woman who forgoes wielding pointed wit.
Upon Beatrice's retirement from the fray, as Ray L. Heffner, Jr. has observed [in "Clues in Much Ado About Nothing," in Teaching Shakespeare, edited by Walter Edens et al., 1977], the role of Messina's female fencer passes to Margaret, who "steps into [Beatrice's] shoes as witty commentator" on the follies of lovers. The transfer of this office occurs on the morning of the wedding, when Hero's gentlewoman baits Beatrice for her unconvincing attempt to pass off her lovesickness as a head cold:

Beatrice: I am stuffed, cousin, I cannot smell.
Margaret: A maid, and stuffed! There's goodly catching of cold.
Beatrice: O, God help me, God help me, how long have you professed apprehension?
Margaret: Ever since you left it. Doth not my wit become me rarely?

[III. iv. 59-65]

Now that Beatrice has abandoned her barbed humor, Margaret takes it up and turns it against her, employing a jest very similar to the one Beatrice breaks upon Benedick in Act 1, when she refers to him as "no less than a stuffed man" (I. i. 53). Margaret also flaunts the quickness of her newfound wit near the end of Act III, scene iv by launching a long, breathless burst of wordplay against Beatrice, who asks, "What pace is this that thy tongue keeps?" "Not a false gallop," answers Margaret (III. iv. 87-88). This riding metaphor recalls Benedick's ironic admiration of the swiftness of Beatrice's wit during their first hostile encounter: "I would my horse had the speed of your tongue, and so good a continuer" (I. i. 130-131).

Benedick reenacts his initial duel of wits with Beatrice later in the play against a new opponent when he and Margaret square off in the opening segment of Act V scene ii:

Benedick: Thy wit is quick as the greyhound's mouth, it catches.
Margaret: And yours as blunt as the fencer's foils, which hit, but hurt not.
Benedick: A most manly wit, Margaret, it will not hurt a woman.

[V. ii. 11-16]

John Wain claimed [in "The Shakespearean lie-detector: Thoughts on 'Much Ado About Nothing,'" Critical Quarterly 9, 1967] that "this scene is entirely without function except in so far as Benedick asks her to go and fetch Beatrice and she agrees to do so," but in this assertion he failed to perceive that when Margaret assumes the role of quick-tongued adversary she becomes "an explicit surrogate for Beatrice" in the exercise of penetrating wit. This substitution serves its ultimate purpose in the final scene, when Leonato takes Margaret to task for her participation in the plot to defame Hero. Whether she knew of the conspiracy or not, Margaret is still guilty of exceeding the boundaries of acceptable female intercourse by speaking with Borachio at night at Hero's chamber window. Interestingly enough, the woman who is charged with one kind of speech infraction has also committed another; like Beatrice, she has appropriated masculine wit to puncture the pride of men. Beatrice is never overtly faulted for this offense, but her surrogate undergoes a public chastisement for violating the proprieties of feminine discourse. Margaret silently and quickly fades from view, and the verbally transgressive woman as a type is effectually chastened.

Even though the "shrewishness" has already been purged from Beatrice's discourse, she must undergo a final verbal subjugation before she can become the ideal nuptial partner for the protagonist. Benedick subdues her once and for all when their love sonnets to each other are produced, thereby "proving" their reciprocal attachment:
Benedick: A miracle! Here's our own hands against our hearts. Come, I will have thee, but by this light I take thee for pity.

Beatrice: I would not deny you, but by this good day I yield upon great persuasion, and partly to save your life, for I was told you were in a consumption.

Benedick: Peace! I will stop your mouth.

[V. iv. 91-97]

The staging of this climactic moment raises an interpretive issue with implications for the significance of the sequence in performance. Both editors and directors commonly call for Benedick to kiss Beatrice after speaking the final line of the passage, but Edward Berry [in Shakespeare's Comic Rites, 1984] has drawn attention to a textual crux that allows an alternative to the traditional blocking of the exchange. Pointing out that both the Quarto and Folio assign the speech, "Peace, I will stop your mouth," to Leonato, not Benedick, Berry asserted that Leonato should step in and initiate the kiss that brings the two lovers together, just as another third party, Beatrice, gives directions for Hero and Claudio's kiss at their betrothal: "Speak, cousin, or, if you cannot, stop his mouth with a kiss and let not him speak neither" (II. i. 292-293). Berry also argued that since Beatrice has already finished speaking, the "mouth" referred to must be Benedick's, but the fact that Beatrice has completed a sentence does not exclude the possibility that she is about to begin a new one when her uncle interrupts her and gestures for Benedick to silence her with a kiss. Leonato's intervention endows Benedick with the patriarchal power to manage his wife's tongue, and the act of accepting this control makes him into a husband. Immediately, Don Pedro asks, "How dost thou, 'Benedick, the married man'?” (IV. ii. 98).

After Benedick kisses her, Beatrice does not speak another word for the remaining twenty-nine lines of the play. The way viewers interpret this silence, if they notice it at all, will depend largely upon the director's staging of the kiss itself and its aftermath. If the lovers melt into a mutual embrace and later, as in Hands's production, they mime a dialogue, spectators will be unlikely to see any major significance in Beatrice's short period of stillness. Such a staging relies, however, on a textual interpretation that privileges the sharp tongue Beatrice wields throughout the first four acts of the play over the muted voice with which she speaks in the fifth. Boose noted the prevalence of such a critical preference when she wrote,

When feminist critiques looked at the marriage structures evoked at the end of comedy, for instance, they tended to focus on the subversively liberating actions that had led up to the conclusion rather than on the hierarchical subordination and the silencing of the comic heroine that often accompany the reimposition of institutions at the end of those same comedies.

An alternative reading might be that Shakespeare clearly gave Beatrice an expressive and compelling voice with which to object to the subservience of the female sex but that in so doing he set up a formidable "straw-woman" whose mouth he stopped in the final scene. When Beatrice, who once advised Hero to contradict even her father's wishes in the choice of a husband, yields willingly to male control, this surrender indicates that masculine domination is "natural," "correct," and "necessary" after all. As Lisa Jardine stated [a Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare, 1983], "Misrule is set to rights by astute sleight-of-hand. Beatrice charmingly capitulates."

What Jardine called "sleight-of-hand" is the method through which the potentially disturbing aspects of Beatrice's surrender coincide with and are therefore masked by the happiness the audience feels at her reconciliation with Benedick. Conversely, Kate's long speech at the end of The Taming of the Shrew places the issue of wifely subservience squarely at the center of attention and forces a director to enter into the ideological conflict over the duties of wives in marriage. The conclusion of Much Ado, however, lacks an
overt enunciation of this question and only partakes in this discourse if a modern director recognizes the symbolic possibilities of requisite stage actions, such as the kissing of Beatrice, and chooses to use them to foreground the controversy over verbal license in married women. Such a staging would highlight one of the most immediately relevant aspects of the comedy for contemporary spectators.

The Quarto and Folio provide the basis for one such approach to the question of wives and silence in the performance of Much Ado through the possibilities they present for the treatment of Leonato's spouse. According to both texts, two figures in the play's first entrance are "Leonato Governor of Messina" and "Innogen his wife" (I. i. s.d.). The phrase "his wife" then recurs in the list of entering characters for Act II, scene i, but in neither of these scenes, nor anywhere else in the play, does Innogen speak. The first editor to omit her entirely from the play, Theobald, in 1733, gave the following rationalization [quoted in Much Ado About Nothing, New Variorum Edition, edited by Horace Howard Furness, 5th ed., 1899]:

I have ventured to expunge [this name]; there being no mention of her through the play, no one speech addressed to her, nor one syllable spoken to her. Neither is there any one passage, from which we have any reason to determine that Hero's mother was living. It seems as if the poet had in his first plan designed such a character; which, on a survey of it, he found would be superfluous, and therefore he left it out.

Succeeding editors generally have followed Theobald's reasoning in deleting Innogen from the cast of characters, but the claim that there is "no mention of her through the play" is inaccurate, for there is a reference to her in the play's first scene:

Don Pedro: [Looking at Hero] I think this is your daughter.
Leonato: Her mother hath many times told me so.
Benedick: Were you in doubt, sir, that you asked her?
Leonato: Signior Benedick, no, for then you were a child.
Don Pedro: You have it full, Benedick; we may guess by this what you are, being a man.
Truly the lady fathers herself.
[I. i. 95-102]

Don Pedro's comment that Hero "fathers herself compliments both Leonato and his wife, for, as Claire McEachern has noted [in "Fathering Herself: A Source Study of Shakespeare's Feminism," Shakespeare Quarterly 39, 1988], "Hero's physical resemblance to her father guarantees her mother's fidelity, and with it, her father's honor." Innogen appears as the embodiment of wifely chastity, a quality made all the more apparent by Benedick's comically failed attempt to raise humor in the questioning of it.

This passage also provides a rejoinder to another argument often put forward by scholars in favor of omitting Innogen. Furness, the editor of the Variorum Edition, asked, "But how was the audience to know that she was 'the mother of Hero' or her aunt, or her grandmother, if she neither spoke one word herself nor a single remark was made to her by others?" This question assumes that the meaning of the play is transmitted to an audience wholly in verbal terms, but it is quite easy on stage to indicate a figure's relationship to other characters by visual means alone. For example, as Leonato speaks the line, "Her mother hath many times told me so," he may turn toward Innogen and smile at her. If she then meets his eyes, smiles, and nods in agreement, the audience will have no trouble identifying her as the mother of Hero, despite the fact that the line is not
directed to her.

The final justification for the deletion of Innogen stems from the assumption that she was originally conceived as a speaking character, but that, in the words of the New Cambridge editor [F. H. Mares, 1988], "Shakespeare found no use for her as the play developed with his writing. A mother might have mitigated the pathos of the rejected Hero in 4.1, and must surely have had something to say in her daughter's defence." In its pursuit of Shakespeare's original intent, this line of reasoning fails to consider the possibility that a modern director may utilize Innogen as a perpetually mute character, silent even at a time when any "normal" mother, as seen from a twentieth-century perspective, would certainly have voiced strong objections. If Innogen does hold her tongue and conspicuously supports Leonato when he turns against his daughter in the church scene, she will then have shown herself to possess all the characteristics of the virtuous Elizabethan wife: chastity, obedience, and silence.

Brought up by such a mother, it would not be surprising that Hero also should defer obediently to men in all aspects of conversation. In fact, Hero is unable to refute convincingly Claudio's impeachment of her virginity in the church scene precisely because she allows the Count to limit her verbal power to defend herself. He first calls upon Leonato, by "that fatherly and kindly power" that he has over his daughter (IV. i. 74), to enjoin Hero to answer truthfully a question that Claudio will put to her. Hero submits to this paternal command, but she cannot exonerate herself through the circumscribed speech that Claudio's inquiry reduces her to employing, since any answer will prove her guilt:

Claudio: What man was he talk'd with you yesternight,
Out at your window betwixt twelve and one?
Now if you are a maid, answer to this.
Hero: I talked with no man at that hour, my lord.
Don Pedro: Why, then are you no maiden.

[IV. i. 83-87]

In order to prove her maidenhood, Hero must name the man with whom she allegedly spoke, but to do so would in itself constitute an admission of immorality. Moreover, when she denies having conversed with any man at all, the Prince seizes this "falsehood" as evidence that Hero is "no maiden."

Don Pedro's connection of "untruthfulness" to unchastity suggests an association between women's verbal license and sexual promiscuity. As Peter Stallybrass has pointed out [in "Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed," in Rewriting the Renaissance, edited by Margaret W. Ferguson et al., 1986], the writers of Renaissance conduct books for women commonly equated "the closed mouth" with "the enclosed body" and condemned the open mouth as a sign of wantonness. For example, R. Toste wrote in a marginal gloss to his translation of Benedetto Varchi's The Blazon of Jealousie:

Maides must be seene, not heard, or selde or never,
O may I such one wed, If I wed ever.
A Maide that hath a lewd Tongue in her head,
Worse than if she were found with a Man in bed.

In Much Ado, the actual crime which Don Pedro claims that he, his brother, and Claudio witnessed Hero commit was that she did "Talk with a ruffian at her chamber-window" (IV. i. 91), the same offense for which Margaret is later publicly chastised. As for Beatrice, her freedom of discourse can be condoned, even enjoyed,
while she is single; as the Prince tells her, "Your silence most offends me, and to be merry best becomes you" (II. i. 312). But Don Pedro may take pleasure in Beatrice's "merry" wit only because he has never felt its sting. Benedick, who has, takes care to stop her mouth at the moment of her marriage, and her speech conforms to the guidelines of wifely modesty for the short duration of the play.

Innogen typifies the woman on the other side of the matrimonial altar from Hero and Beatrice: the chaste, obedient, verbally deferential wife, which both young women become once harmony has been fully established. In order to communicate this idea more forcefully in performance, the focal point of the closing moments of Much Ado can be shifted away from the traditional spotlight on Beatrice and Benedick or slow fade on Don Pedro alone and unmarried to a focus on the situation of the wives of Messina, including Innogen. Her presence at the marriage of her daughter in Act V, scene iv can make a significant contribution to an emphasis on the enforced subservience of wives in the play's final scene.

After Benedick silences Beatrice, he calls for a dance, the stage action which represents the wedded state. This dance may be choreographed so that the men and women are divided into two parallel lines, with the partners facing each other across a short distance. This arrangement not only pairs off the couples about to be married but also preserves the bonds among the males and the females, which the play suggests are as important, if not more important, than the ties across sexual lines which the characters are preparing to celebrate. The dance concluded, all of the men and single women may rush to congratulate Benedick and Claudio, leading them offstage to the chapel with much commotion. On the opposite side of the platform, Innogen may come forward to embrace both Hero and Beatrice, and the three of them may keep the stage, watching silently as their husbands make their exit. Through this staging, a director may exploit the power of tableau to associate Beatrice and Hero with the play's paragon of wifely virtues and thus to imply their own acceptance of the subservient role she represents.

Although the majority of spectators may interpret this staging in a similar manner, there may be less agreement in their emotional reactions to it. While some viewers may find nothing objectionable in the idea that Beatrice will become Benedick's submissive wife, others may be disturbed by this suggestion and complain about being deprived of the unproblematic happy ending they may feel is essential to comedy. This second reaction is precisely the effect a production that seeks to examine the question of wives and silence might strive to provoke. Granted that Beatrice and Benedick seem perfectly matched and destined for an affectionate marriage, in order to achieve it, Beatrice suppresses, at least temporarily, the indomitable spirit and verbal mastery which modern audiences have found her most attractive and distinctive attributes. This suppression, if clearly expressed, introduces a sense of loss which can balance in performance the audience's pleasure in witnessing her joyous union with Benedick. If spectators find an equal emphasis on Beatrice's capitulation to the male hierarchy troubling, the alienation produced by this unexpected focus can give them the detachment to perceive that such submission is not necessarily "correct" and "natural" after all.

Modern directors who object to the subordination and silencing of the comic heroine at the end of a Shakespearean play may deal with this circumstance in either of two ways. On the one hand, they may cut critical passages and use elements of stagecraft to contradict whatever evidence of the heroine's subjugation occurs in the dialogue. This strategy effectively avoids the theatrical reproduction of the sexist values underlying her enforced submission, but it also sacrifices an awareness of the social forces which prescribe her ultimate surrender. The other option, which is to foreground and problematize the notion of wifely subservience, both reveals the ideological conditions which constrain the behavior of female characters and draws upon the dramatic tension these limitations create. Admittedly, such an approach may not elicit the emotional satisfaction which traditional conclusions to comedies like Much Ado have routinely produced, but it does offer the pleasure of a fuller understanding of the play's internal ideological conflict.

Gender Issues

James Smith

[In the following excerpt, Smith discusses the characterization of relationships between the citizens of Messina.]

It will be remembered that Coleridge chose Much Ado as an illustration of his famous 'fourth distinguishing characteristic' of Shakespeare, in accordance with which 'the interest in the plot' in the latter's plays 'is always in fact on account of the characters, not vice—versa … the plot is a mere canvass and no more'. And he went on to exemplify: 'Take away from Much Ado … all that which is not indispensable to the plot, either as having little to do with it, or, at best, like Dogberry and his comrades forced into the service, when any other less ingeniously absurd watchmen and night—constables would have answered the mere necessities of the action;—take away Benedick, Beatrice, Dogberry, and the reaction of the former on the character of Hero,—and what remains? 'The implication is nothing, or almost nothing; so that the play as a whole has no purpose—that it has no unity and, failing to show even a thwarted striving towards unity, is most conveniently for the critic resolved into its elements.

As Coleridge's sharp distinction between plot and character would now no longer be accepted, it becomes at least possible that his judgment on Much Ado should be modified—perhaps, indeed, reversed. Antecedently, this would seem probable; for whatever they have said or written, post—Coleridgeans have not, perhaps, ceased to enjoy the play as a whole: at least they have not been reduced to reading it as some of Dickens's novels are read, with a methodical skipping of scenes or chapters. Are they not to be held more justified in sheer practice than in their theory? The best way to attack this problem is perhaps to consider one by one the elements which Coleridge claims to have isolated from the plot and from each other, asking whether in fact they can be so isolated: whether they or the plot do not succumb to the operation or, if they survive it, whether they are not maimed thereby.

And first of Dogberry: though with regard to him, it is indeed difficult to maintain the detachment desirable in an analysis. Let us begin however by noting that, though he and his fellows are at times styled malaprops, the term is not altogether happy. Mrs. Malaprop is not a character who, on a second reading of The Rivals, gives any great if indeed any pleasure; for her pride in 'the derangement of epitaphs' is a foolish pride that the reader, for discretion's sake, prefers to ignore, Mrs. Quickly of The Merry Wives, with her 'alligant' and 'alicholy', has perhaps something of the same pride—though having other things too, she does not prove quite so embarrassing on continued acquaintance; and in any case, rather than painfully aping, she is probably lazily echoing her superiors. As for the Mrs. Quickly of the historical plays, she is another person: with her 'Arthur's bosom', she gives expression, as best she may, not to a selfish foolishness but to a charitable concern for souls—at least, for one soul; arriving in a moment of illumination, or perhaps at the end of a train of thought, at a striking conclusion about the state of the blessed.

Dogberry and his fellows, of from time to time the victims of syllables like Mrs. Malaprop, are more frequently and more significantly, like the second Mrs. Quickly, the victims of ideas. When Verges speaks of 'suffering salvation body and soul', and Dogberry of being 'condemned into everlasting redemption', it is impossible they are being deceived merely by similitude of sounds. Rather, they are being confounded by ideas with which, though unfitted to do so, they feel it incumbent upon themselves to cope. Such utterances are of a piece with Dogberry's method of counting; with his preposterous examination of Conrad and Borachio, in which condemnation precedes questioning; with his farewell of Leonato, to whom, in an endeavour to conserve both their dignities, he 'humbly gives leave to depart'; with his desire 'to be written down an ass', in which the same sense of his own dignity is in conflict with, among other things, a sense that it needs vindication. It is not Mrs. Malaprop, but rather Bottom, who comes to mind here: Bottom who, like Dogberry, is torn between conflicting impulses—whether those of producing his interlude in as splendid a manner as possible, while at the same time showing as much deference as possible to the ladies; or of
claiming as his own the 'most rare vision' which, as a vision, certainly had been his, while for its rarity it seemed such as could not rightly belong to any man.

In thus addressing themselves to intellectual or moral feats of which they are not capable, Bottom, Mrs. Quickly and Dogberry do of course display a form of pride. Given his attitude towards Verges:

> a good old man, sir, hee will be talking as they say, when the age is in, the wit is out, God helpe us, it is a world to see …

Dogberry's pride needs no stressing. It is however no longer a foolish pride; or if foolish, then not with the folly of Mrs. Malaprop, but rather of all the protagonists of drama, comic or tragic, who measure themselves against tasks which ultimately prove too much for them. Perhaps with justice it is to be classified as a form of hybris, a comic hybris; and if so, then some kind of essential relation between the Dogberry scenes and the tragically inclined scenes of the main plot is immediately suggested.

The suggestion is strengthened, once Dogberry's strength rather than his weakness, his triumphs rather than his failures, are considered. For he has established himself as Constable of Messina, not only to the content of his subordinates, but with the tolerance of his superiors. In this respect he is no longer to be compared with Bottom—who, it is to be feared, would never gain a firm footing, however humble, at the court of Theseus—but with Falstaff, a character of greater importance. Unlike Bottom, Dogberry and his companions have taken fairly accurate measure both of themselves and of those who surround them; so that, if swayed by hybris in a certain degree, they take care that this degree shall fall short of destructive. For example, they are quite dear 'what belongs to a Watch': they will 'sleep rather than talk'; rather than bid a man stand against his will, they will let him go and thank God they are rid of a knave; rather than take a thief, they will 'let him shew himselfe for what he is', and steal out of their company. In short, they will exert themselves, or fight, no longer than they see reason: to adapt Poins's words. Indeed, in this matter they are more consistent than Falstaff, who, in dismissing Prince Henry as 'a Fellow, that never had the Ache in his shoulders', is for once allowing himself to be puffed up by hybris. In his boasts to Shallow, Falstaff betrays not a little of a Bottom—like recklessness:

> Master Robert Shallow, choose what Office thou wilt in the Land, 'tis shine … Boote, boote, Master Shallow, I know the young King is sick for mee …

And discomfiture of course follows. Whereas Dogberry has perfectly accommodated himself to those on whom he depends, making their ideals his own. I is list of qualifications is revealing:

> I am a wise fellow, and which is more, an officer, a householder, and which is more, as pretty a piece of flesh as any in Messina, and one that knowes the Law, goe to, and a rich fellow enough, goe to, and a fellow that hath had losses, and that hath two gownes, and everything handsome about him.

It needs little acquaintance with the Leonato circle to realize that for them too it is a principal concern that everything, as far as possible, shall remain 'handsome about them'.

The few adjectives we have had occasion to apply to Claudio—prim and shallow—suggest this; and so far, we have not studied Claudio with any closeness. Nor as he time yet come to do so; we can however note how everything about his wooing confirms the propriety of adjectives of this kind. His leaving, not only the wooing of Hero, bu the falling in love with her until circumstances are convenient, and

> … warre—thoughts
> Have left their places vacant
his abandoning that love once it appears the Prince contemplates asserting an opposing claim; his preliminary enquiry

Hath Leonato any sonne my Lord?
No childe but Hero, she's his only heir,

and so on: his conduct is of a piece—is conduct, we may add, fitting for a 'Count Comfect', as Beatrice calls him; conduct directed in the first place to the setting up of appearances. Yet it is conduct that, recommending itself to Leonato, earns his emphatic approval. for though he arrogates to himself a merit for forgiving Claudio for an insult which, as yet, everyone assumes to have had fatal consequences, he is careful not to exaggerate this merit. In his eyes, it does not justify him in offering, as a pledge of forgivemement, the hand of a niece whom he has not previously declared to be, not only as beautiful, but as rich as Hero. Indeed, she is richer:

… My brother hath a daughter …
And she alone is heir to both of us.

Marrying off the young before they have time to get into mischief, and so ruin appearances—

Wisdom and blood combating in so tender a body, we have ten proofes to one, that blood hath the victory.

taking care to do so however in such a way that fortune shall not be impaired, social position shall be safeguarded; this would seem to be the prime occupation of society in Messina. Obviously, it is an important occupation; but equally obviously, it has no claims to be considered as unique. To fill up the gap, war is allowed of as a diversion for males and, for both the sexes, games and small talk. Thus, though not active about things of great importance nor, it would appear, importantly active about anything, society in Messina manages to keep up the appearance of great activity.

Such a society has the merit of being a society, that is, a more or less stable organization of human beings for common ends; and ex hypothesi, it is charming on the surface. For appearances lie on the surface. Yet for that reason they may be hollow; and there is a danger that faculties, exercised exclusively on appearances, may incapacitate themselves for dealing with, or even for recognizing, substance, when on occasion this presents itself. Something of the kind would seem to have happened to Pedro, Leonato, Claudio and their like; who when faced with the substance of Hero's grief, display an incompetence as great as that of any Dogberry; give rein to a hybris which is, perhaps, greater. For it is inconceivable that any but the most pampered and therefore the most spoilt members of a society should, in circumstances of such distress, show themselves as immune as they do from self—questioning, as free from misgiving. Hybris on this scale is of course tragic; but, it may be suggested, hybris on this scale is also ridiculous—indeed, unless the ridiculous aspect is first acknowledged, the tragic may escape acknowledgment altogether. For human vanity alone constitutes a strong temptation to discount it as preposterous. The figures of Dogberry and his kind are necessary in the background, to reduce the figures in the foreground to the required proportions—to the proportions of apes (as Isabella says, in Measure for Measure), apes for whom no tricks are too ferocious, too fantastic Coleridge's isolation of Dogberry from the main plot is perhaps the effective reason for his dismissal of that plot as a 'mere canvass'; and if so, this of itself suggests that the isolation is not to be justified. But there is the further point: because of the same isolation, Coleridge dismisses Dogberry as 'ingeniously absurd'. Undoubtedly he is: but also, he is relevantly absurd—relevantly absurd to the main plot, and to life such as the main plot renders it. And finally, Dogberry is relevant not only for his absurdity, but for the limitations placed on this absurdity by his persistent if purblind prudence, but the steady if myopic eye which he keeps fixed on appearances—on his office as constable, on his comfort, on the main chance. This immediately establishes his commensurability with the figures of the main plot; who like him take care not to prejudice what is comfort in their eyes.
Having perhaps established this point, we may allow ourselves to go even further than Coleridge in separating Dogberry and the rest from what he called the 'mere necessities of the action'. 'Any other watchmen', he says, 'would have served the latter equally well'; whereas now it would seem clear that, in all probability, they would have served it better. Few if any other watchmen would have taken stock of themselves as frankly as Dogberry; they would not therefore appear guilty of an inconsistency, as Dogberry's assistants seem to be, in arresting the swashbucklers Conrad and Borachio. For they have just declared an intention to attempt no such thing. Or perhaps this inconsistency is due, not to the watchmen, but to the swashbucklers; who indeed, from this point in the play onwards, show a remarkable meekness. But the matter is hardly worth discussing; nor, perhaps, whether the carelessness involved on the author's part is to be described as positive or negative.

Carol Thomas Neely (essay date 1985)


[In this essay, Neely discusses the influence of the concept of marriage on the themes and structure of Much Ado about Nothing, particularly its effect on the social and emotional relations between the sexes.]

Marriage, no one doubts, is the subject and object of Shakespeare's comedies, which ordinarily conclude with weddings celebrated, recelebrated, or consummated. But throughout these plays broken nuptials counterpoint the festive ceremonies, revealing male and female antagonisms and anxieties that impede the movement toward marriage.

Leo Salingar [in his Shakespeare and the Traditions of Comedy, 1974] finds broken nuptials the distinctive feature of a number of Shakespeare's plays that have Italian novelle as sources. I extend the implications of the expression, using it to refer to all of the parodic, unusual, or interrupted ceremonies and premature, postponed, or irregular consummations that occur in nearly every comedy from Love's Labor's Lost's deferred weddings to Measure for Measure's premature consummations. The centrality of the motif is reinforced by the fact that Shakespeare added broken nuptials when they are absent from his sources and altered and enlarged those he found there, imbuing them with more complex and wide-ranging functions and significance than they originally had.

Love's Labor's Lost and A Midsummer Night's Dream lack sources for the plays as a whole, and there are no clear-cut antecedents for the deferred weddings of the one or the Titania-Bottom union of the other. In The Taming of A Shrew, the source/analogue to Shakespeare's play, there is no farcical wedding ceremony, although Ferando, the Petruchio figure, is "basely attired" (scene vii, 1.27) and drags Kate home before the wedding feast. Merchant of Venice's postponed consummation is absent from its primary source, the first tale of the fourth day of Ser Giovanni Fiorentino's Il Pecorone, in which the lover, in order to win the lady, "bestow[s] on her the bliss of holy matrimony" and then enjoys her for several months more after the marriage before the bond expires and he must leave for Venice. The ring precipitates only a minor incident when it is given to Portia's analogue, who returns it quickly to her husband without any emphasis on its symbolic value or reconfirmation of the wedding vows. The mock wedding ceremony in As You Like It's source, Thomas Lodge's Rosalynde, is a one-sentence joke initiated by Aliena and Rosalynde: "and so with a smile and a blush, they made up this jesting match, that after proved to a marriage in earnest." Touchstone and Audrey and their aborted ceremony by Oliver Martext are missing altogether from Lodge's romance.

Where broken nuptials are present in the source, their significance is emphasized and complicated by Shakespeare in his plays. The interrupted ceremony of Much Ado About Nothing, the precipitous marriage of Olivia and Sebastian in Twelfth Night, and the bedtrick consummations of All's Well That Ends Well and Measure for Measure derive from important plot incidents in the sources: Bandello's novella 22, "Timbreo and Fenicia"; the anonymous Gl'Ingannati; the ninth story of the third day of Boccaccio's Decameron; the
fifth of the Eighth Decade of Cinthio's *Hecatommiti*, "The Story of Epitia"; and George Whetstone's *Promos and Cassandra*. Claudio's violent disruption of the wedding ceremony itself is missing in Bandello, where Timbreo merely sends a friend to Fenicia's house before the wedding to announce the breakoff of the match. In *Gl' Ingannati*, the wedding between the Olivia and Sebastian figures is undertaken with comical haste because Isabella, locked in a room with Fabrizio, has received conclusive proof that he is not a woman in disguise: "before he gave her the ring, my young mistress had given him something too!" Although in the sources of *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure* broken marriages and premature consummations are as central as they are in the plays, Bertram's and Helen's single dark consummation is an event blithely repeated numerous times in Boccaccio's tale, while in none of the sources of *Measure* is there a surrogate for the Isabella analogue or a bedtrick. Shakespeare appears to have been drawn to sources that contain broken nuptials; he multiplies instances of the motif, heightens its importance, and complicates its significance.

The existence of the motif has implications for study of the comedies' connections, continuity, and development. The pervasiveness and patterning of the motif may provide a way of looking at them as useful as those provided by C. L. Barber's implicit distinction between festive and other comedies [in *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*, 1963], Sherman Hawkins's division between green-world comedies of extrusion and closed-heart comedies of intrusion [in "The Two Worlds of Shakespearean Comedy," *Shakespeare Studies* 3, 1967], and Salingar's categories of farcical, woodland, and problem comedies. Exploration of the motif will show that the most important impediments to comic fulfillment lie within the couples themselves and not, as Northrop Frye has influentially argued [in "The Argument of Comedy," *English Institute Essays*, 1948, edited by D. A. Robertson, Jr., 1949], within the blocking figures, repressive laws, and humor characters of an anticomical society in need of transformation. *Senex* figures in Shakespearean comedy are marginal, weak, or altogether absent, as in *Love's Labor's Lost* and *Twelfth Night*. The fathers in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *As You Like It* are peripheral to the matchmaking. Attempts by Leonato in *Much Ado* and the King in *All's Well* to arrange marriages go awry. Even Portia's father's will, which Frye takes as an example of a repressive law, actually preserves her from unwelcome suitors and selects the desired one. The fathers who deny their daughter's wishes and try to control their matches—Egeus in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Baptista in *Taming*, and Page in *Merry Wives*—are easily thwarted and ultimately compliant. Shylock, the play's most clear-cut and ruthless *senex* figure, is powerless to prevent Jessica's elopement and is only an indirect impediment to the marriage of Portia and Bassanio.

Humor characters are more numerous and more important than *senex* figures. They rarely hinder matches but sometimes reflect in exaggerated form the rigidities, anxieties, and defenses of the lovers themselves. Armado is even more absorbed in his own wit than the lords are in theirs; Malvolio's "love" for Olivia is more fantastical than Orsino's. But often the humor or subplot characters not only parody their betters' affectations but abandon them sooner. Armado gets Jaquenetta pregnant while the lords are still writing sonnets. Bottom acquiesces in his enchantment by Titania more easily than the lovers do in theirs. Gratiano expresses the sexual aspect of marriage more vigorously than Bassanio does, and Parolles's letter to Diana forthrightly exposes both Bertram's intentions and his own. The couples in the plays must overcome their own anxieties, not the blocking mechanisms of a restrictive society. But their inner anxieties of course reflect society's formulaic and constricting attitudes toward male and female roles, sexuality, and the structure and function of marriage.

The broken nuptials express these anxieties and are one means of achieving the release of emotion moving toward clarification which C. L. Barber has explored in the festive comedies. I shall argue, extending Barber's insights, that release of emotion is necessary in all of the comedies, as is some transformation of released emotion, although not precisely the sort that Barber finds characteristic of the late romances. Within the continuity of the comedies which the motif manifests, overall development is likewise apparent. In earlier comedies, irregular nuptials identify and release conflicts, engendering their resolution. In later comedies in which conflicts are severe and anxieties deeply rooted, nuptials are more severely disrupted and resolutions increasingly strained.
In Shakespearean comedy, if wooing is to lead to a wedding ceremony and consummation of the marriage, separation from family and friends must occur, misogyny must be exorcised, romantic idealizing affection must be experienced and qualified, and sexual desire must be acknowledged and controlled. Only then can romance and desire be reconciled in a formal social ceremony. Resistance to marriage is variously manifested and mitigated and is different for men and women. Women often bear a double burden. Once released from their own fears, usually through the actions of other women, they must dispel men's resistance and transform men's emotions. I will focus on the central instance of broken nuptials in *Much Ado About Nothing*, showing how this thematically pivotal comedy extends earlier uses of the motif and anticipates its darker configurations in the problem comedies and contemporaneous tragedies.

*Much Ado About Nothing* contains the most clear-cut example of broken nuptials—Claudio's interruption of his wedding ceremony to accuse Hero of infidelity. Poised at the center of the comedies, the play looks both backward and forward. Its tensions and its poise are achieved by the interactions of its two plots, its two couples. None of the other comedies includes two such sharply contrasted, subtly interrelated, and equally important couples. While, despite some uneasiness about the issue, critics are generally in agreement that the Claudio/Hero story is the main plot and the Beatrice/Benedick story the subplot, they also concur that the subplot couple is rhetorically richer, dramatically more interesting, and psychologically more complex than the mainplot couple. Discrepancies in the sources, the tone, and the nature of the two plots have generated charges of disunity that have been countered by claims that the two are unified by one or another theme: giddiness, moral complacency, the deceptiveness of appearances. Varied, hesitant, or inadequate attempts to categorize the play, focusing usually on one plot or the other, also suggest that the relationship between the two plots has not been fully understood and confirm and illuminate *Much Ado's* affinities with both festive and problem comedies.

C. L. Barber implies at a number of points in *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* that *Much Ado* is like a festive comedy with a holiday world in which Beatrice and Benedick experience festive release; but the absence of an extended discussion suggests that it does not fit easily into his category. Sherman Hawkins, likewise emphasizing Beatrice and Benedick, includes the play with *Comedy of Errors, Taming of the Shrew,* and *Twelfth Night* as a closed-heart comedy based on "sexual antagonism" in which men and women must overcome internal obstacles to love; but his description fails to account for the Hero/Claudio plot. Northrop Frye, when attending to Beatrice and Benedick, likewise identifies the play as a humor comedy (like *Love's Labor's Lost* and *Taming*) in which the witty couple and Claudio must discard the humors that are impediments to love. But elsewhere Frye [in *An Natural Perspective*, 1965], focusing on Hero's death and rebirth, groups the play with *All's Well* as an extension of the ritualistic "green-world" comedies—*Two Gentlemen of Verona, Midsummer Night's Dream, As You Like It, Merry Wives of Windsor.* Other critics who emphasize the Hero/Claudio plot have also noted *Much Ado's* connections with later plays. R. G. Hunter, in *Shakespeare and the Comedy of Forgiveness* [1965], by stressing Claudio's error, contrition, and our forgiveness of him, is led to place the play at the beginning of a line stretching through *All's Well to Cymbeline* and *The Tempest;* but this forgiveness is only peripheral in *Much Ado.* Leo Salingar ... places *Much Ado* in his category of problem comedies along with *Merchant of Venice, All's Well and Measure for Measure;* although *Much Ado* manifestly includes broken nuptials, the distinguishing mark of the category, the other characteristic features—the complex of the judge and the nun, the trial scene, and the conflict between justice and mercy—are attenuated or altogether absent, and the Beatrice/Benedick story does not fit the pattern. A. P. Rossiter, focusing on the themes and tone of the play rather than its plots [in *Angel with Horns*, 1961], explores most fully and persuasively *Much Ado* as an immediate precursor of the group that he designates "problem plays" or "tragi-comedies"—*Henry IV, Part II, Troilus and Cressida, All's Hell, Hamlet, Measure for Measure,* and *Othello.* He finds *Much Ado* balanced neatly on a tonal frontier between comedy and tragicomedy just before the "point at which a sense of humour fails" and is replaced by "cynicism"—"where the attitudes I called 'hardness' (self-defensive) and 'farce' (offensive, debunking) combine to 'place' love, honour, truth, only to devalue them."
As these various explorations suggest, *Much Ado About Nothing* combines elements from almost all of the other comedies in a unique mixture. It is linked with both the romantic comedies and the problem comedies by virtue of the interactions of its two couples, its two plots. In the Claudio/Hero plot, the anxieties and risks underlying the conventions of romantic love are expressed and contained by the broken nuptials, Hero's vilification and mock death, and Claudio's penitence and acceptance of a substitute bride, motifs that are developed further in *All's Well, Measure for Measure*, and the late romances. In the Beatrice/Benedick plot, the mutual mockery, double gulling, and Benedick's acceptance of Beatrice's command to "Kill Claudio" function, as do the mockery, trickery, parody, and tamings of the festive comedies, to break down resistance and to release desire and affection. The Beatrice/Benedick plot protects the Hero/Claudio plot by ventilating and displacing it and by transforming its romance elements. In turn, the impasse of the Hero/Claudio plot generates movement in the Beatrice/Benedick plot and, by permitting the witty couple the expression of romantic affection, initiates the transformation of their "merry wars" into a witty truce. Together the two plots release and control elements that will generate greater uneasiness and distrust in the problem comedies. Together they maintain an equilibrium between male control and female initiative, between male reform and female submission, which is characteristic of the romantic comedies but is disrupted in the problem comedies. In this play, wit clarifies the vulnerability of romantic idealization while romance alters the static, self-defensive gestures of wit.

The two plots are played out against a backdrop of patriarchal authority, which is protected by the extensive bawdy, especially the cuckoldry jokes, and contained by the ineffectuality of the men's exercise of power, especially when exaggerated in the Dogberry subplot. The play's lighthearted, witty bawdy expresses and mutes sexual anxieties; it turns them into a communal joke and provides comic release and relief in specific ways. It manifests sexuality as the central component of marriage and emphasizes male power and female weakness. Its clever, inventive innuendo emphasizes the anatomical "fit" between the sexes: "Give us our swords; we have bucklers of our own" (V.ii.19).

The bawdy persistently views sex as a male assault on women. Men "board" (II.i.138) women, "put in the pikes" (V.ii.20), and women cheerfully resign themselves to being "made heavier ... by the weight of a man," and "stuff'd" (III.iv.26, 62-63). The women counterattack by mocking the virility that threatens them: the "blunt foils" (V.ii.14), "short horns" (II.i.22), and "fine little" wit (V.i.161) of the men. They do not, however, see their own sexuality as a weapon. They joke about female "lightness" (III.iv.36, 43, 45) to warn each other against it, not to threaten men; even the term itself identifies women with weakness rather than strength.

But women's proverbial "lightness" is also a source of power. Women fear submission to men's aggressive sexual power. Men, likewise perceiving sexuality as power over women, fear its loss through female betrayal. They defend themselves against betrayal in three ways: they deny its possibility through idealization, anticipate it through misogyny, or transform it, through the motif of cuckoldry, into an emblem of male virility. As Coppélia Kahn shows [in *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare*, 1981], cuckoldry is associated with virility through the horn, which symbolizes both. The reiterated motif "In time the savage bull doth bear the yoke" (I.i.254) emphasizes the bull's potency as well as his submission to dull domestic life and inevitable cuckoldry. Similarly, to be "horn-mad" (I.i.262) is to be both furious with jealousy and sexually voracious; both halves of the pun imply aggressiveness. The defensive function of these jokes is especially apparent in the extended one that precedes the couples' pledge to marry. In it the scorn due the cuckold is ingeniously swallowed up in the acclaim awarded the cuckolder for his "noble feat" by which he attains power over both the woman and the husband:

> **Claudio.** Tush, fear not, man! We'll tip thy horns with gold,
> And all Europa shall rejoice at thee,
> As once Europa did at lusty Jove
> When he would play the noble beast in love.
All rejoice with the woman. The cuckold is crowned, the cuckolder is noble, and even the illegitimate calf will be proud of, if intimidated by, his father's virility—and may even inherit it.

_Benedick._ Bull Jove, sir, had an amiable low.
And some such strange bull leaped your
father's cow
And got a calf in that same noble feat
Much like to you, for you have just his bleat.

Here Benedick implies that Claudio, like his putative father, may become a cuckolder, and Claudio subsequently jokes that Benedick, too, may be a "double-dealer" (V.iv.114). Cuckoldry has thus been deftly dissociated from female power and infidelity and identified instead with masculine virility and solidarity, which are emphatically reasserted on the eve of the weddings.

Marriage and cuckoldry, both potentially threatening to male bonds and power, have become assurances of them. But male authority in the play remains lame and diffused. Leonato is a weak father; Claudio, a passive protagonist; Don John, a conventional villain. Don Pedro is potentially the most powerful man in the play by virtue of his age, rank, and multiple connections with the others. But this potential remains subdued. He phases himself out of the plots he initiates, is moved from the center of the action to the periphery, and is curtailed as a rival suitor. His illusory competition with Claudio for Hero is abruptly dropped, and what could become a courtship of Beatrice—"Will you have me, lady," (II.i.314)—when politely dismissed by her as a joke, is immediately abandoned in favor of the project of uniting her with Benedick. The men's rivalry evaporates, and their violence is defused. First Leonato's and Antonio's attempts to avenge Hero are comically presented, and then Benedick's challenge is laughed off.

Male power in the play also remains benign because it is blunted by its ineffectuality and rendered comic by Dogberry's parody of it. Most of the men's schemes—Pedro's to woo Hero, the Friar's to reform Claudio, Don John's and Leonato's to get revenge, Benedick's to kill Claudio, the Watch's first to "offend no man" (III.iii.80) and later to bring wrongdoers to justice—are botched, backfire, or fall apart. But though none of the schemes works as it is supposed to, they all achieve their goals. Dogberry's bungling attempts to arrest Borachio and Conrade on some charge or other mirror and parody the inept strategy and good luck of the other men. Whereas at the end of the church scene Beatrice and Benedick transcend melodrama and create witty romance, in the following scene (IV.i) Dogberry transforms melodrama downward into farce, parodying the perversions inside the church. The arraignment precedes any examination of the evidence, malefactors and benefactors are confused with each other, and judges as well as accused have charges brought against them. When, at the end of the scene, Dogberry defends himself, he becomes a comic spokesperson for his betters. He endearingly articulates the men's testy response to insults real or imagined, their reliance on conventions—of dress, rank, wit, institutions—to protect and confirm their self-importance, and the potential for assininity that goes along with their desires for swaggering and safety:

_I am a wise fellow; and which is more, an officer; and which is more, a householder; and which is more, as pretty a piece of flesh as any is in Messina, and one that knows the law, go to! And a rich fellow enough, go to! And a fellow that hath had losses; and one that hath two gowns and everything handsome about him._

[IV.ii.80-86]
The play's presentation of male power is further symbolized by the sheerly linguistic invention, "the Prince's officer Coxcomb" (IV.ii.72), whose denomination suggests deference and pride, elegant arrogance and assinine folly, but also embodies comfortable security. Such security is threatened by those outsiders who wish to usurp legitimate authority and who are perhaps symbolized by Coxcomb's antithesis, the "thief Deformed": "'a has been a vile thief this seven year; 'a goes up and down like a gentleman" (III.iii.125-27). Yet in spite of the men's rivalry, ineffectuality, and silliness, all of the play's plot-generating deceits and revelations are controlled by them, and it is they who fit women with husbands. Their authority and solidarity are confirmed in the play's conclusion, which reconciles male power and alliances with marriage.

But first conflicts disrupt both the male bonds and the two couples. The Claudio/Hero alliance is thinly sketched as a conventional one in which the functions of romantic idealization are made clear. Claudio protects himself from Hero's sexuality by viewing her as a remote, idealized love object who is not to be touched or even talked to: "she is the sweetest lady that ever I looked on" (I.i.183). Patriarchal marriage customs conveniently coalesce with romantic rhetoric, enabling him to maintain Hero as an object of social exchange and possession: "Lady, as you are mine, I am yours," he cautiously vows (II.i.296). He lets Don Pedro do his wooing for him. He scarcely acknowledges Hero's sexual attractiveness, and his only reference to his own desires seems oddly passive and gynocentric in a play crammed with aggressively phallic innuendo: "But now I am returned and that war-thoughts / Have left their places vacant, in their rooms / Came thronging soft and delicate desires, / All prompting me how fair young Hero is" (I.i.294-97). Claudio thus alleviates his anxieties about marriage by viewing it both as a romantic ideal and as a conventional social arrangement that will occupy the time between battles. Once married, he intends to go off to Aragon immediately with Don Pedro, their companionship uninterrupted (III.ii.3).

Hero's willingness to be the passive object of her father's negotiations, Don Pedro's decorous wooing, and Claudio's low-keyed proposal provide her with a parallel defense against sexuality. She is as unforthcoming as Claudio at their first exchange, and perhaps she welcomes his silence, for she asks Don Pedro as he begins his wooing to "say nothing" (II.i.83). Her own uneasiness about sex is suggested in her unhappiness on her wedding day, and the one bawdy innuendo that she contributes to the banter, "There, thou prickest her with a thistle" (III.iv.74) is as tentative as Claudius's allusion. Hero is the perfect object of his "delicate" desires: modest, chaste, virtuous, silent.

The witty verbal skirmishes comprising Beatrice's and Benedick's "merry wars" explicitly express the anxieties about loss of power through sexuality, love, and marriage that lie beneath Claudio's and Hero's silent romanticism. Their verbal wars fill up the silence of the Hero/Claudio plot and reveal the fundamental asymmetry of the battle of the sexes. Benedick expressly equates loving with humiliation and loss of potency; he imagines it as a castrating torture: "Prove that ever I lose more blood with love than I will get again with drinking, pick out mine eyes with a ballad maker's pen and hang me up at the door of the brothel house for the sign of blind Cupid" (I.i.243-47). He likewise fears being separated from his friends by marriage and loss of status with them if he must "sigh away Sundays" or, feminized, "turn spit" like Hercules (I.i.196; II.i.244). He defends himself against a fall into love and marriage and against fears of female betrayal by distrust of women—"I will do myself the right to trust none" (I.i.237). Distrust, coupled with the claim that all women dote on him, allows him to profess virility without putting it to the proof. Mocking Claudio's romantic idealization, he is similarly protected by misogyny; the parallel function of the two poses is evident in Benedick's admission that, could he find an ideal woman, he would abandon the pose: "But till all graces be in one woman, one woman shall not come into my grace" (II.i.27-29). As he continues his description of the ideal woman, it is clear that she, like Claudio's Hero, meets the conventional prescriptions for a suitably accomplished and submissive wife: "Rich she shall be, that's certain; wise, or I'll none; virtuous, or I'll never cheapen her; fair, or I'll never look on her; mild, or come not near me; noble, or not I for an angel; of good discourse, an excellent musician" (II.iii.29-33). Benedick's misogyny puts him in a position of unchallengeable power; his wit is consistently belligerent, protective, and self-aggrandizing. But his bawdy incorporates, as romantic rhetoric does not, the aggressiveness and urgency of desire even while defending
against it.

Instead of defensively asserting power and certainty, Beatrice's sallies often directly reveal weakness and ambivalence; her wit, in contrast to Benedick's, is consistently self-deprecating. Her mockery of marriage and men poignantly reveals her desire for both. The fear of and desire for women's roles that generate her merry mask are suggested in her description of her birth and her mother's response to it—"No, sure, my lord, my mother cried; but then there was a star danced, and under that was I born" (II.i.322-23)—and in Leonato's similarly paradoxical description of her—"She hath often dreamt of unhappiness and waked herself with laughing" (II.i.333). Her repartee, like that of the others, embodies anxiety about being unmarried, as it does about being married: "So, by being too curst, God will send you no horns" (II.i.23). She does not mock Hero's marriage plans as Benedick does Claudio's but only urges her to marry a man who pleases her. Hero's engagement does not engender smug self-satisfaction in her but a sense of isolation: "Thus goes everyone in the world but I, and I am sunburnt. I may sit in a corner and cry 'Heigh-ho for a husband!'" (II.i.306-08). Even her allusion to "living as merry as the day is long" in heaven "where the bachelors sit" shows her desire to continue to share equally in easy male camaraderie rather than a desire to remain single (II.i.45-47).

Beatrice's ambivalence about marriage is rooted in her fear of the social and sexual power it grants to men. Her bawdy jests manifest both her desire for Benedick and her fear of the potential control over her which her desire gives him. In the first scene it is she who quickly shifts the play's focus from Claudio's deeds of war to Benedick's deeds of love. She refers to him as "Signior Mountanto," suggestively initiates dialogue by asking, "Is it possible Disdain should die while she hath such food to feed it as Senior Benedick?" (I.i.29, 117), and from behind the safety of her mask admits to Benedick (of him)—"I would he had boarded me" (II.i.137). But her jesting about the unsuitability of husbands with beards and those without them both mocks Benedick's beard and reveals her ambivalent attitude toward virility: "He that hath a beard is more than a youth, and he that hath no beard is less than a man; and he that is more than a youth is not for me, and he that is less than a man, I am not for him" (II.i.34-37). Because she is apprehensive about the social and sexual submission demanded of women in marriage and wary of men’s volatile mixture of earthly frailty with arrogant authority, Beatrice does not want a husband:

Till God make men of some other metal than earth. Would it not grieve a woman to be overmastered with a piece of valiant dust? To make an account of her life to a clod of wayward marl? No, uncle, I'll none. Adam's sons are my brethren, and truly I hold it a sin to match in my kindred.

[II.i.56-61]

Neither hating nor idealizing men, she does not wish to exchange kinship with them for submission to them. Given the play's dominant metaphor of sex as a male assault, the subordination demanded of Renaissance women in marriage, and the valiant cloddishness of many of the men in the comedies, Beatrice's fear of being "overmastered" seems judicious. But her anxieties, like Benedick's, grow out of pride and fear of risk as well as out of justified wariness.

Beatrice and Benedick, both mockers of love, cannot dispel these anxieties or admit to love without intervention. The asymmetrical gullings perpetrated by their friends (the "only love-gods" in this play, II.i.372) resemble the ceremonies mocking men and the attacks on female recalcitrance already examined. These garrulous deceits follow upon and displace Hero and Claudio's silent engagement and confront anxieties there left unspoken. As male and female anxieties are different, the two deceits are contrasting. The men gently mock Benedick's witty misogyny while nurturing his ego. Their gentle ribbing of Benedick's "contemptible spirit" is tempered with much praise of his virtues; he is proper, wise, witty, and valiant "As Hector" (II.iii.180-87). They alleviate his fears about Beatrice's aggressiveness by a lengthy, exaggerated tale of her desperate passion for him: "Then down upon her knees she falls, weeps, sobes, bears her heart, tears her
hair, prays, curses—"O sweet Benedick! God give me patience!" (II.iii.148-50). The story dovetails perfectly with his fantasy that all women dote on him (and presumably it gratifies the other men to picture the disdainful Beatrice in this helpless state). The men also reassure Benedick that Beatrice is sweet and "out of all suspicion, she is virtuous" (160-61). The gulling permits Benedick to love with his friends' approval while remaining complacently self-satisfied. Even these protective assurances of his power win from him only a grudgingly impersonal acknowledgment of his feelings: "Love me? Why, it must be requited" (II.iii.219). This he must justify by relying, like Claudio, on friends' confirmations of the lady's virtue and marriageability, and by viewing marriage not personally but conventionally as a social institution designed to control desire and ensure procreation: "the world must be peopled" (236).

The women's gulling of Beatrice is utterly different in strategy and effect. They make only one unembroidered mention of Benedick's love for her, and even that is interrogative—"But are you sure / That Benedick loves Beatrice so entirely?" (III.i.36-37). They praise his virtues, not Beatrice's. Instead of treating sex with detachment, as the men do with their joke about "'Benedick' and 'Beatrice' between the sheet" (II.iii.139), the women include an explicit, enthusiastic reference to it: "Doth not the gentleman / Deserve as full as fortunate a bed / As ever Beatrice shall couch upon?" (III.i.44-46). Throughout most of the staged scene, they attack at length and with gusto Beatrice's proud wit, deflating rather than bolstering her self-esteem. The men emphasize Beatrice's love whereas the women emphasize her inability to love as a means of exorcising it: "She cannot love, / Nor take no shape nor project of affection, / She is so self-endeared" (54-56). Beatrice, accepting unabashedly the accuracy of these charges—"Contempt, farewell! And maiden pride, adieu!" (109)—is released into an undefensive and personal declaration of love and of passionate submission to Benedick: "Benedick, love on; I will requite thee, / Taming my wild heart to thy loving hand. / If thou dost love, my kindness shall incite thee / To bind our loves up in a holy band" (111-14). She views marriage not as a social inevitability but as a ritual expressing affectionate commitment. Benedick's "love" will be requited with "kindness," not merely with the production of "kind." And, unlike Benedick, she trusts her own sense of his worth more than her friends' praise: "For others say thou dost deserve, and I / Believe it better than reportedly" (115-16).

The effect of the gullings is to engender parallels between the two women and the two men and to emphasize differences between the men and women, manifesting in this way the connections between the two plots. Hero asserts herself for the first time during the gulling of Beatrice. She zestfully takes the lead in the mockery, parodying Beatrice's contemptuous wit and scorning her scorn; her vehemence perhaps reveals some resentment of Beatrice's domination and shows her own similar capacity for aggressiveness, realism, and wit. In their next scene together on her wedding day, Hero for the first time expresses her own apprehensiveness about marriage by being heavy of heart and refusing to join in the sexual banter of the other women. Like Hero, Beatrice is now "sick" with love, and her wit is out of tune. Claudio welcomes Benedick's lovesickness even more gleefully than Hero does Beatrice's. During the gulling, his comic descriptions of the doting Beatrice and the valiant Benedick are caricatures of his own romantic ideals, while his description of Beatrice dying for Benedick (II.iii.173-77) hints at the violence, anxiety, and desire for female submission that lie beneath the romantic veneer. Benedick in love is, like Claudio, "sadder"; his wit is curtailed ("governed by stops"), and he has shaved off his beard, marking his new vulnerability (III.ii.15, 56). Claudio, with the other men, takes advantage of him, reiterating his tale of Beatrice's "dying."

The anxieties about sexuality and submission that are the source of the men's lovesickness then erupt violently in Don John's slander. It is ironically appropriate that, though Hero has never talked to Claudio at all and he had "never tempted her with word too large" (IV.i.52), he should immediately accept Don John's report that she "talk[ed] with a man out at a window" (IV.i.308) as proof of her infidelity. Though he does not "see her chamber window ent'red" (III.ii.108), this imagined act transforms defensive idealization to vicious degradation, as will occur later with Angelo, Troilus, Hamlet, Othello, Posthumus, and Leontes. His former cautious, silent worship inverted, Claudio denounces Hero at their wedding with extravagantly lascivious, but still conventional, rhetoric:
Out on thee, seeming! I will write against it,  
You seem to me as Dian in her orb,  
As chaste as is the bud ere it be blown;  
But you are more intemperate in your blood  
Than Venus, or those pamp'red animals  
That rage in savage sensuality.

[IV.i.55-60]

He perverts the ceremony that had seemed to protect him and seeks from friends confirmation of her corruption, as he had formerly needed proof of her virtues.

When unanchored idealization turns to degradation here, nuptials are shattered more violently and irretrievably than in the other comedies. The possibility of future reconciliation is kept alive, however, by the Friar's scheme for Hero's mock death, by Dogberry and crew's knowledge of the truth about Don John's deceit, and by Beatrice's command to Benedick. The slander of Hero tempers Beatrice's commitment to love. But Claudio's failure of romantic faith in Hero parallels and helps to rectify Benedick's lack of romantic commitment to Beatrice. Both men, along with Hero, must risk a comic death and effect a comic transformation to affirm their love. Although only Dogberry's revelation influences the plot, the three "deaths" function together to engender the play's comic reconciliations and festive release.

Hero's mock death, transforming the strategies of self-concealment through masking, disguise, or withdrawal practiced by women in romantic comedies, anticipates the development of the motif in later plays. The women in Love's Labor's Lost mask themselves, and they go into seclusion at the end; Kate plays shrew and Titania evades Oberon; Julia, Rosalind, Portia, and Viola are disguised. The literal masks of Beatrice and Hero at the ball mirror their defensive facades of wit and silence. But, unlike these festive disguises, women's mock deaths do not merely parody or postpone nuptials voluntarily; they are designed by the woman and/or her confidantes to mend nuptials shattered by the men. It is now not idealization of women which must be qualified but their slander and degradation which must be reformed. The mock death is both an involuntary, passive escape from degradation and a voluntary constructive means to alter it.

Hero's play death incorporates many of the elements found in later versions of the motif; the Friar, who engineers the death with Leonato's approval, outlines its constructive purpose and potential effects. The death—real or imagined—of the slandered woman satisfies the lover's desire for revenge while alleviating his fear of infidelity; "Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men" (Oth, V.ii.6). Then relief and guilt working together will change "slander to remorse" (IV.i.210). Freed from the pain of desiring her and the fear of losing her, the lover can reidealize the woman, a process that is described in detail by the friar, walked through in this play, and dramatized more completely in All's Well That Ends Well, Hamlet, Othello, Antony and Cleopatra, Cymbeline, and The Winter's Tale.

For it so falls out  
That what we have we prize not to the worth  
Whiles we enjoy it; but being lacked and lost,  
Why then we rack the value, then we find  
The virtue that possession would not show us  
Whiles it was ours. So will it fare with  
Claudio.  
When he shall hear she died upon his words,  
Th' idea of her life shall sweetly creep  
Into his study of imagination  
And every lovely organ of her life  
Shall come appareled in more precious habit,
More moving, delicate, and full of life,  
Into the eye and prospect of his soul  
Than when she lived indeed.  

[IV.i.216-29]

Through the death—pretended or actual—of the corrupted beloved, the lover can repossess her, purified. In this way, the Friar hopes, the "travail" of restoring the image of the woman will culminate in a "greater birth" (IV.i.212), her death in life.

But for women the strategy is bold, painful, and risky. Whereas in earlier comedies, female disguise, control, and wit brought men to their senses, in later ones, more disturbingly, female submission generates male affection. Hero must put herself in the hands of the friar, practice patience, and accept, if the trick fails, chaste seclusion in a religious retreat—the fate Hermia is threatened with in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Helen pretends to in *All's Well That Ends Well*, and Isabella desires in *Measure for Measure*. Women pretend to die of unrequited love as Beatrice is said to be doing; they "die" sexually, validating male virility as Helen and Mariana do in bedtricks whose deceit makes them a form of mock death; and they die, or pretend to, as retribution for their imagined betrayals; Juliet undergoes a double confrontation with death—her deathlike swoon induced by the Friar's potion and her interment with dead bodies in the Capulet monument—before she actually dies; Hermione must remain in seclusion sixteen years. In the tragedies women actually die. But the woman's pretended or real death, even when combined with the vigorous defense of her virtues by her friends—Beatrice, the Countess, Emilia, Paulina—does not by itself ensure penitence. Ophelia's and Desdemona's deaths do engender in Hamlet and Othello the penitent reidealization the friar describes. But Juliet's and Cleopatra's mock deaths kill Romeo and Antony. Claudio's and Bertram's penitence is perfunctory and coerced. Claudio seems utterly unaffected by the death until Borachio testifies to Hero's innocence (as Emilia will testify to Desdemona's and the oracle to Hermione's); then reidealization is instantaneous: "Sweet Hero, now the image doth appear / In the rare semblance that I loved it first" (V.i.250-51). Only Antony and Posthumus forgive the woman without proof of her innocence. Only in *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Cymbeline* does the mock death by itself lead to the guilt, penitence, and forgiveness predicted by the Friar. And only at last in *The Winter's Tale* does the death lead to penitence, transformation, and full reconciliation. Although the motif appears in all genres, playing dead can perhaps be seen as a female version of the tragic hero's literal and symbolic journeys. Its effect is not to transform the woman as the tragic hero is transformed, but to achieve the transformation of her image in the eyes of the hero and to alter and complicate the audience's view of her. The motif satisfies the male characters' fantasies of control and the audience's need to sympathize with the slandered women.

But in *Much Ado* the festive conclusion is not only made possible by Hero's mock death, Claudio's enforced penance, and Dogberry's apprehension of the "benefactors" who expose the deceit. Equally important is Benedick's willingness to comply with Beatrice's command to "Kill Claudio" (IV.i.88). Benedick's acquiescence signals his transformation and reconciles him with Beatrice. Although the gullings bring Beatrice and Benedick to acknowledge their affections to themselves, they have not risked doing so to each other. The broken nuptials provide the impetus for this commitment. The seriousness of the occasion tempers their wit and strips away their defenses. Weeping for Hero, Beatrice expresses indirectly her vulnerability to Benedick, just as Benedick's assertion of trust in Hero expresses indirectly his love for Beatrice and leads to his direct, ungrudging expression of it: "I do love nothing in the world so well as you" (IV.i.267). This reciprocates Beatrice's earlier vow to "tame her wild heart" for him. But the broken nuptials have encouraged Beatrice to be wary still; her vow is witty, and she asks for more than vows from Benedick, taking seriously his romantic promise, "Come, bid me do anything for thee." "Kill Claudio," she replies (IV.i.287-88).

Extravagant and coercive as her demand may be, Benedick's willingness to comply is a necessary antidote to the play's pervasive misogyny and a necessary rehabilitation of romance from Claudio's corruption of it. Benedick's challenge to Claudio, by affirming his faith in both Hero's and Beatrice's fidelity, repudiates his
former mistrust of women and breaks his bonds with the male friends who shared this attitude. Because
romantic vows and postures have proved empty or unreliable—"But manhood is melted into cursies, valor into
compliment, and men are only turned into tongue, and trim ones too" (IV.i.317-20)—they must now be
validated through deeds. The deed Beatrice calls for is of a special sort. Male aggression is to be used not in
war but for love, not against women but on their behalf. Beatrice calls on Benedick to become a hero of
romance in order to qualify his wit and verify his commitment to her. Similar transformations are demanded
by the women of other men in the comedies: the lords in Love's Labor's Lost must test their wit and prove
their vows during a year of penance; Bassanio must relegate friendship to surety for his marriage; Orsino and
Orlando are led to abandon silly poses for serious marriage vows. But while the grave estrangement of
Claudio and Hero is displaced by Beatrice's and Benedick's movement into romantic love, the wits' love for
each other is also protected by their commitment to the cause of Hero. Beatrice can weep for her friend as she
does not weep for Benedick, and Benedick is "engaged" simultaneously to Beatrice and on behalf of Hero.

The scene of the challenge itself also deftly intertwines two tones—the romantic and the comic—and the two
plots. Although it shows the bankruptcy of Claudio's wit, it also absorbs Benedick's challenge back into a
witty comic context before actual violence can disrupt this context irrevocably. Benedick, having abandoned
his wit, proposes to substitute a sword for it: "It [wit] is in my scabbard. Shall I draw it?" (V.i.126). Seriously
challenging Claudio, he refuses to join in his friend's effort to use wit to transform swords back into jests, a
duel to a feast, his adversary to a dinner: "he hath bid me to a calf's head and a capon; the which if I do not
carve most curiously, say my knife's naught. Shall I not find a woodcock too?" (V.i.154-57). In fact,
sword-play is absorbed back into wordplay when the slandering of Hero is revealed, Claudio guiltily does
penance, and the challenge is dropped. Benedick's delivery of it releases him and Beatrice into the affectionate
banter through which, "too wise to woo peaceably" (V.ii.71), they reanimate the conventions of romantic
rhetoric as they did those of romantic valor: "I will live in thy heart, die in thy lap, and be buried in thy eyes;
and, moreover, I will go with thee to thy uncle's" (V.ii.99-101). The dynamics of the Beatrice/Benedick plot
invert and counteract the dynamics of the Claudio/ Hero plot. Whereas Hero must "die" in response to
Claudio's misogynistic fantasies of her corruption in order to restore his romantic attachment, Benedick must
agree to kill Claudio in compliance with Beatrice's demand in order to establish the replacement of witty
misogyny by romantic affection.

At the conclusion, Claudio's and Hero's pat reaffirmation of their wedding vows ignores rather than
transforming the conflicts which erupted through the broken nuptials. First Claudio performs a ritualistic but
impersonal penance: "Pardon, goddess of the night, / Those that slew thy virgin knight; / For the which, with
songs of woe, / Round about her tomb they go" (V.iii.12-15). Then he asserts his faith in women by agreeing
to accept a substitute bride. But his willingness to "seize upon" any bride seems to suggest that the
possessiveness and conventionality which fuel romance are not exorcised. When she un_masks, Claudio
declares, "Another Hero," and it is Don Pedro who must assert the continuity between the two Heros, one
"defiled" and destroyed, the other pure, a "maid": "The former Hero! Hero that is dead!" (V.iv.62-65). But
there is no sense of rebirth. Claudio and Hero give no sign of establishing a new relationship or of
incorporating desire. They move mechanically back into their former roles: "And when I lived I was your
other wife / And when you loved you were my other husband" (V.iv.61). In the problem comedies, Bertram's
and Angelo's repentance and acceptance of substitute brides is even less spontaneous; in them the crucial
presence of two women at the endings—the one the chaste object of lust (Diana, Isabella), the other the
substitute bride and enforced marriage partner (Helen, Mariana)—emphasizes the continuing division between
idealization and degradation, between romance and desire, which is glossed over here.

In Much Ado, however, Beatrice and Benedick, displacing the Claudio/ Hero plot one final time, create the
festive conclusion. Disruptive elements continue to be expressed and exorcised in their bantering movement
into marriage. Their refusal to love "more than reason" or other than "for pity" or "in friendly recompense"
(V. iv.74-93) acknowledges wittily the fear each still has of submission and the desire each has that the other
be subordinate. They are finally brought to their nuptials only by a wonderfully comic "miracle," (91) but one
not dependent on removal of disguise, recognition of other kinds, or the descent of a god. The discovery of their "halting" sonnets signals their mutual release into the extravagance of romance and is followed by the kiss which, manifesting their mutual desire, serves as a truce in their merry wars. This kiss "stop[s]" Beatrice's mouth as she had earlier urged Hero to "stop" Claudio's at their engagement (V. iv. 97; II. i. 299). But while affirming mutuality in one way, the kiss ends it in another, for it silences Beatrice for the rest of the play. Similarly, other strong, articulate women are subdued at the ends of their comedies—Julia, Kate, Titania, Rosalind, Viola. This kiss, then, may be seen as marking the beginning of the inequality that Beatrice feared in marriage and that is also implicit in the framing of the wedding festivities with male jokes about cuckoldry, in the reestablishment of male authority by means of these jokes, and in Benedick's control of the nuptials.

This inequality is confirmed as Benedick presides over the play's conclusion, using his wit to affirm the compatibility of manhood, friendship, and marriage. Through the cuckoldry motif, Benedick has transformed a potentially humiliating submission in marriage into a proof of power. He likewise transforms the women's "light heels" into a sign of joy, not infidelity (V. iv. 119). His final unifying gesture invites Don Pedro to join him and Claudio in marriage to alleviate his sadness, attain authority, and reestablish ties with his war companions: "get thee a wife, get thee a wife! There is no staff more reverend than one tipped with horn" (V. iv. 122-25). Beatrice's and Benedick's sparring is transformed by the broken nuptials into romantic attachment, and Hero's mock death and the revelation of her innocence transform Claudio's degradation of her into a ritualistic penance. Throughout the comedies broken nuptials, even when initiated by men, give women the power to resist, control, or alter the movement of courtship. But with the celebration of completed nuptials at the end of the comedies, male control is reestablished, and women take their subordinate places in the dance.

While rejoicing in the festive conclusion of Much Ado we should perhaps remember Beatrice's acute satire on wooing and wedding—and their aftermath:

wooing, wedding, and repenting is as a Scotch, jig, a measure, and a cinquepace. The first suit is hot and hasty like a Scotch jig (and full as fantastical); the wedding, mannerly modest, as a measure, full of state and ancestry; and then comes Repentance and with his bad legs falls into the cinquepace faster and faster till he sink into his grave.

[II. i. 69-75]

Beatrice's description, which sees marriage as a precarious beginning, not a happy ending, is anticipated by the many irregular nuptials of earlier comedies and is embodied in the troubling open endings of All's Well That Ends Well and Measure for Measure. In these plays the balance between wit and romance, between male authority and female power is lost. The culmination "fantastical" romance and "hot and hasty" desire in a "mannerly modest" ceremony does not preclude the repenting which follows in the problem comedies and tragedies. In the romantic comedies "the catastrophe is a nuptial," as Armado proclaims with relish in his love letter to Jaquenetta (LLL, IV. i. 78), but later nuptials prove to be catastrophic in a sense other than the one Armado consciously intends. His own reversal of customary nuptials by getting Jaquenetta pregnant before the ceremony foreshadows a source of difficulty. And in Much Ado About Nothing there is one final nuptial irregularity: the dancing begins even before the weddings are celebrated.

W. Thomas MacCary (essay date 1985)


[In the following essay, MacCary focuses on the orientation of sexual desire and the idealization of women in Much Ado about Nothing, noting how these reflect the worldview of the men of Messena.]
Much Ado About Nothing is a fascinating play, and finally satisfying if we allow our attention to shift from the romantic protagonists, Hero and Claudio, in the main plot to the narcissistic subordinates, Beatrice and Benedick. It is closer in tone and moral cast to Measure for Measure and All's Well than to the other comedies of this period. Like Measure for Measure it has a prince who messes about in the love life of his courtiers, and like All's Well it has an unregenerate hero. For our purposes, though—tracing the orientation of desire in the comedies, and noting how it reflects and informs worldview generally—the major interest is the correction made by the love match in the subplot of the love match in the main plot. Hero is completely passive and unimpressive; Claudio is first ineffective in love, then effusive, then offensive, and finally frivolous. There is a pattern to his behavior, a discernible consistency in his character, and it is that same self-imposed role of the warrior, ferocious in battle but clumsy in love, that so deforms Bertram and is the type against which Othello's unique tragedy is played. It is this same polarity between sex and violence that forces our attention on Beatrice and Benedick, because they not only articulate it precisely in their commentary on the romance of Hero and Claudio, but they mediate and transcend it through their wit.

It is clear that Beatrice is cast against the type of Katherina; Leonato and Antonio call her "shrewd" and "curst" (II.i.16-19), and she says of herself:

And, Benedick, love on, I will requite thee,
Taming my wild heart to thy loving hand.

(III.i.111-12)

Katherina is not clever, however, nor finally as self-willed. Beatrice has strong sexual appetites; indeed she develops the analogy between sex and food and expresses the violence in both loving and eating:

Beat. I pray you, how many hath he killed and eaten in these wars? But how many hath he killed? For indeed I promised to eat all of his killing. (I.i.38-40)

Beat. Is it possible disdain should die, while she hath such meet food to feed it as Signoir Benedick? (I.i.110-11)

Bene. By my sword, Beatrice, thou lovest me.
Beat. Do not swear and eat it.
Bene. I will swear by it that you love me, and
I will make him eat it that says I love not you.
Beat. Will you eat your word?
Bene. With no sauce that can be devised to it.
I protest I love thee. (IV.i.273-79)

This last leads, of course, to Beatrice's demand, "Kill Claudio!" To understand the full significance of that, we must follow its preparation in all the attention to seeming and being, to men of fashion and men of action, to men of words and men of deeds, to men and women generally. We can note now, however, that several traditional identifications, important to the earlier comedies, come together here to create a new dimension of identity.

Beatrice and Benedick are at war with each other, their tongues being their swords, whereas the other men and women divide their libidinal and aggressive pursuits. Claudio, the conventional lover, gives us a conventional statement of the convention:

Claud. When you went onward on this ended action,
I look'd upon her with a soldier's eye,
That lik'd, but had a rougher task in hand
Than to drive liking to the name of love:
But now I am return'd, and that war-thoughts
Have left their places vacant, in their rooms
Come thronging soft and delicate desires,
All prompting me how fair young Hero is,
Saying I lik'd her ere I went to wars.

(I.i.277-85)

It is fortunate for Claudio, who can speak no better than this, that he has Don Pedro to speak for him. Beatrice and Benedick can speak for themselves, in way of war:

There is a kind of merry war betwixt Signior Benedick and her: they never meet but there's a skirmish of wit between them.

(I.i.55-58)

In the last act there are several derogatory remarks about the confusion of witty tongues with swords: Antonio to Claudio (V.i.124ff.) and Benedick to Claudio (V.i.182ff.). Then in a brief exchange Benedick and Margaret supply the missing signifier:

_Bene._ Pray thee, sweet Mistress Margaret,
deserve well at my hands, by helping me to
the speech of Beatrice.

_Marg._ Will you then write me a sonnet in
praise of my beauty?

_Bene._ In so high a style, Margaret, that no
man living shall come over it, for in most
comely truth thou deservest it.

_Marg._ To have no man come over me? Why,
shall I always keep below stairs?

_Bene._ Thy wit is as quick as the greyhound's
mouth, it catches.

_Marg._ And yours as blunt as the fencer's
foils, which hit, but hurt not.

_Bene._ A most manly wit, Margaret, it will not
hurt a woman. And so I pray thee call
Beatrice; I give thee the bucklers.

_Marg._ Give us the swords, we have bucklers
of our own.

_Bene._ If you use them, Margaret, you must
put in the pikes with a vice, and they are
dangerous weapons for maids.

Marg. Well, I will call Beatrice to you, who I think hath legs.

Bene. And therefore will come.

(V.ii.1-24)

We know tongues as swords in the battle of wits, but now the identification between swords and penises is made explicit. With the talk of blunt swords that will not hurt, and pikes (spikes) vised into bucklers (shields), we are forced to think of sexual intercourse as a violent encounter which men and women nevertheless take pleasure in. (If we think of this complex of associations in tragic rather than comic contexts, we see that Desdemona is both witty and courtly, as well as admiring, if not envious, of her husband's martial prowess; in Emilia we see wit as the means of expressing women's sexual desires, just as it is here with Margaret. Shakespeare then condemns women to death for their wit and desires in tragedy while he makes them triumphant in comedy. Portia, I think, is somewhere in between.) [In "Mature Love: Prerequisites and Characteristics," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 22, 1974, O.] Kernberg notes the importance of ambivalence in erotic relations; libidinal and aggressive impulses combine only if good and bad object-images are combined. He even insists [in "Boundaries and Structure in Love Relations," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 25, 1977] that satisfying heterosexual relationships involve some projection of homosexual desires:

It seems to me the normal love relationships include the following pre-conditions: first—at the level of actual sexual behavior—having the capacity for broadening and deepening the experience of sexual intercourse and orgasm with the expanded sexual eroticism derived from the integration of aggression and bisexuality (sublimatory homosexual identification) into the heterosexual erotic relationship; second, having developed an object relation in depth … third, having developed depersonification, abstraction, and individualization in the super-ego.

Certainly Margaret and Benedick summarize here the whole play's consideration of sexual roles. This is particularly important after Beatrice's outburst:

Beat. O that I were a man! (IV.i.302)

Beat. O God that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the marketplace. (IV.i.305-6)

Beat. O that I were a man for his sake, or that I had any friend would be a man for my sake! But manhood is melted into curties, valour into compliment, and men are only turned into tongue, and trim ones too: he is now as valiant as Hercules that only tells a lie and swears it. I cannot be a man with wishing, therefore I will die a woman with grieving. (IV.i.316-23)

Now this clearly fits the context of those other considerations of the seeming and being of men—Borachio's diatribe on fashion (III.iii.127-34) and the attacks on Claudio by Antonio and Leonato (V.i.45-109) and by Benedick (V.i.110-90). Indeed yet another masculine accoutrement enters into the discussion: we have heard of penises, swords, and tongues, but we also hear of beards. Beatrice thinks a man without a beard is not a man, but a woman or a boy (II.i.30-37); Benedick calls Claudio "lackbeard" (V.i.190); Antonio speaks of "fashion-mongering boys" (V.i.94). Shakespeare's sexual perspective then seems to be that boys are like women, but with the potential to become men, whereas women can wish to become men, as Beatrice does to avenge Hero, but must die—perhaps there is even a sexual suggestion here—as women.
As [G. K.] Hunter has shown [in *John Lyly*, 1962], it was first Lyly who introduced wit into dramatic love relationships and thereby freed women from the passivity imposed upon them by the medieval romance tradition. Shakespeare goes much further: by first identifying wit and warfare, and then giving women wit, he makes it possible for them to beat men at their own game. That, however, is a social issue; my concern is the erotic. What Shakespearian comedy shows again and again is that men want women to be like men, and *Much Ado About Nothing* makes the strongest statement of this so far in the corpus. Claudio and Hero follow the conventional pattern of love-relationships, and their union is disastrous; Beatrice and Benedick break all the rules and their union is perfect. It seems not to frighten Benedick that Beatrice wants to be a man; he has not Petruchio's fear of women. It seems that Theseus dominates Hippolyta; it seems that Rosalind dominates Orlando; Beatrice and Benedick are in perfect equilibrium. In *Much Ado About Nothing* the violence is sublimated. It is not with swords and genitals but with tongues that they fight. We see the preparation for the belligerent equality of Beatrice in the transvestism of Julia, and, of course, we see in Beatrice preparation for Portia, Rosalind, and Viola, those young women who will completely dominate the other comedies of this middle period. Why is that figure satisfying? How does she represent the fulfillment of men's desires? Again, Kernberg is suggestive:

In men, the predominant pathology of love relations derived from oedipal conflicts takes the form of fear of and insecurity vis-a-vis women and reaction formations against such insecurity in the form of reactive and/or projected hostility and guilt toward the maternal figure. Pre-genital conflicts, particularly conflicts around pre-genital aggression, are intimately condensed with genital conflicts. In men, pre-genital aggression, envy and fear of women reinforce oedipal fears and feelings of inferiority toward them: the pre-genital envy of mother reinforces the oedipally determined insecurity of men regarding idealized women.

There can be no question that Claudio represents this pathology: he idealizes Hero, then loves her correspondence to an idealized image and not her actual being; because he still feels antagonistic toward both the pre-oedipal image of the mother as all-powerful, and the oedipal image as all-sexual, he readily mis-sees Hero as whore, and denounces her in the most scathing misogynistic terms.

Benedick, on the other hand, is reassured by Beatrice's assimilation to his type. She is aggressive, surely, but in such a way that he can fight back. Her threat is, as it were, up front: genital, lingual, martial. She is not the void of nonbeing that the pre-oedipal mother can seem, or the sexually insatiable oedipal mother. She is a clear and present danger, not a veiled threat. She is, indeed, his mirror image. Benedick finds in Beatrice the combination of friend and lover which previous Shakespearian comic heroes had pursued in separate objects. His union with her is then a restoration of the total self-referentiality of primary narcissism: he desires what he is and is what he desires. There is no other. His identity is in his tension with this mirror image of himself. Therein lies his being, not by some reference to an hypostasis of desire, an idealized object, a metaphysical constant. In this we see again the conjunction between Shakespeare's analysis of love and his whole worldview. Our overwhelming impression at the end of *Much Ado About Nothing* is of Benedick's superiority to the other male characters: he has achieved the most satisfying sexual union and with it complete self-knowledge. He is the secure center in a chaotic universe. The strongest statement of this occurs directly before the innocence of Hero is proved and therefore his duel with Claudio canceled. Benedick moves through three stages of identifying himself—first, as antagonist to Claudio:

But I must tell thee plainly, Claudio undergoes my challenge, and either I must shortly hear from him, or I will subscribe him a coward. (V.ii.53-56)

Then, as Beatrice's lover:

And I pray thee now tell me, for which of my bad parts didst thou first fall in love with me? … I do suffer love indeed, for I love thee against my will…. Thou and I are too wise to woo
peaceably. (V.ii.56-66)

And finally as a man who knows himself:

If a man do not erect in this age his own tomb ere he dies, he shall live no longer in monument than the bell rings, and the widow weeps.… Therefore, it is most expedient for the wise, if Don Worm, his conscience, find no impediment to the contrary, to be the trumpet of his own virtues, as I am to myself. So much for praising myself, who I myself will bear witness is praiseworthy. (V.ii.71-81)

Benedick has introjected Beatrice's image of a perfect man, loved her for making him see himself in that image—a kind of mutually narcissistic relationship, since she describes the man she would be, which becomes the man she loves—and now he sees himself clearly.

When Claudio and Don Pedro try to nag Benedick about his capitulation to love, he disdains even to answer, knowing they are incapable of understanding what he has discovered:

A college of wit-crackers cannot flout me out of my humour…. Since I do purpose to marry, I will think nothing to any purpose that the world can say against it; and therefore never flout at me for what I have said against it; for man is a giddy thing, and this is my conclusion. (V.iv.99-107)

How do Beatrice and Benedick love each other? As reason itself (V.iv.74-77), and there is no higher authority. Note that here reason is not some sort of external force operating upon men's minds to shape their experience (as Descartes' passive acceptance of that force is the only way to self-knowledge), but rather reason is self-knowledge, which comes through a disparagement of the world and its expectations, and a fulfillment of one's own individual desire to recapture in one's own beloved the perfect, original image of oneself.

We must note also that the resurrection of Hero prefigures the resurrection of Hermione in The Winter's Tale. Both women have been wrongly accused of sexual crimes and their lovers made to lament their false judgement; thus, when they give themselves a second time to their husbands, this is the greatest grace and favor. Claudio accused Hero of seeming rather than being good, and she disputed him:

Claud. She's but the sign and semblance of her honour. (IV.i.32)

Claud. I never tempted her with word too large,
But, as a brother to his sister, show'd
Bashful sincerity and comely love.

Hero. And seem'd I ever otherwise to you?

Claud. Out on thee, seeming! I will write against it.
You seem to me as Dian in her orb,
As chaste as is the bud ere it be blown;
But you are more intemperate in your blood
Than Venus, or those pamper'd animals
That rage in savage sensuality.

(IV.i.52-61)

Claudio makes here the same kind of mistake that Berowne and his friends make:

The ladies did change favours, and then we,
Following the signs, woo'd but the sign of she.

(LLL V.ii.468-69)

But, whereas Berowne only confuses one lady for another behind the sign, Claudio actually confuses the sign for the lady, and then accuses her of making that confusion herself. He has an image of the perfect woman, the moon goddess, to which he will force Hero's assimilation. Needless to say, it is an idealized, desexualized maternal image, a denial of all those fears and loathings that we know prey upon him and keep him "infantile." Claudio rejoices in the restitution of this image after the revelation of Don John's deception:

Sweet Hero! Now thy image doth appear
In the rare semblance that I lov'd it first.

(V.i.245-46)

It is much easier for Claudio to love a dead woman than a living, aging, changing woman, who in her cycles will fulfill and contradict all his fears and desires of the female.

There is a significant echo of Claudio's comparing Hero, in her supposed intemperance, to "pamper'd animals," in Hermione's description of herself and other women:

I prithee tell me: cram 's with praise and make 's
As fat as tame things: one good deed, dying tongueless,
Slaughters a thousand, waiting upon that.
Our praises are our wages. You may ride 's With one soft kiss a thousand furlongs ere
With spur we heat an acre.

(WT I.ii.91-96)

This adds fuel to the fire of Leontes' madness. The image is first of some guinea hen or rabbit being fattened for the table, but then these creatures breed in captivity, having nothing else to do. That is what Claudio and Leontes think of women, that they live "dully sluggardis'd at home" with nothing to do but think about sex. They are Othello's "goats and monkeys," Oberon's "love-in-idleness."

[In Shakespeare and the Experience of Love, 1981, A.] Kirsch has shown how Claudio's misperception of Hero is based on his idealization of her. He cannot see her properly, because he sees with other men's eyes, the mind of the past, the myth of women's infidelity and sexual insatiability. [In "Myth and Ritual in Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream," in Textual Strategies, edited by J. Harari, 1979, R.] Girard compares Cervantes, Molière, and Dostoevsky on the hell of choosing love by another's eyes. We have already noted the resemblance to Don Quixote, where Cardenio misreads an actual scene and sees his fiancée marry another man. What these lovers lose is the actuality of their own experience: by insisting on reference to what they think are constant patterns in human experience, they are blinded to the present. Again, we might attempt to understand this both as a particular moment in the evolution of men's ways of looking at the world—Foucault's classical episteme: the representation of representation—and as a recurrent problem in
psychosexuality. Claudio and Leontes, like Cardenio, have a preunderstanding of women, based on myth and romance; they impose it upon actual women, especially those they love. Shakespeare and Cervantes take an ironic view of this, showing us that men compulsively misread things, especially women. (Cervantes also, of course, shows us that Don Quixote's misreadings are sometimes right, and almost always more gentle and gracious (i.e., elevated and humane) than what actually occurs in the scene.) It seems to me that for Hobbes, and Lacan, and any serious thinker, the problem is language: it is our attempt to express in this alien structure imposed upon us, both to ourselves and to others—the distinction Hobbes makes between "marking" and "signifying"—what we see and what we feel. Desire is a function of the difference between what we actually need and the need we can express in language. Myths live in language, though they are thought to be preverbal: like words themselves they are arbitrary categories into which we organize our experience. This process of necessity short-circuits the connections between things (the real), our impressions of them (the imaginary), and our thinking and speaking about them (the symbolic): connections (necessarily false) are immediately made between things and words. By representing representation, Shakespeare restores the indirection of the original circuit, calling our attention to the genesis of false impressions. One consequence is that he is not so interested in presenting things as they are, but rather things as they appear to individual characters and the difficulty they have communicating these images to other characters. They all speak the same language, but they do not all have the same impressions.

When these phenomena are erotic, I argue, the images are largely self-images: love in Shakespeare, as in life, is not an idle entertainment, but a compulsive attempt to establish identity. The images, then, that we are projecting are of object-relations from our earliest childhood. If these have been consolidated into a substantial sense of self, then we can allow correction in them by the others they are projected upon. There are, however, two types of pathological projections which we know from life and from Shakespeare. There is the projection onto others of a grandiose self-image; this is pathological narcissism, which we see in Malvolio and Petruchio. Then there is the kind of splitting of the object we see in all those male characters who are obsessed with female sexuality; they deny it in their "ladies" and seek it in inferiors. This is Freud's distinction between idealization and debasement in object-choice, which Wheeler has applied so thoroughly and convincingly to the problem comedies that we need only refer to his work and pass directly on from the mature comedies to the late romances.

In this sense, too, Shakespeare produces a representation of representation: he forces us to see how characters without a consolidated sense of self force all their objects to fit archaic images of narcissistic and anaclitic object-choices. He shows us how characters learn to love and progress through the stages of such a consolidation, thereby creating a sense of self derived from early object-relations. Again we see, in a different way, the disastrous results of the "triangulation of desire": an immediate and complete correspondence is demanded between actual, experienced objects and those images of one's original objects, derived from one's own childhood or from the "childhood of man," which have solidified as symbols without any allowance for the mutual corrections which should take place in the relations between the real and the imaginary, on the one hand, and the imaginary and the symbolic, on the other.

Carol Cook (essay date 1986)


[Here, Cook traces the significance of differences that represent gender in Much Ado about Nothing, concentrating on the use of language to both mask and expose masculine fears about feminine power in the play.]

Much Ado about Nothing begins with news of an ending; a rebellious brother has been defeated in battle, and the victorious prince and his retinue are approaching Messina. Don Pedro, Claudio, and Benedick return from
one kind of conflict to enter another: before they set foot in Messina we hear of a "merry war," the ongoing "skirmish of wit," between Benedick and Beatrice (1.1.62-63). Responding to the centrality of sexual conflict in *Much Ado*, critics have sometimes read the play as a struggle in which humane feminine qualities ultimately supersede inadequate masculine values. Barbara Everett has written [in "*Much Ado about Nothing,*" *Critical Quarterly* 3, 1969] that

the play concerns itself with what can only be called the most mundane or "local" fact in that world of love, in all its forms, that the comedies create: that is, that men and women have a notably different character, different mode of thinking, different system of loyalties, and, particularly, different social place and function. Not only this: but this is the first play, I think, in which the clash of these two worlds is treated with a degree of seriousness, and in which the woman's world dominates.

John Crick, after describing the limitations of Messina's "predominately masculine ethos" [in "*Much Ado about Nothing,*" *The Use of English* 17, 1965], suggests that Beatrice's "feminine charity triumphs.... Benedick becomes acceptable to her when he symbolically joins his masculine qualities to her feminine principles by taking up, however reluctantly, her attitude to Claudio ...". Janice Hayes [in "Those 'soft and delicate desires': *Much Ado* and the Distrust of Women," in *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, edited by Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene, and Carol Thomas Neely, 1980] borrows the psychological terms *instrumental* and *expressive* to characterize masculine and feminine modes of behavior and experience in the play. Contrasting "the traditionally male sphere of war, honors, and triumph" and "the private and potentially expressive world of Messina, a world whose functioning is communal and cyclical and whose heirs are women," Hayes sees the Claudio-Hero plot as a ritual action in which Claudio's "narcissistic instrumentality" is overcome in his symbolic penance at Hero's tomb and his acceptance of an unknown bride.

These readings find a resolution to sexual conflict in the play in a thematic movement that privileges the feminine and provides moral closure. In my view, however, whatever conversion or movement the play offers is notably incomplete, for while the sexual conflict points in an illuminating way to the question of gender differences and what is at stake in them, their relation to subjectivity and authority, the play cannot resolve its contradictions from within its own structures of meaning. My reading of *Much Ado* begins by tracing the signifying differences that produce or represent gender in the play, differences especially evident in the cuckold jokes of the opening scene, and suggests that what is at stake in these differences is a masculine prerogative in language, which the play itself sustains. I argue that the play masks, as well as exposes, the mechanisms of masculine power and that insofar as it avoids what is crucial to its conflicts, the explicitly offered comic resolution is something of an artful dodge.

The pervasive masculine anxiety that characterizes the play's Messina might be read psychoanalytically as castration anxiety; the imagery of horns and wounds in the cuckold jokes points rather insistently in this direction. But "castration anxiety" is not so much an answer to the play's questions about gender difference as another formulation of them that requires some further explanation, for the phallus and its loss only signify within a larger structure of meanings. *Much Ado* sets up a complex chain of association among the word, the sword, and the phallus, marking off language as the domain of masculine privilege and masculine aggression. The masculine, in the world of the play, is the place of speaking and reading subjects, of manipulators and interpreters of signs. The characters are much concerned with self-concealment and the exposure of others, with avoiding objectification by others, the abjection of which the cuckold's horn becomes the fearful sign. To read others in this play is always an act of aggression: to be read is to be emasculated, to be a woman. Masculine privilege is contingent on the legibility of women, and the ambiguous signifying power of women's "seeming" is the greatest threat to the men of Messina, who engage various defensive strategies against it, from the exchange of tendentious jokes to the symbolic sacrifice of Hero. The play itself is implicated in these strategies, insofar as the characters' plot to recuperate Claudio through the fiction of Hero's death is also the plot of the play: the stability necessary for comic closure requires the exorcism of a disturbingly polysemous
image of woman. The strategy is only partially successful, however, for though the “false knaves,” Don John and his henchmen, are ultimately revealed as the manipulators of misreadings, they function as scapegoats, deflecting attention from the unresolved anxieties about language and gender that have been responsible for the play’s catastrophe.

I

We can learn a good deal about the place of gender difference in the life and language of Much Ado’s Messina by looking at the most persistent theme in the witty discourse of the play’s male characters—that of cuckoldry. The cuckold jokes begin when Leonato, asked whether Hero is his daughter, replies, "Her mother hath many times told me so" (1.1.105), and end with Benedick's closing advice to Don Pedro: "get thee a wife, get thee a wife! There is no staff more reverent than one tipp'd with horn" (5.4.122-24)—an absolute equation of marriage with cuckoldry. The tirelessness with which these men return to such jokes suggests an underlying anxiety that is present when the play opens and that has not been dispelled by the resolution of the plot’s various complications.

The imagery of the play's cuckold jokes reveals much about the anxiety that motivates them. Leonato's casual remark about Hero's mother is a witty circumlocution of the sort that dominates the sophisticated small talk of Messina. In itself it is a trifle, a hackneyed joke that comes automatically to mind and rolls easily off the tongue. We are not to infer that Leonato is harboring serious doubts about the fidelity of his wife. The very conventionality of the comment, though, points to a larger cultural picture in which men share a sense of vulnerability because they have only a woman's word for the paternity of their children. A man may be a cuckold, it is suggested, and not be aware of his horns.

This anxiety about women's potential power over men is particularly apparent in Benedick's self-consciously misogynistic banter in the first scene, where he airs some of his antiromantic doctrine for the benefit of Claudio and Don Pedro:

That a woman conceiv'd me, I thank her; that she brought me up, I likewise give her most humble thanks; but that I will have a rechate winded in my forehead, or hang my bugle in an invisible baldrick, all women shall pardon me. Because I will not do them the wrong to mistrust any, I will do myself the right to trust none; and the fine is (for which I may go the finer), I will live a bachelor.

(238-46)

To submit oneself to a woman by loving and marrying her is to "have a rechate winded" in one's forehead—a trumpet blast blowing from one's forehead, announcing one's humiliation to the world. Marriage forces a man to "hang his bugle in an invisible baldrick." This somewhat obscure metaphor seems to be a concentrated expression of the masculine fears about feminine power in the play. The gloss given for this line in the Riverside edition runs as follows: "carry my horn not in the usual place on the usual strap (baldrick) but where no strap is seen (because none is present)—on my forehead" (335). As a symbol of man's betrayal and humiliation, the horn displaced from its rightful place to a wrong one must be read, it seems to me, in the light of the play's two metaphoric uses of the word horn, for horns are not only signs of cuckoldry but also phallic symbols. What Benedick's metaphor of the invisible baldrick suggests is that marriage emasculates a man and flaunts the evidence of his emasculation by displaying the displaced phallus in his fore-head. This theme is sustained in the lines that follow:

Bene…. Prove that ever I lose more blood with love than I will get again with drinking, pick out mine eyes with a ballad-maker's pen and hang me up at the door of a brothel-house for the sign of blind Cupid.
D. Pedro. Well, if ever thou dost fall from this faith, thou wilt prove a notable argument.

Bene. If I do, hang me in a bottle like a cat and shoot at me; and he that hits me, let him be clapp'd on the shoulder and call'd Adam.

D. Pedro. Well, as time shall try: "In time the savage bull doth bear the yoke."

Bene. The savage bull may, but if ever the sensible Benedick bear it, pluck off the bull's horns and set them in my forehead, and let me be wildly painted, and in such great letters as they write "Here is good horse to hire," let them signify under my sign, "Here you may see Benedick the married man."

(250-68)

Benedick here offers in succession three versions of his fate if he becomes subjected to a woman, if he "ever lose[s] more blood with love than [he] will get again with drinking"—a loss of vitality and virility like "Th' expense of spirit" of sonnet 129, perhaps suggesting also the bleeding wound of castration. What makes these three statements (of what would happen "if") roughly parallel is their recurrent images of vulnerability, mutilation, and exposure as legible signs. In the first case, loss of eyes suggests the lover's mutilation—and, obliquely, castration—but also enforces the particular humiliation of denying the victim the ability to witness his own condition. Displayed publicly at the site of sexual degradation, the lover is fully objectified, seen but unseeing, subjected to the aggression of others' gazes. That the instrument of blinding is the satiric ballad maker's pen links the visual objectification through display with a textual objectification through language, as the emasculated cuckold is ridiculed and published in degrading fictions. In the second case, the lover is to be hung "in a bottle like a cat" and shot at by other men, who compete for the first hit. In his public exposure and vulnerability, the cuckold becomes the target for other men's "shots," their witty jibes. Finally, Benedick picks up Don Pedro's aphorism about the yoking of the savage bull. The bull's horns are the manifestations of its savagery, its undomesticated masculine power, and by extension an image of virility in general. Should the sensible Benedick ever submit to the yoke, he says, "pluck off the bull's horns"—that is, turn them from signs of potency to signs of emasculation—"and set them in my forehead." The displacement motif here recalls the invisible bald-rick, and again the emasculation of the lover is followed by public display—the sign designating the humiliated victim "Benedick the married man."

The cuckold joke partakes of all three categories of what Freud calls "tendentious jokes": the aggressive or hostile joke (the cuckold joke expresses masculine competition), the cynical joke (aimed at the institution of marriage itself), and the obscene or exposing joke. In discussing the last category, Freud makes a number of observations that are pertinent here. "Smut," he writes, in Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, translated and edited by James Strachey, 1960, or "the intentional bringing into prominence of sexual facts and relations by speech, is … originally directed toward women and may be equated with attempts at seduction." Such sexual talk "is like an exposure of the sexually different person to whom it is directed." If the woman does not respond sexually to the verbal overture—as is often the case at "the higher social levels," where sexual inhibitions are strongest—"the sexually exciting speech becomes an aim in itself" and "becomes hostile and cruel, and … thus summons to its help against the obstacle the sadistic components of the sexual instinct." Denied its original aim of seduction, the sexual joking will be directed to a new audience: "The men save up this kind of entertainment, which originally presupposed the presence of a woman who was feeling ashamed, until they are 'alone together.'" The tendentious joke calls for three participants: "the one who makes the joke, … a second who is taken as the object of the hostile or sexual aggressiveness, and a third in whom the joke's aim of producing pleasure is fulfilled."

Freud's diachronic analysis of the origin of "smut" can be more usefully understood here as an account of the different aims that a joke may simultaneously fulfill. As such, his model turns out to illuminate the cuckold
jokes in *Much Ado*. Freud's paradigmatic joke teller is a man, speaking to a male audience, with women as the silent, absent objects of the jokes. The tendentious jokes work on several levels of direction and indirection. Thus, when Claudio aims a cuckold joke at Benedick for the benefit of don Pedro ("Tush, fear not, man, we'll tip thy horns with gold ..." [5.4.44]), the object of the joke is Benedick, imagined as a cuckold and hence as having lost his masculine status in the sexual hierarchy, but at another remove the object is also women, with their fearful power to cuckold men.

The cuckold joke expresses hostility and fear, but the relational structure of the joke-telling situation offers a compensation. Cuckoldry occurs as a triangular relationship that the cuckold joke revises—and perhaps revenges. In the act of cuckolding, which dominates the imaginations of Messina's men, it is the husband who is the silent and absent butt of the joke, while a woman takes the active and powerful role (comparable to that of the teller of a joke), in complicity with a third party in whom, as Freud puts it, the "aim of producing pleasure is fulfilled." The telling of cuckold jokes, then, restores the male prerogative: it returns the woman to silence and absence, her absence authorizing the male raconteur to represent her in accordance with particular male fantasies, and produces pleasure through male camaraderie.

Thus, Benedick's lines figure emasculation, or the loss of masculine privilege, in two ways: as a literal, physical castration and as a concomitant loss of masculine prerogative in language. In becoming a cuckold, a man relinquishes his role as the teller of jokes, the manipulator, reader, and subject of language, and falls instead to the woman's position as the object of jokes, the silent, legible sign. It is the place of the woman to be the object, or referent, of language, a sign to be read and interpreted; silent herself, she becomes a cipher, the target of unconscious fantasies and fears, and is dangerously vulnerable to the representations and misrepresentations of men, as the main plot of *Much Ado* bears out. The woman is therefore doubly threatening, both in her imagined capacity to betray and cuckold men and as an image of what men fear to become: paradoxically, her very vulnerability is threatening.

The social world of *Much Ado*'s Messina seems rather precariously founded on a denial of its most pervasive anxieties, and its potential for violence is triggered when the repressed fear of the feminine, and all that woman represents, is forced into consciousness by Don John's machinations. Messina, the most sophisticated and urbane society in all Shakespeare's comedies, is also the most confined. No moonlit wood or forest of Arden offers escape from Messina's social tensions, and the characters' romantic and sexual roles are not relieved by opportunities for sexual disguise. Social and sexual roles are firmly established, and the inhabitants are acutely conscious of them.

To note the rigidity of this world is not to suggest that Messina lacks charm. Its aristocratic characters demonstrate the most elaborate courtesy; formality does not make their manners less genial, and they move through their elegant social patterns with an almost choreographic grace. Yet beneath their easy charm, their wit and conviviality, the characters are evidently anxious, edgy, afraid of betraying spontaneous emotion, afraid of exposing themselves to one another. Messina is much concerned with its carefully preserved surfaces. The characters talk a good deal about how they dress. We hear about "cloth o' gold ... down sleeves, side-sleeves, and skirts" (3.4.19-21); about Benedick's metamorphosis in "strange disguises" (3.2.32-33); about "slops" (3.2.36), doublets, rabatos, gloves, and vizards; about Dogberry's two gowns; and about "the deformed thief, fashion"—the rhetorical figure overheard by messina's night watch, in whose minds "the thief, Deformed" takes on a remarkably vivid personality and criminal record (3.3.130-31). Just as the Messinans talk about dress, they talk about talking. They are highly conscious of verbal style. Benedick and Beatrice are known for their "skirmish of wit" (1.1.63); if they were married "but a week," Leonato predicts, "they would talk themselves mad" (2.1.353-54). We hear about the speed of Beatrice's tongue, about "quips and sentences and paper bullets of the brain," about the "ill word" that may "empoison liking," about Don John, who is "not of many words" (1.1.157).
Entering into the social intercourse of Messina entails dressing well and talking well, and in a way these modes of decorous behavior serve similar functions. Early in the play, Benedick withdraws from the banter of Don Pedro and Claudio saying: "Nay, mock not, mock not. The body of your discourse is sometimes guarded with fragments, and the guards are but slightly basted on neither" (1.1.285-87). Benedick here makes explicit a relation between discourse and dress that continues to be important throughout the play. The discourse of Claudio and Don Pedro (and perhaps of all the major characters except Hero) is guarded—that is, decorated (rhetorically) and also, in the now more common sense of the word, defensive. The characters use their wit to cover their emotional nakedness and to avoid exposure. Discourse in Messina is aggressive and witty; real wounds are dealt in the "merry war" between Benedick and Beatrice, in which Beatrice "speaks poiniards, and every word stabs" (2.1.247-48). Because of its capacity to inflict wounds, language—especially wit—is wielded both as weapon and as shield. Like Benedick, Beatrice adopts the role of "profess'd tyrant" to the opposite sex (1.1.169), satirizing masculine pretensions with agile wit. To Hero, she remarks tartly on paternal authority: "Yes, faith, it is my cousin's duty to make cursy and say, 'Father, as it please you.' But for all that, cousin, let him be a handsome fellow, or make another cursy, and say, 'Father, as it please me'" (2.1.52-56). And, like Benedick, she makes cynical pronouncements on romantic love and marriage:

... wooing, wedding, and repenting, is as a Scotch jig, a measure, and a cinquepace; the first suit is hot and hasty like a Scotch jig, and full as fantastical; the wedding, mannerly-modest, as a measure, full of state and ancestry; and then comes repentance, and with his bad legs falls into the cinquepace faster and faster, till he sink into his grave.

(2.1.73-80)

Beatrice's ironic comments on men and marriage, and her passionate outburst against Claudio in the first scene of act 4, have led some critics to regard her as the champion of a "feminine principle" and as a kind of protofeminist. Yet Beatrice's ostentatious flouting of conventional sexual roles is often only a concession to them at another level, and instead of challenging Messina's masculine ethos, she participates in its assumptions and values. In the opening scene, she mocks Benedick's soldiership: "I pray you, how many hath he killed and eaten in these wars? But how many hath he killed? For indeed, I promised to eat all of his killing" (42-45). On the messenger's remarking that Benedick is a "good soldier too, lady," she quibbles "And a good soldier to a lady. But what is he to a lord?" (1.1.53-55). But her insinuation that "Signior Mountanto" is effeminate does not question the machismo value of soldiership itself.

Beatrice tacitly accepts her culture's devaluation of "feminine" characteristics—of weakness, dependence, vulnerability—and sees conventionally masculine behavior as the only defense against them. She usurps the masculine prerogatives of language and phallic wit, speaking poiniards as an escape from feminine silence or inarticulate expression of emotion.

Beatrice's audacious speech might seem a serious violation of Messina's conventions of gender, but it is significant how little she actually threatens Messina's men, who regard her generally as rather a good fellow. Though Benedick professes a hyperbolical terror of "My Lady Tongue" (2.1.262-75) and Leonato rebukes her mildly ("By my troth, niece, thou wilt never get thee a husband, if thou be so shrewd of thy tongue" [2.1.18-19]), she provokes nothing like the hysterical reactions to the quiet Hero's supposed transgressions against the social and sexual code. When Beatrice retracts a bit on her own impertinence—"But I beseech your Grace to pardon me. I was born to speak all mirth and no matter"—Don Pedro replies, "Your silence most offends me, and to be merry best becomes you ..." (2.1.329-32). It is silence and the exposure of vulner-ability that are the real threats to Messinan men, painful reminders of the sexual difference that is really a mirror.

Beatrice is as aggressive and as guarded as the men in the play, and for the same reasons: she fears emotional exposure and vulnerability to the opposite sex. As the play begins she already seems to be nursing wounds from some abortive romance with Benedick, to which she alludes cryptically more than once. Beatrice
vacillates uneasily between self-exposure and affected indifference; she chafes at times against the constraints of her ironist's role, which consigns her to isolation and detachment when part of her desires love, but recognizing her susceptibility, she clings the more tenaciously to her role. The long first scene of act 2 reveals her contradictory impulses. Leonato chides her for being "so shrewd of [her] tongue" and tells her "So, by being too curst, God will send you no horns." "Just," she replies, "if he send me no husband, for the which blessing I am at him upon my kness every morning and evening" (27-29). At Hero's betrothal, however, she speaks in a different key: "Good Lord, for alliance! Thus goes everyone to the world but I, and I am sunburnt. I may sit in a corner and cry 'Heighho for a husband!'" (318-20). If the tone is mock lament here, the sense of exclusion is real; yet each of her tentative gestures of self-exposure is followed by a nervous reassertion of ironic detachment. She alternately challenges others' misreadings of her humorist's mask and encourages them to take her as she appears. When Don Pedro seems too readily to accept her as "born in a merry hour," she replies, "No, sure, my lord, my mother cried; but then there was a star danc'd and under that was I born. Cousins, God give you joy!" (334-36).

Chafing at the reductiveness of Don Pedro's image of her as merely "merry," Beatrice offers a fleeting glimpse of a part of herself and a realm of experience that cannot be given expression in Messina, figured in the laboring mother whose only articulation is an ambiguous cry. But she compulsively banishes the image of the crying mother with that of the dancing star and quickly turns attention away from herself by congratulating her "cousins." She is thus perceived only as "a pleasant-spirited lady" (341) whose "merry heart … keeps on the windy side of care" (314-15). Leonato misses the significance of his own remark when he tells Don Pedro: "There's little of the melancholy element in her, my lord. She is never sad but when she sleeps, and not ever sad then; for I have heard my daughter say she hath often dreamt of unhappiness and waked herself with laughing" (342-46). Whatever unhappiness haunts Beatrice's dreams, her laughter is a conscious defense against it. She cannot in her waking moments articulate or address the conflicts inherent in her relation to her world.

Beatrice is a character of some complexity, a character whose contradictions, manifest in her own words and actions, we read as signs of interiority and ambivalence, as evidence of different levels of motivation. Hero presents another kind of problem. Here the contradictions consist of a tension between the manifest representation of her character (which is quite uncomplicated and one-dimensional) and her latent significance, which is evident in the effects she produces in others. Minimally drawn, with few lines, she is less a character than a cipher, or a mirror to the other characters. She is represented as conventionally feminine; meek, self-effacing, vulnerable, obedient, seen and not heard, she is a face without a voice. In the world of the play Hero's role is to meet or reflect others' expectations of what women are supposed to be (as Beatrice does not) and paradoxically, therefore, to represent a powerful threat.

Hero's status as a character and the mode of her representation are peculiar enough to require special consideration. Crick characterizes Hero as "nebulous," but he uses the word to dismiss rather than to analyze her. In fact, Hero's nebulousness is significant: she is the "nothing" that generates so much ado. The pun on nothing and noting in the play has frequently been remarked, but we might usefully pursue it in this connection. To note can mean to observe (to read) or to make note of (to inscribe); both involve acts of interpretation. A similar ambiguity arises in connection with the word mark. Benedick believes that he spies "some marks of love" in Beatrice once he falls in love with her (2.3.245-46). In the climactic church scene the friar, "by noting of the lady" (Hero), has "marked / A thousand blushing apparitions / To start into her face …" (4.1.158-60). Benedick's act of "marking" is clearly a projection, but the question then arises whether the friar's marking of Hero is not equally so.

Hero's nothing invites noting, her blankness produces marking, and the ambiguity of this action occurs not only in the play but also in the critical commentary. Marilyn French describes Hero this way [in Shakespeare's Division of Experience, 1981]: "As a noncharacter, the obedient and silent Hero exemplifies the inlaw [i.e., subordinate] feminine principle at its most acceptable: but like Bianca in Taming, she wears the disguise
society demands of her, but harbors other thoughts under her impeccable exterior." The equation of Hero with Bianca, a conscious hypocrite who wears a "disguise" and harbors a subversive will, blurs the distinction toward which French seems to gesture with her initial suggestion that Hero is a "noncharacter." Without confronting her conflicting readings as a critical problem, French contradictorily treats Hero sometimes as a character whose hidden depths she can read and sometimes as a symbol that functions as pure surface; but in effect the play itself does the same thing. Ironically, the attempt to read Hero as a psychologically realized character, in this feminist approach to the play, leads French to adopt a notion of Hero's "seeming" that concurs with the one Claudio takes up in his most misogynistic moment (4.1). To avoid this difficulty, it seems to me, one must be willing to regard Hero as a kind of cipher or space, which other characters—and perhaps critics as well—fill with readings of their own.

In the opening scene, where the personalities, roles, and relations of the characters are largely established, Hero has only one line, seven words, and these are to explain a remark of Beatrice's. Though the actor playing the part has recourse to some nonverbal means of establishing the character for the audience (facial expressions, gestures, placement on stage, etc.), the text itself portrays Hero primarily through the effect she produces on Claudio. Typically, the exchange between Claudio and Benedick about Claudio's "soft and delicate desires" (303) reveals little about Hero but a good deal about the two speakers. Beside Benedick's energetic irony, Claudio's desires seem a little too delicate, his love a little bloodless. When he tremulously asks whether Benedick does not find Hero "a modest young lady" (165) and, gathering courage, pronounces her "the sweetest lady that ever I looked on" (187-88), his adjectives betray more propriety and sentiment than they do passion. When he demonstrates a penchant for romantic hyperbole ("Can the world buy such a jewel?" [181]), which Benedick neatly deflates, his extravagant praise expresses, not burning Petrarchan longings, but a kind of wistful acquisitiveness.

Benedick greets Claudio's desire to marry with a sardonic lament for the decline of bachelors: "hath not the world one man but he will wear his cap with suspicion?" (197-99). It becomes clear, however, that Claudio does wear his cap with suspicion—and a good deal of it, too. The cautious reticence of his confession of his love is self-protective: a desire to assess the lady's merit and other men's opinions of it before betraying too ardent a regard for her. He is edgy about the whole business and wary of his friend's responses. "Didst thou note the daughter of Signior Leonato? … Is she not a modest young lady?" he asks Benedick; and he then exhorts him, "I pray thee tell me truly how thou lik'st her" (161-63, 165, 177-78). Even when told what he wants to hear, Claudio has misgivings. When Don Pedro assures him that "the lady is very well worthy" Claudio responds "You speak this to fetch me in, my lord" (221-23). Claudio further reveals his anxieties in the first scene of act 2: anticipating his later behavior by believing without question Don John's assertion that Don Pedro has won Hero, Claudio gives vent to his sense of betrayal in a brief, telling soliloquy:

'Tis certain so. The Prince woos for himself. Friendship is constant in all other things Save in the office and affairs of love; Therefore all hearts in love use their own tongues. Let every eye negotiate for itself, And trust no agent; for beauty is a witch Against whose charms faith melteth into blood. This is an accident of hourly proof, Which I mistrusted not. Farewell therefore Hero! (174-82)
Abdicating the use of one's own tongue, Claudio laments bitterly, leaves one vulnerable to treachery; to be represented by another is to be wounded. What is perhaps more revealing, though, is the way in which the speech subtly shifts the blame for the supposed betrayal from its ostensible object, Don Pedro, to the "witch," female beauty. Though not specifically accused, Hero is subsumed into an archetype of destructive female power—of the sorceress who deprives men of their wills and dissolves the solidarity of masculine bonds into the "blood" of passion and violence. Like Benedick, Claudio associates love with a loss of blood, not the woman's loss of hymenal blood but the loss a man suffers from the castrating wound love inflicts. Claudio's references to Hero here take on sexual over-tones wholly lacking in his earlier "noting" of her modesty and sweetness. He perceives her as a sexual being only in her capacity to betray and then perceives her as a powerful threat, suggesting that in his imagination he has desexualized the Hero he wishes to marry. When he learns that Don Pedro has, in fact, honored their agreement and that Hero is to be his, he reverts to his romantic perception of her. The pattern established in this early episode is repeated, as we shall see, in the catastrophe of acts 4 and 5.

III

The first three acts of Much Ado clearly establish the capabilities and limitations of Messina's aristocratic milieu: its sophisticated, graceful, almost choreographic social forms; its brilliant language and aggressive wit; and the tight rein kept on emotions, making them difficult or dangerous to express. Whether we are more charmed or put off by Messina's genteel artificiality, the violent outburst in the catastrophic church scene comes as a shock (4.1). We have, of course, seen trouble brewing. Don John's malicious intentions are revealed early (1.3), and we know from his first attempt at sabotaging Claudio's love that Claudio's distrust of the witchlike powers of female beauty is close to the surface and easily triggered. In a scene paralleling that earlier deception (3.2), Don John comes to Claudio with his accusation that "the lady is disloyal" (104). He offers ocular proof, and Claudio, who had earlier resolved to "let every eye negotiate for itself," swallows the bait: "If I see anything tonight why I should not marry her, tomorrow in the congregation, where I should wed, there will I shame her" (123-25). It is not so much on Claudio's eye, however, as on his mind's eye that Don John practices deceit. Using subtly sexual language to describe what Claudio will see—"Go but with me to-night, and you shall see her chamber-window entered" (112-13)—Don John raises the figure of a witchlike, betraying, sexual Hero in Claudio's imagination, and the image of the "sweet" and "modest" Hero gives way before it. Claudio believes the ocular proof before he sees anything—"O mischief strangely thwarting!" he cries (132), as he goes off to spy on her window.

Critics dissatisfied with Much Ado have complained that its near tragic catastrophe violates the comic mood of the rest of the play. The naked emotions that erupt in act 4 among the hitherto highly civil characters are calculated, I think, to be startling. Yet what makes this behavior almost inevitable has been implicit from the first scene. The witty discourse that gives the play its vitality and the Messinans much of their charm consists mainly of tendentious jokes—covert expressions of aggression or sexual hostility. The polished behavior, the elegant courtesies, and the verbal sophistication of the characters have served through three acts of the play to cover or contain these energies. In the scene at the church, however, once the surface of decorous ritual has been stripped away, the violence of the emotion and the language, especially Claudio's, becomes explicit and shocking.

Though the manner Claudio displays here differs drastically from his reverence for Hero in the scenes of his courtship and betrothal, he is not inconsistent. The self-protective reserve and the conflicted perceptions of Hero underlying his earlier sentimental expressions now motivate his scathing castigation of her. Kerby Neill, writing an "acquittal" for Claudio [in "More Ado about Claudio: An Acquittal for the Slandered Groom," Shakespeare Quarterly 3, 1952], emphasizes Shakespeare's departure from his sources in "removing all trace of carnality from the hero's love." "If anything," he argues, "the bitterness of Claudio's denunciation of Hero shows an abhorrence of … carnality…. The … effect is to idealize Claudio even as he denounces the innocent Hero. He remains a good man, although deceived…. " Neill, in effect, takes Caludio at his own
valuation—claiming that he "sinned not but in mistaking," as Claudio says of himself (5.1.273-74)—and in so doing accepts implicitly the dualism inherent in Claudio's view of Hero: it is his "abhorrence of carnality" that allows his romantic idealism to coexist with a powerful misogyny. In the first scene of act 4 the thought that, despite his caution, he was nearly taken advantage of kindles in Claudio a hot, self-righteous resentment. The "witch" female beauty, he thinks, almost made him the victim of her "exterior shows." This time he is well guarded with elaborate language, wittier in his cruelty than he had ever been in jest:

O Hero! What a Hero hadst thou been,
If half thy outward graces had been placed
   About thy thoughts and counsels of thy heart!
But fare thee well, most foul, most fair!
   farewell;
Thou pure impiety and impious purity!

(Claudio) 100-04

Claudio's radically divided sense of Hero's identity is most fully apparent in this scene. When Leonato suggests that Claudio himself might, in a bridegroom's natural impatience, have "made defeat of her virginity," Claudio denies it with priggish distaste:

I know what you would say: If I have known
   her,
You will say, she did embrace me as a
   husband,
And so extenuate the 'forehand sin.
No, Leonato,
I never tempted her with word too large,
But as a brother to his sister, show'd
   Bashful sincerity and comely love.

(Claudio) 48-54

Either Hero must be the unthreatening sexless recipient of Claudio's "comely" fraternal love, or she becomes the treacherous beauty whose witch-like powers destroy men. But where Claudio had previously responded to alternative possibilities for Hero's identity, he now imagines the dichotomy to be one between her surface and her hidden nature. He is most outraged by what he takes to be her "seeming":

She's but the sign and semblance of her
   honor.
Behold how like a maid she blushes here!
O, what authority and show of truth
Can cunning sin cover itself withal!
Comes not that blood as modest evidence
To witness simple virtue? Would you not
   swear,
All you that see her, that she were a maid,
By these exterior shows? But she is none.
She knows the heat of a luxurious bed;
Her blush is guiltiness, not modesty.

(Claudio) 33-42

In a sense Claudio is correct in calling Hero "the sign and semblance of her honor." Her place in the world of this play is most apparent in this scene, where, nearly silent and finally subsiding into unconsciousness under
the onslaught of abuse, she becomes in effect a sign to be read and interpreted by others. Claudio sarcastically rejects her "authority" to be perceived as she presents herself. He has, he thinks, the clue that allows him to read her true worth and nature. It is particularly the "blood" visible in Hero's face that is taken to signify the state of her soul. "Comes not that blood as modest evidence / To witness simple virtue?" he asks with the ironic jubilance of a reader onto the meaning of a text, the truth that her "blush is guiltiness, not modesty." His descriptions of the polarities of Hero's identity become more and more elaborate and literary, and he returns to the significance of her "blood" in this depiction of opposing female archetypes:

You seem to me as Dian in her orb,
As chaste as is the bud ere it be blown;
But you are more intemperate in your blood
Than Venus, or those pampered animals
That rage in savage sensuality.

(57-61)

Having found the key to reading women, Claudio suggests as he exits, he will know how to apply it in the future:

For thee I'll lock up all the gates of love,
And on my eyelids shall conjecture hang,
To turn all beauty into thoughts of harm,
And never shall it more be gracious.

(105-08)

Leonato, thrown into an anguish of uncertainty by Claudio's outburst, charges his daughter to answer her accusers, but he hardly hears her simple denial. Quickly persuaded when Claudio's claims are seconded by Don Pedro, and by Don John, who hints darkly at the unutterable nature of Hero's crimes ("There is not chastity enough in language / Without offense to utter them" [97-98]), Leonato grasps Claudio's method of reading his child. He believes that her surface has been stripped away to expose the secret foulness of her sexuality; her silence is a horrifying nakedness. When the friar ventures to suggest that her accusers may be mistaken, Leonato rejects the possibility:

Friar, it cannot be.
Thou seest that all the grace that she hath left
Is that she will not add to her damnation
A sin of perjury; she not denies it.
Why seest thou then to cover with excuse
That which appears in proper nakedness?

(170-75)

Leonato too rejects Hero's authority to voice her own nature, which he believes he can read. "[C]ould she here deny / The story that is printed in her blood?" he demands. In her blood he reads the story of "her foul tainted flesh" and insists that "Death is the fairest cover for her shame / That may be wish'd for" (121-22, 143, 116-17). Ironically, thinking that they have exposed the "proper nakedness" of Hero's sin, her accusers expose only themselves.

It is in the wake of this scene of exposure that Benedick and Beatrice reveal their love for each other. Love, and the vulnerability that comes with it, has been a kind of exposure each has dodged through most of the play. Their resolutions to open themselves to love have been followed by physical illness (Benedick's tooth-ache, Beatrice's cold), which, whether real or feigned, suggests the anxiety such exposure produces. Distracted from their anxieties about themselves for a moment by their preoccupation with Claudio's
denunciation of Hero, Benedick and Beatrice are able to talk to each other without persiflage. The intimacy of the situation (255-88) quickly leads to revelation, and for a moment we watch what appears to be an alternative to the kind of self-protective emotional display witnessed in Claudio. Benedick initiates it with his sudden, apropos-of-nothing, unprecedentedly literal confession: "I do love nothing in the world so well as you—is not that strange?" (268-69). And though Beatrice has to be teased out of her evasiveness, she is brought to respond in kind:

Beat. You have stayed me in a happy hour, I was about to protest I loved you.
Bene. And do it with all thy heart.
Beat. I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest.

(283-87)

The warmth and simplicity of the language are like nothing we have heard before in the play (as was Claudio's unmasked brutality), and we are apt to watch this exchange with relief. At last the masks seem to be dropped; at last two characters seem to confront each other "in proper nakedness." But the intimacy of the moment is volatile, and it leads to something for which we are unprepared. "Come, bid me do anything for thee," Benedick jubilantly exclaims. And Beatrice quite unexpectedly responds, "Kill Claudio" (288-89).

Benedick's Claudio-like hyperbole perhaps recalls to Beatrice the whole preceding scene of Hero's rejection and humiliation by the man in whose power she had placed herself, and Beatrice hastily retreats from her emotional surrender. Her demand that Benedick kill Claudio is a double defense, placing Benedick in an impossible position and covering her exposed tenderness with a display of ferocity. She is both magnificent and absurd in her vigorous denunciation of Claudio:

Is 'a not approv'd in the height a villain, that hath slander'd, scorned, dishonored my kinswoman? O that I were a man! What, bear her in hand until they come to take hands; and then, with public accusation, uncovered slander, unmitigated rancor—O God that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the marketplace!

(301-07)

Beatrice's explosion of moral outrage against Claudio is immensely satisfying, partly because it gives vent to our own frustrated sense of justice (the release of this pent-up emotion is also why we laugh at the scene). Her anger takes in not only Claudio but men in general—the "princes and counties" (315), and the fathers, who have united in persecuting Hero and against whom Beatrice is powerless to act.

The critics quoted at the beginning of this essay emphasize particularly this moment in designating Beatrice a champion of the "feminine principles" needed to correct the evils of Messina's "predominantly masculine ethos." John Crick praises her "feminine charity," her "generosity and sympathy in a world dominated by ultimately inhumane standards, as Barbara Everett does her "dogged, loyal, irrational femininity." Although Beatrice's outburst is extremely gratifying—the scene is constructed to make it so—it is important to recognize that her fury imitates what we might call the dogged, brutal, irrational masculinity just displayed by Claudio and Leonato: her rage is generated by her inability to "be a man with wishing" and to do what men do. She echoes the masculine revenge ethic voiced earlier by Leonato, who, brought finally to consider the possibility of Hero's innocence, had vowed to have his revenge on somebody (190-92). Far from proposing an alternative to masculine values, Beatrice regrets their decline and upbraids Benedick for his unmanly reluctance to exchange verbal aggression, which is common coin in Messina, for real violence:
O that I were a man for his sake! Or that I had any friend who would be a man for my sake! But manhood is melted into cursies, valor into compliment, and men are only turned into tongue, and trim ones too. He is now as valiant as Hercules that only tells a lie, and swears it. I cannot be a man with wishing; and therefore I will die a woman with grieving.

The last line of her tirade raises the question of what might be an adequate "feminine" alternative to the "predominantly masculine ethos" of Messina. Beatrice longs to take arms against a sea of masculine troubles but, by opposing, would only perpetuate them. The sole alternative that presents itself to her, however, is to follow Hero's model of conventional femininity and "die a woman" in silent grief.

The friar has proposed a somewhat different way of dealing with the crisis. "By noting of the lady," he has "marked" signs of her innocence and has produced a plan that he hopes will work changes in Claudio's poisoned imagination by means of a fiction:

So will it fare with Claudio,
When he shall hear she died upon his words,
Th' idea of her life shall sweetly creep
Into his study of imagination,
And every lovely organ of her life
Shall come apparel'd in more precious habit,
More moving, delicate, and full of life,
Into the eye and prospect of his soul
Than when she liv'd indeed. Then shall he
mourn,
If ever love had interest in his liver,
And wish he had not so accused her.
No, though he thought his accusation true.

Many critics have seen the friar as the point of moral reference in the play and also as the instrument of its resolution. His sensible resistance to the false evidence that has fooled Don Pedro and Claudio, his opposition to their outbursts of violent emotion, his attentions to Hero, and his proposal to educate Claudio in Christian forgiveness—all these actions seem to place the religious father outside Messina's masculine ethos and to confer on him a special moral authority. The tendency to see him in this light, whether we attribute it to indicators in the text (the friar's speech is rhetorically impressive) or to a powerful desire to see moral coherence in Shakespearean comedy, has led otherwise careful critics into a simple error of fact: the friar's plan fails. The plan is specifically a response to Claudio's determination to "lock up all the gates of love" by hanging "conjecture" on his eyelids "To turn all beauty into thoughts of harm." The friar proposes to change the way Claudio sees, introducing a "moving" image of Hero "Into the eye and prospect of his soul" through the fiction of her death. The friar looks to do more than correct Claudio's "mistake" about Hero's virtue: he hopes that Claudio will change in a way that will induce remorse and love "though he thought his accusation true." Shakespeare dramatized such a conversion much later in Cymbeline, when Posthumus, believing himself responsible for Imogen's death, laments his harsh judgment of her in a long soliloquy before he learns of her innocence (5.1.1-17).

The proposed resolution does not occur. Not only is Claudio not grief-stricken when we see him next (5.1), he is rather giddy. He shows no shame when Leonato accuses him of killing Hero through his villainy ("My villainy!") he asks indignantly [72]), and he describes the incident flippantly when Benedick arrives: "We had lik'd to have our two noses snapp'd off with two old men without teeth" (115-16). He then goads Benedick
about Beatrice as though nothing had happened since the third scene of act 3. Don Pedro behaves with the same careless good humor, both of them apparently hoping that Hero's "death" will pass off as merely an unfortunate social awkwardness. It is not until he learns of her innocence that Claudio's feeling changes; the issue is no longer a matter of forgiveness now but only of getting the facts straight. Claudio does not question his behavior or his assumptions, contending that he "sinned not but in mistaking," and once in possession of the "truth" about Hero, he simply reverts to his initial image of her: "Sweet Hero, now thy image doth appear / In the rare semblance that I lov'd it first" (251-52). The image of the witch is dispelled—and replaced by its opposite—but the sexual dualism that governs Hero's "image" is not displaced or questioned.

It would perhaps be tendentious to refer this outcome to some moral or tactical failure on the friar's part. The simpler explanation is that the plan to reform Claudio fails because his callousness makes him incapable of responding as predicted. Nonetheless, the friar's well-meaning intervention on Hero's behalf may in some sense undercut its own power to effect changes in the world of the play and may unconsciously reinforce the assumptions of which Hero is a victim. The friar's plea on behalf of the prostrate Hero reverses but also imitates the speeches of her accusers. Claudio had angrily denied the "authority" of her "semblance" and had read her blush as the sign of her guilt. Leonato too had insisted on his reading of "the story that is printed in her blood." The friar, in opposing these interpretations of what is seen in Hero's face, also emphasizes his authority to speak for the silent Hero:

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Trust not my reading, nor my observations,
Which with experimental seal doth warrant
The tenure of my book; trust not my age,
My reverence, calling, nor divinity,
If this sweet lady lie not guiltless here
Under some biting error.
(4.1.165-70)
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The friar offers his own reading of Hero's blood:

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I have marked
A thousand blushing apparitions
To start into her face, a thousand innocent
shames
In angel whiteness beat away those blushes …
(4.1.158-61)
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The friar's plot to counter the "misprision" of Claudio and Don Pedro parallels in certain respects the plot by which Don John engineers the catastrophe. Don John, though "not of many words," is a master of representation in the play. Keeping aloof from the action himself, he commissions Borachio to stage the scene in which Claudio will read Hero's guilt. "I will so fashion the matter that Hero shall be absent," promises Borachio (2.2.46-47); and he then enlists Margaret to represent Hero by dressing in her clothes. The representation succeeds in replacing in Claudio's imagination the image of Hero as chaste Dian with that of her as intemperate Venus. The friar too intends to make Hero's absence the occasion for a "moving" representation of her (4.1): "Let her awhile be secretly kept in, / And publish it that she is dead indeed …" (203-04). When the fiction of Hero's death reaches Claudio, the friar predicts, her image will present itself to him "apparil'd in more precious habit, / … Than when she liv'd indeed." Claudio will then see Hero's "angel whiteness," which the friar believes to represent her true character, "her maiden truth" (164). Though the friar intends the image to be "More moving, delicate, and full of life" than her physical presence ("Than when she liv'd indeed"), death is its essential feature: this representation of Hero is cleansed of carnality, of the blood that has been read as the sign of sexuality and guilt; the friar can interpret Hero's blood as the blush of innocence because "a thousand innocent shames / In angel whiteness beat away those blushes"—leaving her
bloodless, white, and corpse-like in her swoon. He will represent her as "delicate," like the "soft and delicate desires" that Claudio claims to be "comely" and asexual; "every lovely organ of her life" will come to Claudio to be anatomized and read as evidence of chastity, so that the fluid, vital, ambiguous text of her face will be replaced by a petrified monument to her virginity. The displacement is achieved when the penitent Claudio goes in obedience to Leonato, to "Hang an epitaph upon her tomb" that declares her innocent and glorified by death.

IV

The ghost of Hero's ambiguity continues to haunt the play. In the scenes following Claudio's denunciation, her "death" has an uncanny force that far exceeds its limited status as a strategic fiction. Like the deformed-thief fashion, the fiction of Hero's death takes on a life of its own, independent of the circumstances for which it was invented. A striking peculiarity of the final act is the way in which the practicers seem taken in by their own device, becoming Hero's mourners and avengers in a plot that exercises a peculiar power over their emotions and imaginations: it is as though they—and somehow the play itself—need Hero to be dead for reasons that have nothing to do with Claudio.

Claudio's outburst against Hero has exposed the potential for cruelty and violence in Messina's masculine order so unequivocally that resolution would seem to depend on some kind of confrontation with the fears and assumptions of which Hero has been a victim. In the fiction of her death, however, the play finds a ritual resolution that reasserts Messina's stability without the need for painful questioning. Nonetheless, the play's attempt to move toward a comic conclusion and to evade what its plot has exposed places a strain on the fifth act, producing a peculiar shiftiness of tone and mode.

As the characters come under the sway of their fiction, they become increasingly enigmatic in a way that seems to mark a shift in the play's mode of representation. Act 5 begins with Antonio's grieving "counsel" and Leonato's formal lament:

I pray thee cease thy counsel,
Which falls into mine ears as profitless
As water in a sieve. Give not me counsel,
Nor let no comforter delight mine ear
But such a one whose wrongs do suit with
mine.
Bring me a father that so lov'd his child,
Whose joy of her is overwhelm'd like mine,
And bid him speak of patience.…

Leonato's language, with its past-tense references to Hero, has the emotional impact of a father's lament for his dead child; it carries a weight, a dignity and conviction, which nearly overshadows our own knowledge that the death is a fiction. Somehow this fiction has become the governing reality of the play, a fantasy more real than the "truth."

Benedick too, acting on his pledge to Beatrice, challenges Claudio and, like Leonato, becomes formalized and enigmatic as he solemnly maintains Hero's death and appears ready to make it good with his sword: "You have killed a sweet lady, and her death shall fall heavy on you" (148-49). The characters no longer seem to be in the same play, and the resolution cannot come about until Claudio enters the more formalized dramatic world in which the governing plot is the fiction of Hero's death.
The scene at Hero's "tomb" (5.3) marks Claudio's and Don Pedro's entrance into the fictional world created by the other characters. This is the play's most highly formal scene, governed in both its action and its language by the conventions of ritual. Even the few lines of dialogue that are not read from Claudio's prepared text are noticeably conventional in style. Don Pedro's dismissal of the mourners is hardly a return to natural speech:

Good morrow, masters, put your torches out.
The wolves have preyed, and look, the gentle day,
Before the wheels of Phoebus, round about
Dapples the drowsy east with spots of gray.

(24-27)

Much of the critical worrying about Much Ado and its ending focuses on the question of whether this ritual signifies a change in Claudio sufficient to warrant his good fortune in the next scene, where Hero is restored to him. The question cannot be answered. The entire play has shifted its grounds in a way that makes such assessments impossible, if not irrelevant. Yet the ritual itself witnesses to the survival of the fundamental structures of Messina's masculine ethos—structures that the shift toward ritual has allowed the play to preserve.

As I have argued, the sequence of events in act 5 points explicitly to the practical gratuitousness of the fiction and the funeral. Early in the first scene the deception proves ineffectual as a means of softening Claudio, who remains unmoved by the news of Hero's death. Moments later Borachio confesses his crimes and clears Hero's name, leaving no effective reason why the characters cannot produce Hero and reveal her death as a lie. Instead, they complicate the fiction with details about a marriageable niece and engage Claudio to take part in mourning Hero. Hero's funeral is dramatically necessary as Claudio's ritual of expiation. Were Claudio not assimilable into the circle of Hero's family and friends, Messina would be confronted with a fundamental breakdown of its cultural assumptions, which Claudio reflects. Claudio's submission to the authority of Leonato, his agreement to lead Hero's obsequies and to take an unknown bride, permits the play to reach a kind of comic closure. The question is not whether Claudio is sincere—he is certainly that, insofar as a ritual mode allows for such a distinction. The question is what the ritual and Claudio's participation in it signify.

For the ritual itself is, if anything, a reassertion of Messina's old order in new terms. At this crucial moment Hero's exclusion is the condition on which Claudio's reintegration into Messina's social structure and the play's comic resolution depends. Hero's ambiguous blood has been purged away; she is now only "glorious fame" (5.3.8), a name placed unequivocally under the sign of chaste Dian, whose "virgin knight" (5.3.13) Hero is declared to be. The ritual exorcises the threat of Hero's body, whose intactness was so precariously in question, and the ambiguity of her face, which led to violently contradictory readings in act 4. When Hero becomes a monument, her signifying power is tamed. She is redefined so as to be reappropriated to the patriarchal order as a disembodied ideal: "the sign and semblance of her honor." Claudio's placement of the epitaph on her tomb explicitly dramatizes the silencing of the woman's voice, the substitution of the man's:

"Hang thou there upon the tomb, / Praising her when I am dumb" (5.3.9-10). Claudio's text will always speak for Hero, even after Claudio himself is "dumb."

Besides the shift toward ritual, the play engages another strategy in moving toward its comic conclusion. This might be described as a centrifugal process that deflects emphasis from the central characters onto those who constitute the plot's machinery. Claudio's guilt is displaced onto Borachio and ultimately onto Don John, making it possible for Leonato to declare in the last scene that Claudio and Don Pedro are innocent, having accused Hero "upon the error" perpetrated by others (5.4.3).

The serviceable Borachio is most immediately behind Hero's undoing. It is he who first discovers Claudio's interest in Hero and relays the information to Don John (1.3). It is Borachio, again, who concocts the scheme
to deceive Claudio with the amorous tableau at Hero's window. Borachio is also, in a sense, responsible for the denouement, as his confession reveals Hero's innocence and Claudio's "mistake." Autonomous as Borachio is in inventing and carrying out his plot, it is Don John who is the archvillain and the "author of all, who is fled and gone" (5.2.98-99). Don John remains behind the scenes, a shadow himself who causes Claudio to see in shadows the signs of Hero's guilt. Don John's motive is ostensibly resentment toward his legitimate brother; but just as guilt is transferred from Claudio to Borachio to Don John, so Don John's malice, aiming at Don Pedro, glances on Claudio but strikes Hero as its victim. As victim and villain, Hero and Don John serve Messina in the capacities of sacrifice and scapegoat, the one bringing about Messina's atonement through her death, the other carrying off its sins.

The ambiguity of Margaret's role in Borachio's plot has caused some consternation among critics. Logically speaking, Margaret must have known of the accusations against Hero and would inevitably recognize the source of error, that she herself had been mistaken for Hero as she talked with Borachio from Hero's window. Margaret does not disclose any of this, nor does she show any signs of concern or uneasiness during her witty exchange with Benedick in the second scene of act 5. In absolving Claudio and Don Pedro of their "error" in humiliating Hero, however, Leonato transfers part of the blame to Margaret—"But Margaret was in some fault for this"—while paradoxically suggesting that she participated "against her will" (5.4.1-5). The sequence of Leonato's lines suggests, if somewhat vaguely, that Margaret is being made to bear Claudio's and Don Pedro's guilt, that she is guilty in their place, while at the same time denying her conscious, voluntary complicity. Margaret is, in a sense, Hero's double, wearing her clothes, speaking from her window, answering to her name; and the ambiguity of her innocence or guilt points to an ambiguity about Hero, an ambiguity not "in" her character but, rather, in others' perceptions of her. The play simultaneously represents Hero as innocent and punishes her as guilty. Margaret both represents and carries off Hero's ambiguous taint.

"If you meet a thief," Dogberry instructs the watch, "you may suspect him, by virtue of your office, to be no true man; and for such a kind of men, the less you meddle or make them, why the more is for your honesty" (3.3.50-53). In a passing comment [in *The Sexual Enlightenment of Children*, edited by Philip Rieff, 1963], Freud compares Dogberry's counsel to that of physicians who "implore us for heaven's sake not to meddle with the evil things that lurk behind a neurosis." Freud finds in Dogberry a convenient figure for avoidance or repression of the unconscious and does not pursue the comparison with reference to *Much Ado about Nothing*, but perhaps we might take up Freud's analogy in considering Dogberry's function in the play. Despite the admonition not to "meddle or make with" unsavory characters, the night watch does "comprehend" (at least in Dogberry's sense) the "false knaves" Borachio and Conrade (4.2.21). Yet Dogberry and his men do serve the plot as a means of avoiding what might otherwise be the crux of the play: Claudio's intractability in the face of Hero's death. By producing the malefactors and getting their "villainy … upon record" (5.1.239-40), Dogberry shifts the play's focus away from this violent and unsettling misogyny and into a more legalistic vein. By providing villains against whom the law can proceed, Dogberry allows the play to move toward its comic resolution without meddling further with the tensions that triggered its catastrophe.

Besides functioning as an avoidance mechanism, Dogberry serves in another way to mimic larger processes at work in the play: he participates in and parodies the masculine concern with controlling signification, particularly that which relates to himself. We have seen this masculine anxiety most conspicuously in Benedick's fantastic fear of being marked by, even of becoming, a sign of the cuckold, of losing his status as a subject of language and becoming instead its object, its victim, its fool. Dogberry attempts to impress his authority on others by means of his ponderous language, the inflated diction that leads him from one malapropism to the next. Because he cannot master his own meanings, he is continually overmastered by a language that eludes his control and undercuts the authority he wishes to exert over it—and through it, over others.

The final scene restores something like the balance of formality and gaiety with which the play opens. Claudio and Don Pedro are absolved in a single line from Leonato, and our attention quickly turns to Benedick's
mock-rueful request that the friar "bind [him], or undo [him]" (5.4.20) by marrying him to Beatrice. Benedick and Beatrice have left off the dangerous literalness of their mutual self-exposure in act 4; they resume their roles, knowing full well how transparent they are, and their playfulness is perfectly winning. The critical consensus seems to be that this union of Benedick and Beatrice answers whatever dissatisfaction we continue to feel over Claudio and Hero, and in a sense this is right: we like these characters and the sense of euphoria their wit produces. But it is another question whether Benedick and Beatrice represent a challenge or an alternative to Messina's limitations. Different as they are in style from Claudio and Hero, Benedick and Beatrice are of a piece with their world; there is no world elsewhere in this play—even their irony cannot create one, for it participates in the assumptions that shape Messina.

In many ways the final scene reiterates what has been problematic from the play's beginning. The four ladies enter masked and remain, in effect, ciphers until called for by their betrothed husbands. (The text indicates no point at which Margaret or Ursula unmasks. Remaining perhaps a little behind Hero and Beatrice on the stage, the effaced women reinforce the status of women as ciphers until named by men.) In revealing herself and giving herself to Claudio, Hero repeats Claudio's dualistic notion of her identity: "One Hero died defiled; but I do live, / And surely as I live, I am a maid" (5.4.63-64). Her ritual death has purged Hero of intemperate Venus's sexuality, and she returns as Dian in her orb. Don Pedro's exclamation is telling: "The former Hero! Hero that is dead!" (65). Hero remains dead in her resurrection, as she is reappropriated to the mode of perception that killed her.

The circularity here is reinforced by the way this final scene repeats the play's beginning. Having avoided the violent confrontations that threatened to break out after Hero's "death," the male characters recur to their verbal aggression and particularly to their cuckold jokes (5.4.43-51, 121-22). That the jokes retain their original force indicates that Messina's masculine ethos survives unchanged. The play began with the defeat of Don John, and with his defeat it ends, leaving us to wonder, if we care to, when he will next escape.

The readings of Much Ado quoted at the beginning of this essay participate in the play's drive toward ritual transcendence—a movement invoked and sanctioned by the friar. To resist this movement, as my reading of the play does, is manifestly to read against the grain of the play's explicitly offered resolution: it is to recognize what the play's drive toward comic closure suppresses but simultaneously exposes. In his repeated exposure of the limits of his own authority, perhaps Dogberry suggests a way of reading the play as self-exposure: the play is partly the record of its own limitations. In presenting Hero as a kind of cipher, Much Ado reflects its patriarchal heritage; yet it is Hero's very blankness that allows the revealing explosion to occur. The play's explicit representation of masculine fantasy and delusion trades on, and partakes of, the process it explores. Or should we say it exposes the process it trades on? The mode of representation that makes possible the play's main plot—a mode in which women are ciphers—is implicated in that plot, obliquely revealing the underlying sexual values and assumptions that motivate the unfolding of the drama.

Further Reading

Argues that Dogberry, in his absurd pomposity and "splendid lunacy," functions as a comic parody of the egotistical self-love "which is endemic" to Messina.


Identifies the battle of the sexes, the difficulties of disposing of a marriageable young daughter, and the plight of an "ugly duckling" bachelor or spinster who is alienated from the community as three major concerns of Much Ado about Nothing.

Approaches Much Ado about Nothing, particularly the character of Claudio, as a "judicious experiment in dramatic economy," emphasizing its stylization, symbolism, and ritual, and the fact that Claudio's "changing situation is expressed in a series of cameos."


Challenges the notion that Much Ado about Nothing is a play with "a few good acting parts standing out against the unsatisfactory background of a preposterous Italian romance," arguing instead that in Messina Shakespeare depicts a complacent society in which "the instincts of life are in danger of being drained away in small-talk."


Contends that Much Ado about Nothing "subjects to comic scrutiny" the myriad implications of various messages and "the process of interpretation imposed by the delivery of messages."


Maintains that the characters in Much Ado about Nothing move between two "modes of perception": that of wit, which relies on sensory evidence, prudence, and reason, and that of belief or intuition.


Examines Shakespeare's use of details from Bandello, Spenser, and Orlando Furioso in the plot and characterizations of Much Ado about Nothing.


Explores the social environment of Messina. The critic finds that the society depicted is composed of conventional, respectable, but rather shallow citizens, and of soldiers, whose ranks are split by dissension, misunderstanding, and their inability to recognize proper objects of trust or of suspicion.


Places Much Ado about Nothing in relationship to Renaissance antitheatrical discourse "as that discourse provides a mechanism for managing gender and class conflict," and disputes several modern readings which, "in moralizing the play's characters and events, ignore the political implications of its representations of gender and class."

Observes that, in order to resolve the romantic conflicts in his comedies, Shakespeare more than once invokes the Christian idea of repentance and pardon for sin.


Demonstrates that in Much Ado about Nothing Shakespeare sought to combine, through a skillful interplay of formality and naturalism, the "range and fluidity" of The Merchant of Venice with the "harmony of disparate elements" that distinguishes A Midsummer Night's Dream.


Compares the use and development of comic procedures in Jonson's The Alchemist with those in Much Ado about Nothing and notes how these procedures affect the responses of the reader.


Examines the negative connotations of "fashion" in Much Ado about Nothing, noting that this term frequently implies frivolity, effeminacy, opportunism, and inability "to thread one's way through the moral labyrinth and to attain to right choice."


Interprets Claudio's repudiation of Hero in terms of "the ramifications of English matrimonial law," maintaining that he "is merely acting in conformity with Elizabethan conventions and safeguarding his legal position."


Clarifies Shakespeare's conception of love relationships, wit, and perception in Much Ado about Nothing by comparing it with Edward Albee's Virginia Woolf.


Compares the intricately changing relationships between Claudio and Hero, and Beatrice and Benedick, to the steps of a sixteenth-century formal dance, noting that it is only at the end, when the action resolves into a unified pattern of love and friendship, music and marriage, "that they are in tune with each other."

Treats *Much Ado about Nothing* as a play whose principal concern is the relationship between nonconformity and social responsibility.


Regards "manipulation" as a significant theme in *Much Ado about Nothing*, arguing that in this comedy, a character's ability to mature is presented as depending on his or her response to "outer control," imposed in the form of tricks or commands or societal pressures.
Much Ado about Nothing (Vol. 55)

Introduction

Much Ado about Nothing

See also Much Ado about Nothing Criticism (Volume 88).

One of Shakespeare's most popular comedies, *Much Ado about Nothing* combines a cheerful mood with an intricate series of deceptions and miscommunications. As Richard Ornstein (1986) summarizes, the play "is warm as well as witty, and compassionate in its view of human frailties and limitations." The play focuses on the conflict between Beatrice and Benedick, whose relationship takes place as a subplot within the narrative of Claudio's courtship, rejection, and rejuvenated love of Hero. The unconventionality of Beatrice and Benedick's relationship, which is based on an apparent mutual dislike, delight in wordplay, and the conspiratorial matchmaking of their family and friends, has frequently captured the interest of contemporary critics and modern audiences. Feminist critics of the late twentieth century have been drawn to the play's themes related to the feminine ideal and patriarchal authority. Other critics have focused on the misuse of political power and of ineptitude on the part of authorities in the play, as well as the seriousness of the "nothing"—triviality, silences, scenes unseen, and nonsense.

Beatrice's character, who is depicted as Benedick's equal in intelligence and will, has drawn the attention of feminist critics. Her well-known exclamation, "O that I were a man …!" and her assertiveness mark her difference from Hero's conventional femininity. Kathleen L. Carroll (1990) looks to how Beatrice's character was portrayed in two nineteenth-century productions of *Much Ado about Nothing* in order to find "insight into the conflicting perceptions of femininity on the American stage." Claire McEachern (1988) contends that the play reflects Shakespeare's questioning of patriarchal authority and his desire to examine its root causes. McEachern argues that *Much Ado about Nothing* dramatizes the conflicts and tensions within a patriarchal structure, particularly in its portrayal of the relationship between Hero and her father. Contesting this reading, Roy Battenhouse (1991) claims that Leonato's response to Claudio's rejection of Hero is absurdly overdrawn, and plays into the spirit of the comedy, rather than providing serious social critique. He argues that the play is best understood through Christian conceptions of redemption and resurrection, expressed in the Friar's advice to Hero: "Die to live." Recent feminist criticism has increasingly focused on the subtleties of Hero's characterization. Some critics have read Hero's treatment at the hands of her father and Claudio as Shakespeare's critique of feminine conventionality and the weakness of the feminine ideal in Elizabethan culture. Mark Taylor argues that Hero's silence at Claudio's declaration of love can be performed either as a momentary modest pause, or as an "implied ellipsis" that disturbs the conventionality of her role.

The tension in the play between the order established by authorities and the disorder constantly threatening this stability implies, as some scholars conclude, a different kind of cultural critique—that of the corruption or inefficiency of the political authorities of Shakespeare's time. The ineptness of Dogberry and the Watch, who ultimately do unravel Don John's scheme to undermine the marriage of Claudio and Hero, serves as a farcical subplot to the main dramatic action. Phoebe Spinrad (1992) contends that they bring order to the stage and affirm the general stability and political health of Messina. Gavin Edwards (1991) suggests that Shakespeare's attention to the temporal order of the play reinforces the impression that the audience is intended to see the intertwining of order and disorder. Ornstein comments on the mercurial change in the emotional tenor of the play's scenes as a reflection of the chaos—emotional and social—brought on by the human weaknesses of deceitfulness and gullibility. Claudio's character in particular reveals the difficulty of the comedy: his enactment of the "tradition of the courtly lover," as Karen Newman remarks (1985), brings him to repudiate Hero without arousing the loathing of the audience, so that he can redeem himself fully at the second wedding. Newman claims, "Mistaken identity, role-playing and alternate identities are therapeutic instruments which lead the characters to self-knowledge. …"
Several recent critics have attempted to articulate the significance of the title of the play: the role of what seems trivial, absurd, or unspoken. In addition to Hero's silences, the plot is confused by what have been termed “problematic” elements: the history of the relationship between Benedick and Beatrice, Claudio's callousness and subsequent regret, and why Hero cannot provide an alibi when she accused of being “but the sign and semblance of her honour.” David Ormerod examines how the word “fashion” functions as an alias for the word “nothing” in certain instances in the play, and contends that fashion “is the real villain of the play, and that its destructive function is recognised to a greater or lesser extent by many of the play's characters.” Stephen Dobranski (1998) elaborates on the hints in the text regarding Beatrice’s emotional history with Benedick, and suggests that the “nothing” of the title includes an “imagined lost child that haunts their relationship.” The ellipses, missing scenes, and trivialities that complicate the drama are, according to these writers, intimately bound up with its significance, and enrich its portrait of human interaction even as they interrupt any simple determination of genre.

Criticism: Overviews And General Studies
Robert Ornstein (essay date 1986)

[In the following essay, Ornstein introduces Much Ado about Nothing by examining the characters and changing moods of the play and comparing it to Shakespeare's other comedies.]

If Much Ado is not the most genial of the comedies, it is perhaps the most satisfying in form and substance. It is warm as well as witty, and compassionate in its view of human frailties and limitations. Its chief characters, Beatrice and Benedick, are the most attractive pair of lovers in the comedies—the only ones perhaps who are equally matched in intelligence, humor, and humanity. Except for the morose Don John, the other characters are engaging enough to win an audience’s affection. None is as coarse as Gratiano or as ignorant of self as Antonio or as shallow as Jessica. Because all are capable of kindness and some measure of nobility, the community of Messina can be forgiving of rashness. It does not close ranks against an outcast but rather tolerates the turncoat Don John in its midst, and it welcomes back at the close a Claudio who has mistreated Hero but who deserves a second chance at happiness and acceptance among those who gather in Leonato's household. At the same time Much Ado is as unsparing as The Merchant in its revelation of the obtuseness and cruelty with which the self-righteous can act. Its “trial” scene is uglier in its way than the one in The Merchant because it results in the condemnation of the innocent Hero and discloses something about conventional attitudes that we would prefer never to have known.

The rage in this scene is stunning because the early scenes of Much Ado are almost untouched by rancor or discord. Their easy informality and relaxed atmosphere are unique in the comedies, which more often than not open with a strain of antagonism or sorrow: a severe law threatens an old man's life, a would-be suitor is held back by a lack of funds, a father would coerce his daughter into a loveless match. In contrast, the first scenes of Much Ado promise nothing but homecoming celebrations, good conversations, and perhaps a marriage or two. A war has ended and the victorious general and his officers are about to return to cordial reunions in Messina. The only threat to public tranquility is the malcontented Don John, who was defeated in the war and now scowls and mutters of revenge. He is too grumpy, however, to seem very dangerous and he is known to be untrustworthy. The only plots that seem destined to succeed are those that are inspired by friendship and love, and they will unite rather than divide the citizens of Messina.

Although the slandering of Hero is a page out of romantic melodrama and her marriage as a veiled bride to Claudio is a page out of fairy tales, Much Ado has been called the most realistic of the comedies because it comes closest to mimicking the give and take of casual conversations and the daily routine of life in Leonato's household. Here a love match can be arranged without the intervention of goblins, without a choice of caskets, and without the renunciation of monastic vows. The spontaneity of these scenes is both artful and
paradoxical, however, because on the one hand the illusion is created that the audience is eavesdropping on conversations that were never planned or rehearsed; on the other hand, these seemingly improvised moments are ingeniously patterned by symmetries and repetitions so that as we eavesdrop on the characters, they eavesdrop and spy on one another—sometimes accidentally, sometimes intentionally, sometimes lovingly, sometimes maliciously. There is not only much ado about “noting,” but also in this most realistic of comic plots, the acceptance of improbable fictions as undeniable truths by characters who are more sensible, skeptical, and wary of self-delusion than almost any others in the comedies. This is possible only because the twin orchard scenes in which Benedick and Beatrice are hoodwinked are at once gloriously exaggerated and utterly convincing as revelations of their emotional and psychological natures.

One comes away from a performance of Much Ado with a vivid recollection of Beatrice and Benedick, who dominate much of the play, and with fainter impressions of Hero and Claudio, who have less interesting and colorful personalities but are the central figures in the drama of slandered innocence and false accusation that is the main plot of Much Ado. While it is inevitable that Beatrice and Benedick should engross the attention of audiences, it is unfortunate that critics sometimes suggest that the unhappy love of Hero and Claudio is merely a utilitarian scaffolding for the witty banter and prickly courtship of Beatrice and Benedick. If this is so, the plotting of Much Ado is somewhat peculiar and even a bit fumbling because Shakespeare, who transformed the base meta of Il Pecorone into the gold of The Merchant, failed to place the most interesting and important characters at the center of his dramatic fable. Can we assume, moreover, that Shakespeare merely used the story of Hero and Claudio as dramatic scaffolding when he restages this drama of betrayed innocence and mistaken revenge in Othello, again in Cymbeline, and once more in The Winter's Tale? Those who think Claudio and Hero do not really matter may also find that they are shallow and conventional because, unlike Beatrice and Benedick, they fall in love quickly and easily. But if to love at first sight is to love too easily, God help Romeo and Juliet, Rosalind and Orlando, and Ferdinand and Miranda.

The problem of responding to Hero and Claudio is similar to the problem of responding to Bassanio, who seems so much blander and less interesting than Portia and Shylock or even Gratiano. Just as Antonio and Portia's love of Bassanio demands that we recognize his quiet virtues, Beatrice's devotion to Hero and Benedick's affection for Claudio deny the possibility that they are superficial or ordinary. Shakespeare could have made the relationship of Beatrice and Hero as one-sided as that between Antonio and Bassanio by depicting the stronger Beatrice as the protector of her more timid cousin. But there is not the slightest intimation that Beatrice is used to guarding Hero against the blows of life or that Hero requires such protection. It is sometimes suggested that if Hero were more like Beatrice she would not be incapable of defending herself when accused by Claudio, but Beatrice is there when Hero is brutally denounced and like Hero she is too stunned to rebut the false accusations. Critics also suggest that if Desdemona were more like Emilia she would not be so easily victimized by Othello, but they forget that Emilia is unable to defend Desdemona's honesty and life; indeed, she is unable to protect herself against her abusive husband, who murders her when finally she insists upon speaking out. In the four plays that deal with sexual jealousy the emphasis falls, not on the heroines' lack of courage, but on the vulnerability of the heroes to vicious insinuations and prurient fantasies.

A character like Mariana in Measure for Measure can be little more than the jilted maiden of romantic fables who remains loyal to the man who rejected her. We do not know why Mariana continues to love the mean-spirited Angelo, and pleads for his life when he shows not the slightest sign of affection for her or remorse for his mistreatment of her. Because Mariana is a minor character, it is enough if an audience pities her forlorn existence. Because she is a central figure in the dramatic action of Much Ado, Hero's emotional responses are crucial to the resolution of the play. Her acceptance of Claudio as husband is as important to the denouement of Much Ado as Imogen's forgiveness of Posthumus and Hermione's forgiveness of Leontes are important to the denouements of Cymbeline and The Winter's Tale. The first scenes of the play, however, do not lead us to believe that Hero will play a significant role. She speaks just one line in the first scene and not a word to Claudio, although they must be very aware of each other's presence. Indeed, she does not speak to
Claudio on stage until Don Pedro announces that she has agreed to be Claudio's wife. Is this not the quintessence of docility: a shy, unspoken girl who obeys her father in listening to Don Pedro's suit and who accepts Don Pedro's proxy wooing for Claudio without a word to her future husband? But Hero and Claudio have no love scene together, not because she is too timid and retiring, but because he is too uncertain and hesitant to woo for himself, and she would never take the romantic initiative. Unlike her cousin Beatrice, she is content for the most part to remain in the background of a conversation, to listen rather than speak. Although not a talker like Beatrice, she can speak out when the occasion demands speaking out; and when she does, she shows her self-confidence and keen perception of others. With a visor to hide behind, she matches wits with Don Pedro at the ball in a way that suggests a readiness to follow her own inclinations in love, not her father's commands. Although primed by her father to encourage Don Pedro's courtship, she does not flutter her eyelids or turn coy at his approach:

Don Pedro. Lady, will you walk about with your friend?  
Hero. So you walk softly, and look sweetly, and say nothing, I am yours for the walk, and especially when I walk away.  
Don Pedro. With me in your company?  
Hero. I may say so when I please.  
Don Pedro. And when please you to say so?  
Hero. When I like your favor, for God defend the lute should be like the case!  

(2.1. 86-95)

These are not the responses of a shrinking violet; Hero does not lack wit but her sallies are gentler-edged than Beatrice's, more likely to elicit a smile than a tart reply.

Hero's qualities are more fully revealed in the orchard scene that is intended to bring Beatrice and Benedick together. Hero takes the leading role in the charade that Beatrice overhears, and demonstrates her understanding of her cousin and her willingness to risk Beatrice's anger by speaking plainly of her vanity. Her description of Beatrice's behavior is penetrating and just, and somewhat sharp in its rebuke:

... nature never fram'd a woman's heart  
Of prouder stuff than that of Beatrice.  
Disdain and scorn ride sparking in her eyes,  
Misprising what they look on, and her wit  
Values itself so highly that to her  
All matter else seems weak ...  

... I never yet saw man,  
How wise, how noble, young, how rarely featur'd,  
But she would spell him backward ...  

So turns she every man the wrong side out,  
And never gives to simple truth and virtue that  
Which simpleness and merit purchaseth.  

(3.1. 48-70)

Shocked by Claudio's brutal denunciation on her wedding day, she is unable to defend herself; she can only simply and directly declare her innocence, and that is not enough to convince even her father. But it would not matter what she said because Claudio and Don Pedro have already made up their minds about her guilt and are prepared to believe nothing except a confession of lewdness. After the denunciation scene, she does not
appear again on stage until the final scene, in which she enters as Claudio's veiled “second” bride. When she reveals herself to him, she speaks just a few telling lines:

... when I liv’d, I was your other wife,
And when you lov’d, you were my other husband.

(5.4. 60-61)

Should there be more anger or recrimination? Should she demand an abject apology from Claudio before she accepts him again as her husband? The answer depends upon our view of Claudio, and more largely on the way in which the moral and emotional drama of Hero’s betrayal is unfolded by Shakespeare so that a happy ending is not only possible but the only appropriate conclusion. At no time in the play is Claudio contemptible or mean-spirited. When he denounces Hero he is fully convinced that he has been terribly wronged and has the right to denounce her in public. If he is a gullible fool too easily duped by Borachio and Don John, so too is the noble Don Pedro, who is completely taken in by Borachio’s contrivance and volunteers to join Claudio in exposing Hero on her wedding day.

Claudio enters the play a hero celebrated for his gallantry, who has earned the paternal affection of his general Don Pedro. Finding himself drawn to Hero, he discreetly inquires about her prospects, showing the same sensible concern about marrying well that Benedick does when he decides in soliloquy that the woman whom he will marry shall be rich—“that’s certain.” Claudio’s questions are not those of a fortune hunter but of a young man uncertain of his judgment of women, and it is his lack of confidence that will make him vulnerable to Don John’s insinuations as well as intensify his rage at being duped by an innocent-seeming wanton. Before he declares his love of Hero, he asks Benedick if he has noticed Hero and if she is “not a modest young lady.” Despite Benedick’s gibes, he persists in asking for his opinion of Hero. Don Pedro is delighted to hear of Claudio’s affection for Hero. “Amen,” he says, “If you love her, for the lady is very well worthy.” Even this commendation does not assuage Claudio. “You speak this,” he says, “to fetch me in, my lord.” Claudio’s need for assurance seems perfectly genuine; if he does not fear the commitment that love demands, he fears being made a fool by love, and he therefore qualifies almost every statement he makes about Hero. “In mine eyes,” he says, ‘she is the sweetest lady that I ever looked on”—“that I love her, I feel.” That “I feel” speaks volumes of his inexperience in love and fear of misjudging his own emotions as well as Hero’s nature. Although he asks Don Pedro’s aid and advice, he does not use his commander to gain an heiress. It is Don Pedro’s idea to act as Claudio’s proxy and to speak to Hero and Leonato on Claudio’s behalf.

Annoyed by Claudio’s defection from the ranks of smug bachelorhood, Benedick goes out of his way to rag him. When Claudio asks his opinion of Hero, he jokingly replies, “Would you buy her, that you inquire after her?” This blunt-edged joke is not inspired by any crassness on Claudio’s part. It displays the wit of one who by custom is “a professed tyrant” to women and who is both amused and irritated by Claudio’s interest in Leonato’s daughter. Convinced that Don Pedro woos Hero for himself at the masked ball, Claudio tries to hide his misery by saying, “I wish him joy of her.” Benedick replies, “Why, that’s spoken like an honest drovier. So they sell bullock.” This wrenching of Claudio’s words is not amiable or meant to be; it is spoken when Benedick is still smarting from an unpleasant encounter with Beatrice. After being ridiculed and insulted by Lady Disdain, he is ready to enjoy Claudio’s misery and add to it. Claudio is a perfect target for such wisecracks because he has no aplomb as a suitor and it took an effort of will to speak of his feelings to others. He tells Don Pedro that before the war, he looked on Hero “with a soldier’s eye, / That lik’d, but had a rougher task in hand / Than to drive liking to the name of love” (1.1. 298-300). A fear of surrendering to emotion is implicit in his need to “drive” (that is, deepen) liking to the name of love and makes him susceptible to the nasty insinuation that Don Pedro woos Hero for himself. But he is not more gullible in this respect that Benedick, who reached the same conclusion about Don Pedro’s behavior without Don John’s slanderous remarks.
When he is convinced of the seriousness of Claudio's interest in Hero, Benedick is generous in his praise of her. Because he has no romantic illusions or anxieties, he is capable of seeing women clearly and can appreciate their qualities. He enjoys most of his encounters with Beatrice and is very conscious of her attractiveness, but he also enjoys the freedom of his bachelorhood and, less sentimental than some critics, he does not mistake Beatrice's barbed remarks for Cupid's arrows. He knows the difference between tenderness disguised as witty banter and a cutting remark that is intended to draw a little blood. Some critics assure us that Beatrice and Benedick are in love with one another from the start and need only the slightest pretext to abandon their pose of independence and confess their true affections. But one can as justly say that the French Princess is in love with Navarre from the beginning of Love's Labor's and needs only the excuse of her sudden departure to discard her pose of satiric mockery. The close parallels between the masking-dancing-wooing scenes of Much Ado and Love's Labor's leave little doubt that Shakespeare was thinking of his earlier comedy as he wrote Much Ado, especially since he uses an eavesdropping scene in both plays as an occasion in which love is openly declared, and in both plays apparent scoffers betray their true affections by the writing of love poems. Beatrice is more like the French Princess than any other romantic heroines; she takes pleasure in her role of Lady Disdain and she abandons it only with great reluctance. Indeed, it is because Beatrice almost sacrifices her love of Benedick to her rage at Claudio that their meeting of minds and hearts in the final scene is so deeply satisfying.4

Although Benedick speaks several times of Beatrice's beauty, it is only after Claudio turns lover that he begins to think about marriage and to wonder how long his good sense will protect him from the irrationality of passion and the dullness of married life. He will make a fine husband because he is warm-hearted, gentle, and can laugh at himself; yet he is not, like Romeo or most of the heroes of the romantic comedies, born to sigh and eager to embrace the adventure of love. He could, one suspects, live as happily without a wife as with one, provided that he had enough bachelor friends and occasional invitations to dinner from his married ones. Beatrice is a kindred soul with a sharper satiric tongue. She likes men and she is well aware of Benedick's attractiveness; but she prides herself on her independence and self-sufficiency. Although her society assumes that she must marry to have a place in the scheme of things, she has no need of a man to protect her and she cannot imagine treating any man as her lord and master.

If Beatrice secretly desires Benedick's love, she keeps that desire well hidden and it does not prevent her from making him the butt of stinging remarks. Questioning the messenger about the returning heroes, she makes repeated sneers about “Signior Mountanto’s” incompetence as a soldier and swears to eat all the enemies he has slain. Her joking about Benedick's good service at the officers' mess is amusing enough, but she will not admit that her mockery of his valor is a jest, and she refuses to credit the messenger's report of his bravery. Her impatience to have at Benedick is such that she rudely breaks in on the conversation the men are engaged in and gratuitously insults him: “I wonder that you will still be talking, Signior Benedick; nobody marks you.” Refusing to play the demure maiden, she will trade jests, even off-color ones, with men to call attention to her unconventionality, yet even as she rejects the gentility and propriety that are second nature to Hero, she takes advantage of her femaleness to make the kind of remarks to Benedick that would be intolerable from a man. Thus she has her cake and eats it too; she is a free spirit, emancipated from the conventions of a male-dominated society, who depends on the chivalry of men to license her sarcastic sallies. Her quick wit instinctively looks for a target, but she is not a willing target of other people's jests. She has a thin skin and will not laughingly accept from Benedick the kind of remark that she makes at his expense. She does not feel oppressed by the conventions of her society, and she does not feel superior to her more conventional cousin. She does not urge Hero to rebel against her father's dictates; she would have her insist only that the suitor her father approves be “a handsome fellow.” No raider against marriage as Benedick is, she delights in Hero's betrothal and prompts Claudio to seal it with a kiss. Although she pretends to sigh over her impending spinsterhood, she is not eager for a wooer and finds it hard to imagine herself as a wife. A beardless youth, she would not do for her because he would be too easily mastered; a Petruchio would appall her. Her idea of heaven is not a rose-covered honeymoon cottage for two, but an eternity spent trading quips with bachelors. Like Benedick she is too gregarious and too fond of good conversation to yearn for the intimacy of
marriage.

Don John, not Beatrice, is the malcontent of the play, a creature so tart that his very appearance gives her heartburn. A perpetual scowler, he has a bastard’s natural sinistral bent and relishes his role as killjoy, the very death’s-head at the feasts of Messina. He tells himself that he would like to play Marlowe’s Barabas and poison the whole city; but he is an uninspired villain who requires his henchman’s aid to play Iago to Claudio’s Othello. Since his treachery is known, he does not make a serious effort to appear a good fellow, and though on parole, he does not pretend to be repentant. His first attempt at creating mischief by slander fails when Don Pedro proves to be a loyal friend of Claudio. His success in defaming Hero depends upon the ingenious “ocular proof” of her wantonness that Borachio conceives and executes. Hardly a masterful poisoner of minds, he is a vain misanthrope, pedantic in thought and speech, who is addicted to slightly comic euphuisms. Advised by Conrade to accept his lot with patience, he announces his credo of sullen “honesty”:

I cannot hide what I am: I must be sad when I have cause, and smile at no man’s jests; eat when I have stomach, and wait for no man's leisure; sleep when I am drowsy, and tend on no man’s business; laugh when I am merry, and claw no man in his humor.

(1.3. 13-18)

While other residents of Messina are warmly interested in the welfare and happiness of their friends and relations, Don John is interested only in his sour ruminations; like Jonson’s Morose, he has no taste for anyone else’s conversation but is infatuated with his own Lylyan turn of phrase:

I had rather be a canker in a hedge than a rose in [Don Pedro’s] grace, and it better fits my blood to be disdain’d of all than to fashion a carriage to rob love from any. In this (though I cannot be said to be a flattering honest man), it must not be denied but I am a plain-dealing villain.

(1.3. 27-32)

He proudly describes himself as an ill-tempered dog who is trusted only with a muzzle “and enfranchised with a clog; therefore I have decreed not to sing in my cage.” Although his metaphors are somewhat mixed, his intentions are clear: “If I had my mouth,” he continues, “I would …” He would what? Shout? Rail? No, he would “bite.” He is no snarling cur; he is the tyrant of the nursery school, the kind of spoiled sulky child who terrorizes babysitters. He makes a peacock display of his malcontent but will not let his followers have a share in it; it is, he remarks, for his use alone. Even so his small band of trusty knaves swear to assist him in his wickedness “to the death.”

The touch of absurdity in Don John’s speech and manner anticipates that his success as a conspirator will be short-lived. He plays a small role in the denunciation scene and never appears again on stage. His ability to destroy for a time Claudio and Hero’s happiness does not testify to his evil genius but rather to the vulnerability of Claudio and Don Pedro to lies that touch their sense of honor and self. Since Shakespeare has the artistry to stage the twin orchard scenes in which Beatrice and Benedick are duped, he could no doubt have staged a window scene that would be convincing to an already anxious Claudio and Don Pedro. (Iago stage-manages a similar moment with Cassio for Othello to spy on.) But an audience does not need proof of Borachio’s ingenuity because it understands why Claudio and Don Pedro are able to think the worst of the innocent Hero. Although they know that Don John is not to be trusted, they cannot reject out of hand his sneering insinuations of Hero’s looseness, for he dares them to see for themselves, a dare that engages their manhood. Uncertain before of his judgment of women and tormented now, Claudio listens to Don John and asks, “May this be so?” The older, steadier Don Pedro replies, “I will not think it,” as if he were unwilling to contemplate the possibility of her lewdness but not convinced of her chastity. They have to agree to witness
Hero's lasciviousness because it would seem cowardly to refuse; in other words, it would take more courage and confidence in their own judgment than either possesses to laugh at Don John. They are not the only ones in the play who lose their good sense when their egos are threatened. Angered by Benedick's denigration of her wit at the masked ball, Beatrice describes him as a mere buffoon:

Why, he is the Prince's jester, a very dull fool; only his gift is in devising impossible slanders. None but libertines delight in him, and the commendation is not in his wit, but in his villainy, for he both pleases men and angers them, and then they laugh at him and beat him. I am sure he is in the fleet; I would he had boarded me.

(2.1. 137-43)

This portrait is not witty; it is grossly unfair and insulting. Beatrice does not speak her mind about Benedick; she strikes back because her self-esteem has been wounded.

If Claudio and Don Pedro are to be despised for believing what they think they see, what shall be said of the sensible, skeptical Beatrice and Benedick, who without ocular proof accept the most outrageous and transparent fictions about each other? Scholars who do not appreciate Iago's brilliance as a deceiver and manipulator of others hypothesize an Elizabethan dramatic convention to explain his corruption of Othello, but their appeal to convention does not explain how Othello is able to move audiences who have never heard of Elizabethan dramatic conventions. What we witness in the orchard scenes is not ingenious hoodwinking or absurd credulities or complaisant self-deception. Common sense dictates that Beatrice and Benedick cannot swallow the preposterous stories they hear about each other's secret passion, and yet they do not turn to the audience with a knowing wink and pretend to believe what they have overheard because they have always desired to confess their hidden love for each other. They listen carefully, weigh what they have heard, and credit it because those who “gull” them know them intimately.

In the first orchard scene, Benedick enters musing over the way love has transmogrified Claudio. He wonders if love can convert him from a talkative scoffer to a silent idolatrous oyster. With Claudio running a fever, he is no longer certain of his immunity to love's infection, and, preparing for the worst, he mulls over the choice of a wife. He does not desire the moon—she need only be rich, wise, virtuous, fair, noble, and mild—not one of Beatrice's chief qualities. She must also be a fine conversationalist and an excellent musician. This shopping list of female excellencies does not bespeak a longing for romantic ecstasy but rather a desire for the enduring companionship of a happy marriage. Siding with the Owl rather than the Cuckoo, Benedick imagines long winter evenings before the fire, not the excitement of Maytime trysts. His friends begin their angling casually and obliquely, first setting the mood with the music he loves but here pretends to find tiresome. They do not appeal to his vanity in having won the heart of a glorious woman who may die of her unrequited passion; they appeal to his decency, which will not allow him to be responsible for another's suffering. Shall his failure to love cause Beatrice to commit some desperate act upon herself? Must she languish in undisclosed misery because she fears to express her love lest he sneer? What makes the scene irresistible is the earnest description of Beatrice's sleepless nights spent pacing her chamber and writing Benedick's name over and over again on papers that she then rips to shreds: “Then down upon her knees she falls, weeps, sobs, beats her heart, tears her hair, prays, curses: ‘O sweet Benedick.’ God give me patience!” (2.3. 146-49). Benedick should suspect a device because two of the speakers are Claudio and Don Pedro, who swore not long ago that he would someday see Benedick a lover. The other, however, is Leonato, and Benedick will not stoop to suspect the motives of a reverend, white-bearded householder.

When the playacting is over, Benedick does not step out of hiding to declare that he has always loved Beatrice and is happy now to admit it. What he reveals is his sensitivity to the charge of unkindness:
Love me? why, it must be requited. I hear how I am censur’d; they say I will bear myself proudly, if I perceive the love come from her; they say too that she will rather die than give any sign of affection. I did never think to marry. I must not seem proud; happy are they that hear their detractions, and can put them to mending.

(2.3. 224-30)

Agreeing that the lady is fair, virtuous, and wise but for loving him, he decides that he “will be horribly in love with her”—a stunning penance. He knows that any sign of love will make him a target of gibes because he was so long a scoffer, but he is undismayed, for he knows that he remains true to his individuality and idiosyncratic bent. Although he now joins the mainstream of those who love, he sees himself as marching to his own drum. Benedick's appreciation for the comedy of his situation is endearing. He believes most of what he says and at the same time is as zany in his rationalizations as Launce is in his complaints about his incontinent hound. Although friends may jeer, he is determined to follow his “humor” and to prove that his aboutface is forward march: “When I said I would die a bachelor, I did not think I should live till I were married.” Able now to perceive the loving affection that lurks in Beatrice's sallies, he can espy marks of love in her brusquest responses, whereas Claudio will soon be able to see only signs of luxury in Hero's blushes.

Benedick takes an active role in his orchard scene; he opens and closes it with lengthy soliloquies and he comments in asides on the speeches of his friends. In the second orchard scene, Beatrice silently eavesdrops until Hero and Ursula exit, and her response consists of just sixteen lines of formal, rhymed verse. Thus the emphasis falls, not on Beatrice's responses to the charade she witnesses, but on the rehearsed conversation between Hero and Ursula. They do not invent a tale of Benedick's love-lorn suffering; they speak of defects of character in Beatrice that trouble those who love her best. Where Benedick's friends play on his generous sympathy, Hero dwells on the pride and disdain that prevent Beatrice from loving Benedick or even acknowledging his virtues. Where Benedick responds to his friend's hyperboles with a whimsical determination to be horribly in love, Beatrice is too pained by the frank recital of her faults to joke about herself:

What fire is in mine ears? Can this be true?
Stand I condemn’d for pride and scorn so much?
Contempt, farewell, and maiden pride, adieu!
No glory lives behind the back of such.

(3.1. 107-10)

Benedick will become a comic casuist to save a sweet lady's life; Beatrice is dismayed by Hero and Ursula's criticism of her arrogance. It is especially painful that they condemn the clever ripostes that she thinks are her chief ornament. Unlike Benedick, she does not welcome the role of lover or give herself wholeheartedly to it. He jokes when he says that he will be horribly in love; she is absolutely serious when she says that she will requite him, “Taming [her] wild heart to [his] loving hand.” Her words suggest that it will take a conscious effort on her part to stoop to any man's embrace. Her commitment, moreover, is somewhat conditional: if he loves, she says, her kindness will encourage him to win her for his wife. She will not drop her handkerchief when next he walks by, but at least she will not tell him again that she takes as much pleasure in seeing him “as you may take upon a knife's point and choke a daw withal.”

Immediately after the second orchard scene, Don John invites Claudio and Don Pedro to witness an exhibition of Hero's lewdness, and in the very next scene, the Watch apprehends Borachio and Conrade. Thus the crime is discovered almost as soon as it is committed and before the denunciation of Hero at the altar. Yet the denunciation takes place and is watched by an audience which knows that before long the truth of Hero's innocence will be known by all. Earlier scenes juxtaposed the vicious deception of Claudio and Don Pedro
against the loving deceptions of Benedick and Beatrice. Now the merciless denunciation of Hero is juxtaposed against the incompetent but very polite and scrupulous interrogation of Borachio and Conrade by Dogberry. Unlike Bottom, who convinces us that he has the energy and ambition to be a successful weaver, Dogberry and Verges seem rather odd pillars of the community. They may own property and pay taxes; they may even have suffered commercial losses, but if they succeeded in any kind of business it was despite a magnificent inability to concentrate on the matter at hand. With the aid of Verges, Dogberry raises maundering to the level of art and is apparently unable to put together two sentences without savaging the king's English. His command of proverbial sayings and pointless ejaculations does not breed confidence in his acuity, but it does signify his tolerant acceptance of things as they are—of human frailties and infirmities. His truisms celebrate the patient forebearances and petty compromises that make civility possible. Afraid that Verges, who is far more capable of direct communication than he is, will seem simple to Leonato, Dogberry explains:

A good old man, sir, he will be talking; as they say, “When the age is in, the wit is out.” God help us, it is a world to see! Well said, i’ faith, neighbor Verges. Well, God's a good man; and two men ride of a horse, one must ride behind.

(3.5. 33-37)

An original like Bottom, Dogberry is a mixture of ignorance and sagacity, self-importance and unself-consciousness. Where others in the play are busy noting, espying, eavesdropping, and interfering in the lives of friends and enemies, Dogberry and Verges take a Jeffersonian approach to the problem of keeping the peace; they believe that the least watch is the best watch. They know better than Borachio that it is wiser to sleep than to talk, and while their sworn duty is to safeguard the city, they are realistic about their limitations as an amateur constabulary. They would avoid the presence of rogues lest they be defiled—would that Claudio and Don Pedro were of the same mind! If they are lucky, they will have a quiet night; if it is raucous, they will not add to the noise and uproar by attempting to arrest drunks and vagrants. They are too shrewd to waste their time with anyone who does not recognize their authority. It is only by accident that they overhear Borachio gloating over his wicked success as they sit on the church bench waiting for their tour to end, but they are experienced watchmen who know how to sleep without having their weapons stolen, the true and ancient art of standing sentry.

It is a great pity that Dogberry does not come to the point and tell Leonato what the watch learned the night before, yet who would have him talk less, especially when he is concerned that Leonato be patient with Verges, whose wits are not as blunt as Dogberry would have them. Kindly himself, Dogberry inspires kindness in others. Although he is very busy preparing for his daughter's wedding, Leonato takes time to hear the constables, and after apologizing for not being able to join in the interrogation of Borachio, he bids them drink some wine before they leave his house. Inevitably the examination of Borachio and Conrade is a masterpiece of irrelevancies, interjections, and pointless digressions. It is also courteous and fair-minded, almost too much so. Dogberry would discover the better nature as well as the criminal acts of his prisoners. “Masters,” he asks, “do you serve God?” “Yea, sir, we hope,” they answer. “Write down that they hope to serve God,” Dogberry tells the sexton. His inclination to take Borachio and Conrade's word for their innocence unnerves the sexton, and his bumbling manner exasperates Conrade, who calls him an ass. Although wounded by this insult, Dogberry speaks more in sorrow than in anger of this discourtesy:

Does thou not suspect my place? Dost thou not suspect my years? O that he were here to write me down as ass! But, masters, remember that I am an ass; though it be not written down, yet forget not that I am an ass. No, thou villain, thou art full of piety, as shall be prov'd upon thee by good witness. I am a wise fellow, and which is more, an officer, and which is more, a householder, and which is more, as pretty a piece of flesh as any is in Messina, and one that knows the law, go to, and a rich fellow enough, go to, and a fellow that hath had losses, and one that hath two gowns, and every thing handsome about him.
Dogberry is never more appealing than in his earnest desire to be writ down an ass. Claudio's display of indignation in the preceding wedding scene is repellent, however. He too publicly declares that he was made an ass—that is, duped by the cunning whore of Messina whom he almost married. Dogberry expresses a heartfelt sense of wrong; Claudio's denunciation of Hero is self-righteous and premeditated, not a spontaneous outcry from the heart. As soon as he hears Don John's sneering accusation of Hero, he thinks of taking his revenge: “If I see anything to-night why I should not marry her, to-morrow in the congregation, where I should wed, there will I shame her” (3.2. 123-25). Galled by the possibility that he wooed a trollop for his noble friend, Don Pedro says he will join with Claudio in disgracing Hero if he sees proof of her lewdness. The outrage at being victimized is understandable; the manner of the denunciation is appalling. They never think of accusing Hero privately, and they give no warning that her wedding will become a public inquisition. Since they have no doubt of Hero's guilt, they need not scruple about their methods, for what they intend is not a trial but rather a public whipping, the appropriate punishment for a whore, especially one who dared pretend to be a modest virgin. With astonishing speed an adored woman becomes an object of scorn and abuse here as in Othello, and neither Claudio nor Othello questions whether he has the right to take a cruel revenge on the woman who wronged him because both assume that they are defending the cause of public morality, not soothing a tormented ego. It may not be quite fair to humiliate Leonato, whose only crime is a confidence in his daughter's virtue and a desire to have a brief wedding ceremony, but perhaps Leonato deserves a few lashes too, for if Hero is a common stale, Leonato may be unscrupulous enough to try to palm off what he knows is damaged goods as first-class merchandise.

Like many who lack spontaneity of feeling or are afraid of it, Claudio melodramatizes his outrage. When Leonato makes the innocent mistake of declaring that there is no impediment to the marriage known to Claudio, Claudio seizes on his words as if he has caught the old man red-handed: “O, what men dare do! What men may do! / What men daily do, not knowing what they do.” This strained attempt at irony merely puzzles Benedick, who does not see the point: “How now? Interjections?” Claudio's desire to play the satiric scourge of villainy falls flat, and he approaches the ludicrous when he refuses to accept Hero as his wife:

There, Leonato, take her back again. Give not this rotten orange to your friend.

Claudio's gift of phrase reduces his outrage to that of a shopper who finds that he has paid good money for spoiled fruit and wants the grocer pilloried.

Shameful as Claudio's behavior is, it does not condemn him as singularly brutal or insensitive. Every statement he makes is silently approved or actively seconded by Don Pedro, who, when asked to speak by Leonato, says:

What should I speak?
I stand dishonor'd, that have gone about
To link my dear friend to a common stale.

Don Pedro and Claudio have seen the proof of Hero's lewdness. Leonato's belief in his daughter's innocence quickly disintegrates when she is accused by two noble gentlemen. He is not outraged by Claudio's attack on Hero, and he does not respond with angry denials and counteraccusations. His first thought is that Claudio wishes to reject Hero after having seduced her, a behavior not unknown to gentlemen. If so, Hero may well be damaged goods, but Claudio is the one who tampered with her and therefore he should marry her. This
possibility does not alter Leonato's view of Claudio, whom he addresses as “dear my lord,” because one expects men to be men. After all, it is a virgin's responsibility to deny her lover's importunities and her own sexual desires until her wedding night. In a reasonable conciliatory tone, Leonato tries to salvage the marriage as best he can. Hero, Beatrice, Benedick, and the Friar are too stunned to say very much. Nothing that could be said, however, would change Claudio and Don Pedro's minds. They do not give Hero a chance to defend herself; all they offer is an opportunity to confess her guilt. What man, they ask, did she speak with last night at her window? If she admits that she spoke with a man, she stamps herself a whore: if she denies she spoke with a man, she proves that she is a lying whore. Her denials settle the issue for Don Pedro: “Why, then are you no maiden.” Unlike the interrogation of Borachio and Conrade, the trial of Hero is without civility, and yet it is what honorable men think appropriate to her treachery. This offense cuts deep; it insults a man's offer of love and makes him an object of contempt to other men, who might find his gullibility amusing but would feel justified in behaving exactly as he behaves. In this matter, men take their stand with other men against women.

If Hero had been seduced and abandoned, Leonato would feel compelled to seek satisfaction from Claudio. When it appears that she has deceived him as well as Claudio by being a cunning wanton, he abandons her because he feels the wound to his reputation as deeply as Claudio and Don Pedro do. Indeed, the blow to his honor erases all pity for Hero. When she faints, he wishes her dead, for he sees, as do her accusers, the very proof of her guilt in her maiden blush:

Do not live, Hero, do not ope thine eyes;
For did I think thou wouldst not quickly die,
Thought I thy spirits were stronger than thy shames,
Myself would, on the rearward of reproaches,
Strike at thy life …

Why ever wast thou lovely in my eyes?
Why had I not with charitable hand
Took up a beggar's issue at my gates,
Who smirched thus and mir'd with infamy,
I might have said, “No part of it is mine;
This shame derives itself from unknown loins”?
But mine, and mine I lov'd, and mine I prais'd,
And mine that I was proud on …

(4.1. 123-37)

Leonato's self-dramatization is similar to Claudio's; obsessed with his shame, he has no compassion for Hero, who just before had been his most prized possession—five times in the last four lines quoted above he speaks of her as “mine.” Even when Benedick voices his disbelief and Beatrice explains that every night except the last one she was Hero's bedfellow, Leonato is unmoved. It stands to reason that Hero would lie about her lewdness, but “would the two princes lie?”

As he abuses his once-beloved daughter, Leonato blusters in the manner of Capulet browbeating Juliet when she refused to marry Paris. The echo of Romeo and Juliet grows more immediate as the Friar steps forth to play Friar Lawrence's role by offering a solution that involves the heroine's seeming death. Where the timid Lawrence evades his responsibility by refusing to reveal Juliet's secret marriage to Romeo, the Friar in Much Ado is courageous enough to take Hero's part. His is a welcome voice of sympathy and reasonableness after so much emotional and rhetorical extravagance. He points out what should be obvious to all, Hero's speechless anguish and innocence. Leonato still mutters but the tide turns when Hero recovers and swears her innocence. Benedick, who never doubted her, shrewdly guesses at Don John's villainous part in all this, and Leonato, who just before was ready to strike his guilty daughter down, is ready to revenge her, to which end he pledges his blood, invention, means, friends, “strength of limb and policy of mind” in a bragging Polonian speech. Once
again the Friar must intervene to bring Leonato back to reason. His cautious pragmatism opposes any violent action, any challenge to conventional attitudes, even any public defense of Hero's innocence. Such a course would probably not succeed and only spread the scandal more widely. Since Claudio and Don Pedro's accusations have mortally wounded Hero's reputation, the Friar would counter the false report of her lewdness with a false report of her death. Given the way of the world, it does not really matter that Hero is chaste; the only hope now is that Claudio, believing she is dead, will regret his actions and realize what he has lost. In any event, Hero's death

Will quench the wonder of her infamy.
And if it sort not well, you may conceal her,
As best befits her wounded reputation,
In some reclusive and religious life,
Out of all eyes, tongues, minds, and injuries.

(4.1. 239-43)

Although the Friar does not accept Claudio's view of Hero, he implicitly agrees with Claudio that she is damaged goods and unmarriageable unless Claudio will have her.

Benedick thinks the Friar counsels well; Beatrice is not satisfied by this solution, however. Enraged by Claudio's behavior, she wants the kind of satisfaction one man can have of another in a duel. She weeps out of frustration because she feels incapable of striking back:

O that I were a man! What, bear her in hand until they come to take hands, and then with public accusation, uncover'd slander, unmitigated rancor—O God, that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the market-place.

(4.1. 303-7)

Even here Beatrice is not a rebel who storms against the hypocrisies of her society. She is enraged by men who are unmanly—that is, unchivalrous, ungentle in their treatment of women. Instinctively, she seeks a man to champion Hero's cause, one who will use his strength and valor to prove her cousin's innocence and punish those who have defamed her. Since Beatrice never pretended to scoff at romance, she does not seem to step out of character when she becomes the quintessential romantic of the play, one who wants a knight in shining armor to avenge her cousin's shame. When Benedick declares his love, she is so absorbed in her anger that she cannot think of him or of how she feels about him, although she half-confesses her love. Exhilarated by her declaration, Benedick would have her command some service of him; without hesitation, she tells him to kill Claudio and when he draws back in shock, she does not allow him to renege on his offer.

Her rage at Claudio is as blind and unreasoning as Claudio's treatment of Hero. She ignores the fact that Benedick did not take Claudio's side and remained behind when Claudio and Don Pedro left, even though they are his closest friends. She does not see the terrible unfairness of her demand that Benedick kill Claudio to gain her love. Before this, the apprehension of Borachio by the Watch seemed to set limits on the tragic consequences of Don John's schemes; after Claudio's actions in the wedding scene, and after Beatrice's fury, one is no longer certain that all will be well. Very soon Hero's innocence will be proved, but the question will remain whether Claudio deserves to be forgiven because Beatrice insists he does not deserve to live, and she will not be satisfied until Benedick matches swords with him.

The change in the emotional weather of Much Ado from its first genial scenes to the furious passions of the wedding scene is astonishing. As in The Merchant, the outpouring of hate is counterbalanced by the triumph of love: the perversion of Hero's nuptial by the coming together of Beatrice and Benedick. But in Much Ado all will not be well when the villain is defeated because the ugliness of the wedding scene and its aftermath of
bitterness must be dealt with before a happy ending is possible. Since Beatrice's reaction is as excessive as
Claudio's, Shakespeare could have resolved the conflict by having one or the other retreat from his extreme
position, but neither does. Claudio does not walk out on stage to regret his fury; Beatrice does not withdraw
her demand that Benedick kill Claudio. When she next appears on stage, she does not speak of Claudio to
Benedick, and need not speak of him, because Claudio, stunned by Borachio's confession of guilt, has already
put himself into Leonato's hands and the denouement is at hand.

The happy ending of The Merchant demands that those who return to Belmont put out of mind all that
happened in the Venetian courtroom. The denouement of Much Ado is more profoundly satisfying because
nothing that is painful is forgotten; on the contrary, the resolution of anger and conflict comes through the
reenactment of the wedding that had turned into a heartless denunciation of Hero, so that even as Hero and
Claudio are reunited in love and marriage, all who are present at the ceremony and who watch in the audience
must remember the pain of the aborted wedding. The Friar predicted that all would be well when Claudio's
heart softened toward the "dead" Hero, but Leonato, who assented to the Friar's plan, finds it humiliating to
have to wait for a change of heart in the man who mistreated his daughter. Reliving the bitterness of the
aborted wedding, he rejects his brother Antonio's counsels of patience because he finds no comfort in
platitudinous consolations. Like Claudio, he takes pleasure in being aggrieved, and his sense of outrage is the
greater when he imagines Hero as not only defamed but also robbed of life by vicious slander. Confusing
fiction and fact, he tells Claudio that he has

thou slander's slanders are the most
avenue of the wedge, the wedge of the

Thy slander hath gone through and through her heart,
And she lies buried with her ancestors—
G, in a tomb where never scandal slept,
Save this of hers, fram'd by thy villainy!

(5.1. 67-71)

Having heard the false report of Hero's death, Claudio and Don Pedro do not want to speak to Leonato and
Antonio. They are embarrassed and regretful, however, not stricken with remorse. In response to Leonato's
accusations, Don Pedro replies:

My heart is sorry for your daughter's death;
But on my honor she was charg'd with nothing
But what was true, and very full of proof.

(5.1. 103-5)

Perhaps this reply is a bit facile, but Leonato's indignation is not entirely noble; he must know that these
soldiers will have to bear his taunts and insults because they could not accept a challenge from an aging man.
Before long, Antonio, the voice of patience, is swept up in Leonato's passion; he is ready to second his brother
in a duel and, carried away on the tide of his invective, he shouts that Claudio and Don Pedro are

Scambling, outfiting, fastion-monging boys,
That lie and cog and flout, deprave and slander,
Go anticly, and show outward hideousness.

(5.1. 94-96)

At this point, it is Leonato's turn to restrain Antonio, who also speaks of Hero as “slangeded to death by
villains.” If it is not quite fair for old men to challenge those who cannot defend their honor against them,
there is nevertheless a rough justice in the denunciation of Claudio and Don Pedro, who denounced the
helpless, defenseless Hero.
Once the heroes of Messina, Claudio and Don Pedro are now its outcasts. They rejoice in Benedick's entrance, thinking he will take their side and laugh with them about their aged adversaries. They cannot believe his pale-faced anger and readiness to draw his sword. He too accuses them of killing a sweet lady and promises that her death will fall heavy on Claudio. Thus the self-appointed preservers of public morality find themselves publicly denounced for a murder that never occurred. Their nadir comes when the Watch brings in Borachio, who remorsefully confesses all. Although stricken, Claudio and Don Pedro do not openly admit or perhaps even recognize how shamefully they treated Hero. They erred, they say, only in “mistaking.” Claudio's speeches hint, nevertheless, of a deeper sense of guilt, because he offers himself as a sacrifice to Leonato's anger:

Choose your revenge yourself,
Impose me to what penance your invention
Can lay upon my sin.

(5.1. 272-74)

As Benedick put himself in Beatrice's hands by asking her to command some service of love, Claudio puts himself in Leonato's hands, bidding him impose a penance fit for his sin. Leonato's response is nobler than Beatrice's in that the only satisfaction he demands of the man he just before maligned and challenged is to marry his “niece,” a maiden as fair as Hero was and heiress now to two family fortunes. This sudden reversal is not at all perplexing because Leonato's anger was strained and hyperbolic. He is by nature kindly, hospitable, and considerate of others, a leading householder who will invite the officers of the Watch to take a cup of wine. He may indulge his sense of wrong but he will not sacrifice his daughter's happiness to satisfy his personal honor. Thus the customary civilities of Messinian life exert their influence. Just as Claudio expresses his confidence in Leonato by putting himself in his accuser's hands, Leonato expresses his confidence in Claudio's nature by a willingness to accept him as Hero's husband despite all. Borachio also wants to do the right thing and make certain that Margaret is not blamed for her part in the deception at the window. With the crisis past, Benedick has the opportunity to enjoy his role of lover. He can trade greasy jests with Margaret and try his hand at love poems. He can also wear his heart on his sleeve when he speaks to Beatrice. They do not dream of eternal Petrarchan bliss; they look forward to years of mutual affection and loving raillery. Benedick is his old self again, or rather he is his old self with a tincture of Dogberryan sagacity. His parting to Beatrice, who claims to feel ill, is “Serve God, love me, and mend.” With the prospect of a lifetime with Beatrice before him, Benedick cannot pay much attention to the news that Don John's villainy has been uncovered. His universe, Donne would say, is contracted to his love of Beatrice. “I will live in thy heart,” he tells her, “die in thy lap, and be buried in thy eyes.”

Benedick's high-spirited amorosity contrasts with the solemn ritualism of Claudio and Don Pedro's pilgrimage to Hero's “tomb.” The mourning scene is brief and the epitaph and song conventional because the true act of penance is to come on the morrow when Claudio will take as his wife a woman he is not allowed to see before the ceremony. This denouement will leave an unpleasant aftertaste if marriage seems to become a form of expiation or indeed of punishment, as it does in the last scene of Measure for Measure. Claudio, of course, believes that he is sacrificing his chance of happiness in marriage and expects the worst. Everyone else (except Don Pedro) knows that his marriage to a bride he is not allowed to see is, like the gulling of Beatrice and Benedick, a loving practical joke as well as a proper humbling for one who wrongfully rejected his first bride at the altar. If Claudio is to deserve a second chance at love and happiness, he must be able to trust, where before he was too ready to doubt; he must also keep his word however fearful he is of what his bride is like behind her veil. His situation is that of the folktale hero who, having sworn to marry the ancient hag who helped him, discovers on his wedding night that his bride is young and beautiful.
Claudio comes to the wedding grimly determined to marry even an Ethiope. When he tries to relieve his misery by some broad jokes about Benedick's impending fate as a cuckold, he is stung by remarks about his own bovine ancestry. When he asks which of the veiled ladies he must seize on, he is told he cannot see his bride's face until he has sworn to marry her. The testing of Claudio is only a ritual, however, because he has already been approved by Leonato. Like her father, Hero does not demand the satisfaction of humiliating Claudio as he humiliates her. She is content to make clear that she is not “another Hero.” Claudio, she says, was her “other husband” when he loved her. Their reconciliation, like their falling in love, is expressed in silent looks and embraces, not in words. The lovers' dialogue belongs to Beatrice and Benedick, who express their mutual affection with mock dismay and teasing questions and answers. They will not admit that they love “more than reason” or other than “in friendly recompense,” but they cannot deny the evidence of the sonnets they wrote about one another. Reluctantly Benedick agrees to marry because he pities Beatrice, and she will become his wife, she says, to save him from a reported consumption. Benedick is glad not to have to duel Claudio for Hero's sake; and Claudio is relieved that Benedick did not jilt Beatrice because he was ready to play her champion. Over Leonato's objections, Benedick decrees dancing before the weddings are solemnized, and he promises to devise brave punishments for the captured Don John. One doubts, however, that he will find the necessary thumbscrews and strappados in Messina.

In different ways Much Ado and The Merchant deal with the relationship between a society and those it makes its outcasts: a fallen woman, a disgraced hero, a money-lending Jew. The difference between Leonato and the Venetian Antonio is that between a man who treats all with simple courtesy and one who is convinced that he has the right to spit on Shylock's beard. While Much Ado reveals the obtuseness of conventional attitudes, it also reaffirms the preciousness of very ordinary virtues. When an assumption of moral superiority can lead to contempt for others and acts of cruelty, there is much to be said for unassuming decency, even when it is as bumbling as Dogberry's.

Notes

2. Among those who emphasize the conventionality of the portraits of Claudio and Hero are Leggatt (Shakespeare's Comedy of Love, 157-58), and Nevo, who suggests that theirs is a “courtship of convenience” that produces a counterfeit match (Comic Transformations, 164-66).
4. There is a close parallel between Beatrice's stunning response to Benedick's request, “bid me do anything for you,” and Rosaline's stunning response to Berowne's request, “Impose some service on me for thy love.” Shakespeare, it would seem, had the moment in Love's Labor's in mind when he wrote the later scene—an intimation of the possible connection he made between Beatrice and Rosaline, a connection broken by Beatrice's willingness to give up the pleasure of baiting Benedick. See Nevo's comments on the parallels between Much Ado and Love's Labor's (Comic Transformations, 92).
5. Palmer's usual appreciation of the psychological realism of Shakespeare's portrayal of character does not extend to Claudio and Don Pedro, who he thinks are sacrificed as characters to allow the melodrama of the denunciation scene (Comic Characters, 113).

Michael Mangan (essay date 1996)
In the following essay, Mangan studies the comedic language in Much Ado about Nothing, and finds it to be a reflection of Shakespeare's conception of romantic antagonism.

‘HUDDLING JEST UPON JEST’

Much Ado About Nothing picks up on the themes of two of the early comedies examined in Chapter 5: The Taming of the Shrew and Love’s Labour’s Lost. The analogies with The Shrew have often been remarked upon. Beatrice, like Kate, has words like ‘shrewd’ and ‘curst’ associated with her:

Leonato By my troth, niece, thou wilt never get thee a husband if thou be so shrewd of thy tongue.
Antonio In faith, she’s too curst.

(II, i, ll. 16-18)

Like The Shrew, Much Ado About Nothing is a play which is at least partly based on the theme of a battle of the sexes: the sparring between Beatrice and Benedick recalls some of the sparring between Kate and her suitors, especially Petruchio. But in the years between the two plays something has changed. It is not just that Beatrice repeatedly gets the better of Benedick in their wit-skirmishes, in a way that Kate only rarely does of Petruchio. It is that the character of the independent woman is no longer demonized: in the earlier play Kate’s independence was perceived as a threat to male power, and she was therefore seen as an unruly hoyden who had to be, literally, ‘tamed’. But in Much Ado About Nothing the taming metaphor would be completely inappropriate. The patriarchal authority of a Petruchio is not ascribed to Benedick; his point of view is no more valid than Beatrice’s, since he is also a descendant of the love-refusing lords in Love’s Labour’s Lost.

In his commonplace book, published in 1598 as Palladis Tamia, the Elizabethan writer Francis Meres mentioned an unknown play by Shakespeare entitled Love’s Labour’s Won. A popular theory is that this is one of Shakespeare’s existing plays which was published under another title, and Much Ado About Nothing is one of the favourite contenders for this honour. Whether or not this is the case is quite unknown; there is no other evidence to suggest that Much Ado About Nothing is a companion piece to the earlier play. Nonetheless, the suggestion points up ways in which themes, ideas and characters from Love’s Labour’s Lost are reworked in Much Ado About Nothing. The two plays share a few stock devices—poem scenes, parallel eavesdropping routines and, most notably, the mask scene—but more importantly they share a central situation, in which characters who profess disdain for romantic love end up falling in love; and although this disdain is no longer a purely male prerogative, the character of Berowne has much in common with that of Benedick.

The critic Louis A. Montrose has written plausibly of the ‘ludic’ quality of Love’s Labour’s Lost: its element of games-playing. He writes,

The world of Navarre has the appearance of a playground, a special place marked off from the pressures of social reality and the unpleasant implications of a world of fallen nature. Here Shakespeare explores the dimensions of the play faculty, from charming fripperies to serious products of the imagination. … Every activity in which the male quartet engages takes on the character of play …!

Something similar is true of Much Ado About Nothing. I want to explore the functions of two kinds of ‘play’, the verbal joke and the practical joke, in this ‘play’. In an earlier chapter I looked at various kinds of laughter—the laughter of everyday life, the laughter of festivity and the laughter of scorn and ridicule—and suggested that their social uses ranged from the celebratory to the punitive, in Elizabethan society. If I now suggest that Much Ado About Nothing is a play which has much to do with laughter and laughing, it is in the
light of that chapter: the laughter in Messina is problematic.

The tone is set by the blokeish camaraderie of the bachelor soldiers returned from the war, whose conversation typically comprises banter and teasing. Don Pedro, for example, teases Benedick for his characteristic pose of misogyny:

Don Pedro Thou wast ever an obstinate heretic in the despite of beauty.
Claudio And never could maintain his part but in the force of his will.
Benedick That a woman conceived me I thank her; that she brought me up I likewise give her most humble thanks.
But that I will have a rechate winded in my forehead, or hang my bugle in an invisible baldrick, all women shall pardon me. Because I will not do them the wrong to mistrust any, I will do myself the right to trust none; and the fine is (for which I may go the finer), I will live a bachelor.

(I, i, ll. 223-37)

This kind of jokey verbal duelling characterizes the relationship between the men: it is both friendly and aggressive, relaxed and competitive. Benedick has the reputation of being the wittiest of the three, but they all take part in the banter. In the early part of the play, the joking that goes on between Claudio, Don Pedro and Benedick returns repeatedly and almost obsessively to the topic of love. In fact, it is even more limited than that; the basic joke that none of them seem as though they will tire of is Benedick’s stance of the professed and committed bachelor. Their attitude towards this is actually quite complex: they laugh at him for it, and they eventually trick him out of it and into a relationship with Beatrice; yet they also encourage him in his misogyny. Their pleasure in his rôle as ‘heretic in despite of beauty’ is manifest. It is as if Benedick expresses for the whole male group within the play some of the feelings which they all share, but which they cannot always express. Beatrice refers to him at one point as ‘the Prince’s jester’, and while the remark is intended primarily as an insult it has some truth to it. One of a jester’s functions is to speak what others are thinking but not saying—or acknowledging.

The play begins, after all, at a moment of change for the younger men. They have returned from the wars, and are having to deal once more with being at peace; the previously shared male solidarity of the military campaign is beginning to fragment. Benedick laments this fragmentation, which he sees happening most clearly in the character of Claudio:

I have known when there was no music with him, but the drum and fife, and now had he rather hear the tabor and the pipe. I have known when he would have walked ten mile afoot to see good armour, and now will he lie ten nights awake carving the fashion of a new doublet. He was wont to speak plain and to the purpose, like an honest man and a soldier, and now is he turned orthography. His words are a very fantastical banquet, just so many strange dishes.

(II, iii, ll. 12-21)

Benedick sets the worlds of love and of war in opposition to each other, and leaves it in no doubt which he prefers. Claudio, incidentally, confirms Benedick’s account of his transformation; he tells Don Pedro about his sudden interest in Hero:

When you went onward on this ended action
I looked upon her with a soldier's eye,
That liked, but had a rougher task in hand
Than to drive liking to the name of love.
But now I am returned, and that war-thoughts
Have left their places vacant, in their rooms
Come thronging soft and delicate desires ...

(I, i, ll. 270-86)

While Claudio, then, consciously changes his rôle from that of soldier to that of lover, Benedick continues to express his mistrust of women and his intention to ‘live a bachelor’, devoting himself to manly pursuits such as drinking. The other men in the play seem to find this rather reassuring.

Benedick’s rejection of love and marriage is based on a particularly cynical view of male-female relationships. Love, according to Benedick, is a trap, marriage is a prison, women are deceivers and every husband an eventual cuckold.

Benedick
The savage bull may
[bear the yoke] but if ever the sensible Benedick bear it, pull off the bull’s horns and set them in my forehead, and let me be vilely painted, and in such great letters as they write ‘Here is a good horse to hire’ let them signify under my sign ‘Here may you see Benedick, the married man’.

(I, i, ll. 245-50)

In his fantasy Benedick directs a charivari against himself, but the ‘crime’ he imagines committing is that of getting married at all. In ‘Benedick the married man’ he paints a figure of ridicule who is already wearing the emblem of shame, the cuckold’s horns: to be married is to be cuckolded already. In the first part of this book it was argued that the jokes which a society tells are a significant index of that society’s concerns and anxieties. The repeated ‘cuckold’ jokes in Much Ado About Nothing point to an underlying anxiety in the society of the play about the relations between men and women, one which is brought to the surface by the developing events within the play.

The presence of Beatrice feeds this anxiety. She is the rule-breaker, the woman who refuses to accept the gender rôle which the social structure provides for her. Like Kate in The Taming of the Shrew, she presents her society—and in particular her uncles, with whom she lives—with a problem: she shows no sign of wanting to find a husband who will support her. Leonato, it is true, shows none of the desperation which Baptista does in the earlier play about getting the (financially and legally, if not emotionally) dependent young woman off his hands; family structures in Messina seem more able to accommodate Beatrice than those of Padua were to accommodate Kate. Even so, Leonato does occasionally remind Beatrice what her expected destiny is:

Leonato Well, niece, I hope to see you one day fitted with a husband.
Beatrice Not till God make men of some other mettle than earth. Would it not grieve a woman to be overmastered with a piece of valiant dust?—to make an account of her life to a cloud brethren, and truly I hold it a sin to match in my kindred.

(II, i, ll. 53-8)

Beatrice’s last remark contains a hidden truth. Spoken by her as a joke, another excuse not to take a husband, it points to her own ‘kindred’ with the men in the play. Her wit, for example, is as sharp as any of theirs, and of a similar kind. She stands out from the rest of the women in Messina because she is as good as any of the men at the verbal banter which is their characteristic mode of conversation. Thus she threatens them, not only by being as resolutely single as Benedick, but also by annexing an area of discourse which the bachelors of Messina, and Benedick in particular, usually treat as a male preserve: the witty and aggressive wordplay
which is used to ward off the prospect of marriage. The other women of Messina can laugh and joke together, and can even—when suitably masked for a ball—hold their own in flirting conversations with Don Pedro, Balthasar and Antonio. But it is only Beatrice who will openly claim her fair share of lines in a conversation with a man, and it is only Beatrice who makes their kind of bantering language completely her own. Moreover, she can do this without seeming merely to be copying the men because she shares Benedick's contempt for love and marriage. One of the things which make Beatrice simultaneously so attractive to an audience and so threatening to Benedick is the fact that she effectively steals all of Benedick's best lines. For Benedick's pose of the confirmed bachelor and reputed libertine depends on a view of society in which women can be seen as somehow predatory, wanting to ‘capture’ a man and contain him in marriage, only to torture him with subsequent betrayal. Faced with a woman who proclaims herself equally contemptuous of marriage (and for the same reasons), Benedick's rôle is immediately compromised. Beatrice even appears to agree with his most cherished article of faith: the inevitability of a wife betraying a husband:

Beatrice ... it is said ‘God sends a curst cow short horns’, but to a cow too curst he sends none. 
Leonato So, by being too curst, God will send you no horns. 
Beatrice Just, if he sends me no husband.

(II, i, ll. 22-7)

Beatrice, like Benedick, equates a husband with ‘horns’; she makes the threat explicit, that any husband of hers would indeed end up as a cuckold.

The cuckold is a familiar figure of fun in many comedies of the Elizabethan period, but there are few plays in which the idea of a wife's betrayal of her husband is so obsessively harped upon as it is in Much Ado About Nothing. In Messina there are, it appears, only two possible ways of thinking about love. One is the cynical view of love, marriage and cuckoldry which Benedick expresses. The other is the version of idealistic courtly love which appears at first to be exemplified by Hero and Claudio: romantic attraction (at a distance) followed by a happy-ever-after marriage. Claudio, newly in love with Hero, rejects Benedick's view of love in favour of this, the alternative. The jokes between the two men in the early part of the play arise from the fact that they berate, tease and insult each other about their respective points of view. But the continual jokes about husbands and cuckold indicate the underlying anxieties about gender rôles, about women's possible sexual licence. And when Borachio's plot to discredit Hero in Claudio's eyes succeeds, the effect is to bring this anxiety into the open: the unspoken fear turns out, they think, to be well-founded. Borachio succeeds in getting Claudio to exchange one view of love—and of Hero—for the other. Thus, unable any longer to see Hero as a chaste and idealized goddess, Claudio immediately reverts to a view even more cynical than Benedick's. He concludes that she is a whore. The flood of vitriolic abuse which is subsequently unleashed on Hero by her fiancé, her father and her Prince is another, and more destructive, manifestation of those anxieties which had previously been the topic of jokes and wordplay.

‘DECEIVERS EVER’

The verbal jokes with which the play abounds have a close thematic correspondence to the practical ones which constitute so much of its plot. Practical jokes, of course, are part of the stock-in-trade of Shakespearean comedy in general. In these plays characters laugh at each other, and play elaborate practical jokes upon each other, spying, eavesdropping and gloating at their victims' discomfiture. In The Taming of the Shrew, for example, the lord plays an elaborate trick on the tinker Christopher Sly, and Petruchio plays a series of much crueler ones on Kate; in Twelfth Night Sir Toby, Maria, Andrew Aguecheek, Feste and Fabian punish Malvolio through the practical joke of a forged letter, while Toby tricks Sir Andrew and ‘Cesario’ into a supposed duel; another trick duel features in The Merry Wives of Windsor, where the main narrative is taken
up by the tricks played by Mistress Ford and Mistress Page on the lecherous and opportunistic Falstaff; in *All's Well That Ends Well* the braggart captain Parolles is 'captured' on the battlefield by his own comrades, who pretend to be enemy soldiers, while Helena regains her faithless husband by the bed-trick; in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the mythical trickster Robin Goodfellow (Puck) aids his master in playing a joke on the sleeping Titania, ensuring that she will fall in love with the first creature she sees on waking. This turns out to be Bottom, who has been transformed into part-man part-ass in another of Puck's practical jokes. At the risk of being reductive, in fact, it might be suggested that the practical joke lies at the root of the plotting of Shakespeare's comedies. These jokes range from the malicious to the benevolent; some are born out of desperate need, others are the whim of a moment; sometimes they are constructed for the benefit of an on-stage audience, sometimes they have no audience but the real-life one in the auditorium and the tricksters themselves.

Sometimes these practical jokes are staged in a light-hearted or inconsequential manner; elsewhere they turn extremely serious, and become the fulcrum on which the happiness or sadness of the characters depends. The priestly disguise which Feste wears in *Twelfth Night* reappears in a very different mood in *Measure for Measure* where the Duke puts on a priest's robes in order to play games of life and death with the other characters. In the late plays such as *The Tempest* and *The Winter's Tale* the practical joke takes on extraordinary new dimensions of magic and illusion. The entire plot of *The Tempest* is, in one sense, a huge practical joke, played by the magician Prospero upon Antonio, Sebastian, Ferdinand and Alonso in order to bring them to recognition of themselves. At the end of *The Winter's Tale* the penitent King Leontes is shown a 'statue' of Hermione, the wife whose death he had caused sixteen years before, and whose loss he has grieved ever since. But the statue comes to life, turning out to be Hermione herself; she has been hidden all this time and is only now restored to him in this fashion. On one level it is a bizarre practical joke, stage-managed by Hermione's lady-in-waiting Paulina and taking sixteen years of preparation. On another level, it is an extraordinary and moving theatrical moment, made all the more resonant for the fact that the audience is as unsure as Leontes about the nature of the reality they are witnessing.

The jokes of Shakespearean comedy frequently repeat themselves in terms of subject matter and action. The subject matter is frequently to do with the victims' own image of themselves; the action works to transform that image. Victims have their 'true' characters revealed, like Parolles, or else they are reconstructed in a new identity by the trick, like Christopher Sly. Sometimes it is ambiguous as to which of these processes is going on. In *Twelfth Night* Malvolio appears in yellow cross-garters: a figure of fun but also an incongruous emblem of 'young love'. The trick transforms his status in the eyes of the other characters, but also reveals his desire for his mistress, which he has previously concealed. Similarly, Nick Bottom undergoes a transformation from weaver into ass; some critics have argued, however, that the spell reveals rather than transforms, merely making visible to audience and characters alike that element of Bottom's character which is in any case asinine.

In *Much Ado About Nothing* tricks and practical jokes are even more central to the action than they are in most other Shakespearean comedies. Like the verbal ones, these practical jokes return repeatedly to the theme of deception in love, and of swearing fidelity to one person and ending up in the arms of another. They take a variety of forms, have a variety of motives behind them, and are carried off with varying degrees of success. Among the most successful and benevolent of them are the parallel practical jokes played on Beatrice and Benedick in order to trick each of them into a relationship with the other. Within Benedick's hearing, the men discuss how enamoured of him Beatrice is:

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Don Pedro Come hither, Leonato.
What was it you told me of today, that your niece Beatrice was in love with
Signor Benedick?
Claudio (aside) O ay, stalk on, stalk on. The fowl sits.—I did never
think that lady would have loved any man.
Leonato No, nor I neither. But most
wonderful that she should so dote on Signor Benedick, whom she hath in all outward behaviours seemed ever to abhor.

_Benedick (aside)_ Is't possible? Sits the wind in that corner?

_Leonato_ By my troth, my lord, I cannot tell what to think of it. But that she loves him with an enraged affection, it is past the infinite of thought.

_(II, iii, ll. 90-101)_

It is a benign version of the ‘letter’ plot against Malvolio from _Twelfth Night_. Benedick's self-esteem is so tickled that a few minutes later he can pluck a hidden sexual invitation out of the most unlikely of Beatrice's words: 'Ha! “Against my will, I am sent to bid you come in to dinner.” There’s a double meaning in that.’ (II, iii, ll. 245-60).

Immediately afterwards, in a parallel scene, Beatrice overhears a similar conversation concerning her:

_Hero_ No, truly, Ursula, she is too disdainful.

_I know her spirits are as coy and wild As haggards of the rock._

_Ursula_ But are you sure That Benedick loves Beatrice so entirely?

_Hero_ So says the Prince and my new trothed lord.

_Ursula_ And they did bid you tell her of it, madam?

_Hero_ They did entreat me to acquaint her of it.

_But I persuaded them, if they loved Benedick, To wish him wrestle with affection And never to let Beatrice know of it._

_(III, i, ll. 34-43)_

Thus primed, the two become lovers almost immediately—as the audience expected them to all along. Part of the pleasure of the plot is that the stratagem used to catch this witty, intelligent pair is such a simple one. It is a playground trick—the sort of practical joke young adolescents play on each other: ‘so-and-so fancies you …’. And as such it is appropriate to the not-quite-grown-up world of erotic relationships in Messina. Beatrice and Benedick begin the play by proclaiming images of themselves which are overturned by the stratagems of their friends. Benedick is proud of his ‘hard heart’ (I, i, ll. 120) and Beatrice of her ‘cold blood’ (I, i, ll. 124). The practical joke which sends them into each other's arms allows them to discover other aspects of themselves: they are both transformed and revealed.

Different in tone and detail, but similar in purpose and effect, is the trick played by Claudio and Don Pedro, when the disguised Prince woos Hero for his friend. Don Pedro thinks up the plan:

_I know we shall have revelling tonight I will assume thy part in some disguise, And tell fair Hero I am Claudio._

_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._

_(I, i, ll. 303-10)_
Again, this trick is a benevolent one: the avowed aim is not to humiliate Hero but to find a way of breaking through some of the barriers of etiquette which might otherwise keep the lovers apart. But the actual mechanism, whereby a woman is deceived into thinking she is being proposed to by one man, when in fact it is another who is speaking, is that of a practical joke. The context in which the proposal takes place makes it impossible for us to ignore this, for Don Pedro's 'wooing' takes place at the masked ball in Act II Scene i, a scene in which nearly everybody plays some sort of joke on somebody else. It is a rather genteel kind of inversionary festival, where the conventions of mask and disguise allow people to play comedic games with their own identities, and in which everyday hierarchies are temporarily suspended, so that the serving-girl can flirt with the governor's brother. We do not actually see the encounter between Don Pedro and Hero—that happens off-stage—but we see most of the other men and women take advantage of the masked ball to pretend to be someone else or to pretend that they do not know who they are talking to. This multiple trickery continues, for the most part, to be light-hearted and benevolent—with one significant exception.

One of the masquers is Don John, who knows Don Pedro's plan and attempts to turn it to his own advantage. He approaches Claudio, pretending to think that Claudio is Benedick, in order to impugn Don Pedro's motives for wooing Hero.

Don John Are not you Signior
Claudio You know me well. I am he.
Don John Signior, you are very near
my brother in his love. He is enamoured on Hero. I pray you dissuade him from
her; she is no equal for his birth. You may do the part of an honest man in
it.

(II, i. ll. 151-6)

Like nearly every one else in this scene, Don John is playing a practical joke—albeit a particularly nasty one, and one that only John himself and his henchmen are likely to laugh at. In fact, it is not even a particularly good joke, and is doomed to failure from the start. He goes out of his way to throw suspicion on Don Pedro, implying that the Prince is wooing Hero not for Claudio, but for himself. As it happens, he need hardly have bothered: Leonato and Antonio are already under this misapprehension anyway, as a result of some faulty eavesdropping by one of Antonio's own servants. And although the misunderstanding causes Claudio some momentary pain, the confusion cannot last for long: the truth is bound to come out, as soon as Don Pedro, Hero and Claudio compare notes. And indeed, so it does, a few lines later:

Don Pedro Here, Claudio, I
have wooed in thy name, and fair Hero is won. I have broke with her father
and his good will obtained. Name the day of marriage, and God give thee joy!

(II, i. ll. 279-82)

Rather more successful is the second 'practical joke' which Don John and his henchmen play upon Hero and Claudio. This is the balcony plot, which leads Claudio to believe that Hero has been unfaithful to him. Although Don John takes the credit and the blame for this, it actually has very little to do with him; it is thought up, arranged and carried out by his servant Borachio, and all Don John has to do is watch and keep quiet. Don John is actually a rather unsuccessful villain. This trick, however—the most malevolent trick of them all—is an elegant and sinister variation and combination of the practical jokes which have been played before.

Borachio Find me a meet hour
to draw Don Pedro and the Count Claudio alone. Tell them that you know that
Hero loves me. Intend a kind of zeal both to the Prince and Claudio as in
love of your brother's honour who hath made this match, and his friend's reputation who is thus like to be cozened with the semblance of a maid, that you have discovered thus. They will scarcely believe this without trial. Offer them instances, which shall bear no less likelihood than to see me at her chamber window, hear me call Margaret Hero, hear Margaret term me Claudio. And bring them to see this the very night before the intended wedding, for in the mean time I will so fashion that matter that Hero shall be absent, and there shall appear such seeming truth of Hero's disloyalty that jealousy shall be called assurance, and all the preparation overthrown.

(II, ii, ll. 29-45)

Borachio's plan resembles the original trick by which Don Pedro brought the lovers together, for again it depends on disguise and substitution of one of the lovers: this time, however it is not Claudio who is substituted but Hero. Moreover, it also resembles the jokes which Claudio and his friends played on Beatrice and Benedick: like them Claudio believes himself to be an unsuspected eavesdropper, when in reality the scene is being played out entirely for his benefit. Claudio, in fact, is caught in very much the kind of trap he had previously set for others.

The plot of *Much Ado About Nothing* revolves around these elaborate practical jokes, and it is according to the logic of jokes, rather than the logic of naturalism, that it should be understood. While *Much Ado* is a ‘realistic’ comedy in the sense of not being set in a world of fairy woods or pastoral retreats, it is sometimes commented upon that its plot is far-fetched, or illogical. For example, the famous nineteenth-century actress Ellen Terry once received a letter from an equally famous nineteenth-century writer, who complained:

> Why in the world did not Hero (or at any rate Beatrice on her behalf) prove an ‘alibi’ in answer to the charge? It seems certain that she did not sleep in her room that night … Borachio says, after promising that Margaret shall speak with him out of Hero’s chamber window, ‘I will so fashion the matter that Hero shall be absent’ (*How* he could possibly manage any such thing is another difficulty, but I pass over that.) Well then, granting that Hero slept in some other room that night, why didn’t she say so? … She could, of course, prove [it] by the evidence of the housemaids, who must have known that she occupied another room that night.

But even if Hero might be supposed to be so distracted as not to remember where she had slept the night before, or even whether she had slept anywhere, surely Beatrice had her wits about her? And when an arrangement was made, by which she was to lose, for one night, her twelvemonths' bedfellow, is it conceivable that she didn’t know where Hero passed the night? … With all these excellent materials for proving an ‘alibi’, it is incomprehensible that no-one should think of it.²

But once you start looking for logical inconsistencies in the plot, it is difficult to stop. The various elements of the narrative seem to vie with each other for the highest level of implausibility. It is pretty implausible, after all, that Hero should be successfully wooed on behalf of Claudio by the disguised Don Pedro. And the way in which the truth is eventually brought to light by the inept Watch (who arrest Conrade and Borachio in an impossible search for an imaginary villain called ‘Deformed’) is one of the most absurd series of events in Elizabethan drama. The whole thing is topped off by the way in which the happy ending is finally staged: this involves Leonato suddenly inventing a previously unknown ‘cousin’ of Hero, and Claudio both believing in her and being willing to marry her in order to make up for his previous bad behaviour. The entire plot of *Much Ado About Nothing* is basically absurd.

And this, of course, is part of the point. Comedies do not operate according to the rules of everyday likelihood, and in a play like *Much Ado About Nothing* the very absurdity of the events is part of the

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enjoyment that the audience is offered. It is ironic, therefore, that the writer quoted above, who so exasperatedly points out the holes in the plot, is none other than Lewis Carroll. The author whose own fictions display such a delight in irregularity and inconsistency, in breaking the rules of naturalism and in playing games with cause, effect, and logical narrative progression, seems almost offended when faced with inconsistencies in Shakespeare's comic narrative. It is not, after all, as if *Much Ado About Nothing* presented itself as a piece of dramatic naturalism. Shakespeare may have talked about the importance of drama holding 'a mirror up to nature', but that mirror is often a distorting one; the comic world of Messina is located somewhere through a looking glass. The Messina of *Much Ado About Nothing* is a world which both generates and obeys its own comic rules, just as the wood outside Athens, or the Forest of Arden, or Carroll's own Wonderland generate and obey theirs.

If the play is brought near to tragedy by means of Borachio's malevolent trickery, it is also through a sequence of tricks that it is led back towards its inevitable happy ending. It may be thought that Friar Francis's plot to hide Hero away and give out that she is dead hardly merits being called a trick or joke since the context at that point is too serious. However it, too, bears structural similarities to earlier tricks in the play: by giving out false information, the Friar intends to release the true emotion of sorrow and repentance in Claudio's breast, and force him into self-recognition—just as Beatrice and Benedick had been fed false information as their friends attempted to trick them into recognizing their true love for each other.

_Script:

Friar Francis … For it so falls out
That what we have we prize not to the worth
While we enjoy it; but being lacked and lost,
Why, then we rack the value, then we find
The virtue that possession would not show us
While it was ours. So will it fare with Claudio.
When he shall hear she died upon his words
Th’idea of her life shall sweetly creep
Into his study of imagination
And every lovely organ of her life
Shall come appareled in more precious habit,
More moving, delicate, and full of life
Into the eye and prospect of the soul
Than when she lived indeed. Then shall he mourn
If ever love had interest in his liver …

(IV, i, ll. 216-30)

As it happens, the Friar's plot fails, for he has completely under-estimated Claudio's capacity for self-deception and self-justification. Claudio's response to the news is shockingly cold-blooded: he shows no concern at all for the person he earlier claimed to love so dearly, and denies any responsibility for her supposed death.

_Script:

Leonato … I say thou
hast belied mine innocent child.
Thy slander has gone through and through her heart,
And she lies buried with her ancestors;
O, in a tomb where never scandal slept,
Save this of hers, framed by thy villainy!
Claudio My villainy?
Leonato Thine, Claudio; thine I say.
Don Pedro You say not right, old man.
Leonato My lord, my lord,
I’ll prove it on his body if he dare,
Despite his nice fence and his active practice,
His May of youth and bloom of lusthood.
Claudio Away! I will not have to
do with you.

(V, i, ll. 67-79)

It is not until Hero's innocence is established and the truth about Borachio's plot finally revealed that Claudio accepts any responsibility for what he has done. And, as if to achieve some kind of dramatic expiation of this guilt, a final trick is constructed in order to bring the lovers together after all. This involves a shift in tone whereby the plot is taken into the realms of folk- or fairytale as Leonato invents a previously unknown 'cousin' of Hero, whom Claudio must not only believe in but promise to marry. Once more it is a variation of the 'disguised lover' motif which has featured throughout the play. The difference is that this time the motif appears both as a practical joke and as a test, and what is being tested is the sincerity of Claudio's repentance. By virtue of one of those slightly uncomfortable paradoxes in which Shakespearean comedy abounds, it is only when Claudio renounces his own free will and agrees to marry whomever he is directed, that he finally shows himself to be worthy of Hero.

Thus the verbal witticisms in the play are linked thematically to the play's sequence of practical jokes and tricks. These in turn pass through a cycle which leads from well-meaning trickery to malevolent plotting, and then back finally to the benevolent love-trick out of which the happy ending is forged.

‘I CANNOT WOO IN FESTIVAL TERMS’

Comedies end happily and the happy ending is symbolized by marriage: that, at least, is the conventional view. In Much Ado About Nothing there are two sets of couples with, initially, contrasting attitudes towards the comedic happy ending of marriage. Hero and Claudio are the conventional lovers of comedy, for whom the expected wedding day will (supposedly) symbolize the culmination of their desires. This is why the disruption of the ceremony which takes place in Act IV Scene i makes for such a painful moment, not only for Hero but for the audience: the promised ending of the narrative has been snatched away, the comedy has collapsed, and the play teeters on the brink of tragedy. And what makes it so poignant is that Hero and Claudio (but especially Hero) had believed in the message which the structure of romantic comedy implies: that the marriage ceremony offers the perfect ending to the story.

Beatrice and Benedick, on the other hand, reject the assumption that marriage makes for a happy ending. Beatrice sees it as a stage in a process of deterioration, and warns Hero that:

wooing, wedding and repenting is as a Scotch jig, a measure and a cinquepace. The first suit
is hot and hasty, like a Scotch jig—and full as fantastical; the wedding mannerly modest, as a
measure, full of state and ancrency. And then comes repentance, and with his bad legs falls
into the cinquepace faster and faster till he sink into his grave.

(II, i, ll. 65-72)

They are a comic hero and heroine who, at first at least, reject the logic of comedy: the assumption that marriage will see them live happily ever after.

In other plays by Shakespeare those who turn their backs on the forces of Eros (like the lords of Navarre in Love’s Labour’s Lost or Kate in The Taming of the Shrew) are usually treated as proud figures heading for a fall. This is how Beatrice and Benedick's friends see them, and in the early scenes the audience is invited to share this point of view—hence the humour of the parallel tricks which are played upon them: it derives from a comfortable shared awareness that Beatrice and Benedick ought to be brought into the comedic marriage
arrangements.

I have talked about the trick which their friends play upon them as being benevolent—designed to do them good. There is another way of looking at it, however, which does not contradict that but which stresses another aspect of the trick. As we saw in the early chapters of this book, laughter can be used as a weapon against those who flout the norms of a society; it can be used to discourage socially deviant behaviour. Beatrice and Benedick’s ‘deviancy’ lies in their professed rejection of the pattern of comedy. The trick which is played upon them is a way of mobilizing the laughter of the audience in order to bring them back into line, and to make them behave according to the expected norms—not so much of their society as of their genre.

As the play progresses, however, the conventional model of romantic love, represented by Hero and Claudio, becomes increasingly compromised. Seen from Claudio’s point of view it is compromised by Hero’s supposed faithlessness; more importantly, seen from the point of view of the audience (who know the truth of the matter) it is compromised by the ease with which Claudio’s adoration collapses into loathing. The audience is made more and more uncomfortably aware that Beatrice and Benedick may be justified in their original suspicions of love and marriage as they exist in Messina. And the more the relationship between Beatrice and Benedick develops, the more the one between Hero and Claudio is brought into question.

Throughout the play, the courtship of Hero and Claudio is compared and contrasted in this way with that of Beatrice and Benedick. In many respects the two courtships are each other’s opposite: in one respect, though, they are similar, in that both courtships are initially frustrated by the couples’ inability to express love directly. The disguised Don Pedro has to speak for Claudio, taking his place in the courtship ritual and speaking the words that Claudio himself seems unable to say. It is only when his path has thus been cleared for him that he can assume in full his rôle of the lover, and speak the poetic language of love. The moment is pointed up by Beatrice:

Leonato Count, take of me
my daughter, and with her my fortunes. His Grace hath made the match, and
all grace say amen to it!
Beatrice Speak, Count, it is your
cue.
Claudio Silence is the perfectest
herald of joy. I were but little happy if I could say how much. Lady, as you
are mine, I am yours. I give myself away for you and dote upon the exchange.

(II, i, ll. 299-306)

Claudio’s ‘silence’ is eloquently expressed: when he finally manages to speak, he does so in ‘festival terms’, speaking a formal and poetic language of love. Benedick calls it ‘orthography … a very fantastical banquet’ and laments for the old days when Claudio ‘was wont to speak plain and to the purpose, like an honest man and a soldier’ (II, iii, ll. 20-1). In fact Claudio tends to compartmentalize his languages: he has one register for laughing and joking with the boys, and another very different one for going courting. This compartmentalizing of languages corresponds, in fact, to the way in which he compartmentalizes his emotional life. It is on a par with his idealization and subsequent demonization of Hero, and with his ability to dissociate himself from his own cruelty in rejecting her.

In the early part of the play the pattern of courtship which Claudio and Hero follow is gently satirized. It appears to be presented as a not-too-exaggerated caricature of a kind of courtship which is familiar in Elizabethan drama. It is based at least in part on economic considerations: Claudio’s first question to Don Pedro concerns Leonato and whether he has a son; Don Pedro reassures Claudio that Hero is ‘his only heir’ (I, i, ll. 278). The pair do not know each other intimately, and the love that they feel for each other is one based on a sense of affinity which is formed at a distance. It is a love which has not yet developed a sexual
dimension beyond that of erotic attraction: Claudio insists that he

... never tempted her with word too large,
But as a brother to his sister showed
Bashful sincerity and comely love.

(IV, i, ll. 52-4)

Even the intimacy of a person-to-person declaration of love is not initially available to them and the betrothal itself is as much a matter between Don Pedro and Leonato as it is between Hero and Claudio. Moreover, the fact that things should be done this way does not seem to cause anyone any particular surprise. Don Pedro takes on the surrogate courtship almost as a matter of course.

Don Pedro ... If thou
donst love fair Hero, cherish it,
And I will break with her, and with her father,
And thou shalt have her. Was’t not to this end
That thou began’st to twist so fine a story?
Claudio How sweetly you do minister
to love,
That know love's grief by his complexion!
But lest my liking might too sudden seem
I would have salved it with a longer treatise.
Don Pedro What need the bridge much
broader than the flood?
The fairest grant is the necessity.
Look what will serve is fit. ’Tis once: thou lovest
And I will fit thee with the remedy.

(I, i, ll. 291-302)

And yet within these parameters Claudio’s dramatic function as the ‘young lover’ remains intact: the audience is to understand that he is ‘in love’ with Hero. ‘The sweetest lady that ever I looked on’ (I, i, l. 181), he calls her, and we are meant to believe him. The level-headed Elizabethan considerations of family formation are overlaid with a passionate language of courtly love, and for a while it looks as if it will be an antidote to the cynicism of Beatrice and Benedick and the buckish jesting of the male comrades-in-arms.

But in the second part of the play the gentle mockery turns into savage irony, as Claudio’s courtly love and his lyrical, distant idealizing of a woman whom he has wooed at second-hand turns out to have a sinister reverse side to it. In the scene which by rights should have marked the culmination of the love-plot, the stately, courtly language of the betrothal is replaced by the verbal violence of Claudio’s public humiliation and rejection of Hero.

Claudio ... Father, by
your leave,
Will you with free and unconstrained soul
Give me this maid your daughter?
Leonato As freely, son, as God did
give her me.
Claudio And what have I to give you
back whose worth
May counterpoise this rich and precious gift?
Don Pedro Nothing, unless you render
her again.
Claudio Sweet Prince, you learn me
noble thankfulness.
There, Leonato, take her back again.
The audience knows, more or less, what is about to happen. We are aware (as Leonato is not) that the polite civilities of the Prince and his protégé are bogus, and that the exchange between Claudio and Don Pedro contains a double meaning quite the opposite of what Leonato expects. Even so, the image of the ‘rotten orange’ which Claudio uses to describe the woman everybody thinks he is about to marry, is a shockingly violent one, and one which shatters the atmosphere of celebration. The marriage ceremony turns into a punitive shaming ritual, in which Hero is publicly humiliated as surely as if she were in the pillory or ducking-stool.

Even more violent than Claudio’s insult is Leonato’s almost hysterical reaction to the charge. Siding immediately with Claudio, his public rejection of his daughter takes on the intensity of a curse:

Grieved I, I had but one?
Chid I for that at frugal nature’s frame?
O one too much by thee! Why had I one?
Why ever wast thou lovely in my eyes?
Why had I not with charitable hand
Took up a beggar’s issue at my gates,
Who smirched thus and mired with infamy,
I might have said, ‘No part of it is mine;
This shame derives itself from unknown loins’?
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,
Valuing of her—why she, O, she is fall’n
Into a pit of ink …

(IV, i, ll. 126-39)

The fact that the daughter is the property of the father is stressed in this speech; the word ‘mine’ pounds through Leonato’s lines with a drumbeat insistence. His disgust at his daughter’s supposed infidelity and his desire to disown her only serve to intensify his sense that she is, indeed, his to dispose of as he pleases.

Lewis Carroll asked why Hero does not provide herself with an alibi. Yet it is significant how little notice is taken of what Hero herself says in this scene. Elsewhere in the play Hero is presented as a lively and interesting young woman, particularly when she is ‘in private’, in the company of her female friends. When Claudio is on stage, however, she becomes demure and quiet. In the scene in which she was betrothed to Claudio she was given almost nothing to say. Now, as she is rejected by him, most of her talking is once more done for her by the dominant males in her life: her future husband, her father, or her Prince. She is not, however, completely silent. In answer to Claudio’s accusations she protests her innocence;

Is my lord well, that he should speak so wide? …
O God defend me! How am I beset!
What kind of catechizing call you this? …
Is [my name] not Hero? Who can blot that name
With any just reproach? …
I talked with no man at that hour, my Lord.

(IV, i, ll. 62, 76-77, 81-2, 85)

Yet her words are ignored. Claudio does not believe her; Leonato apparently does not even hear her! ‘She not denies it’ (IV, i, ll. 175), he exclaims, quite erroneously, and he deduces from her non-denial a proof of her
guilt. The language of the public scene belongs entirely to men; the woman's words are not listened to.

Thus the conventional love-relationship, as exemplified by Hero and Claudio, becomes less and less attractive as the play develops. We see the interesting young woman diminished by her relationship with the man. Even in fortune Hero's role in the relationship is a passive one. Things are done to her: her marriage is arranged with her having scarcely a line to say about it, and later she is treated like a piece of faulty merchandise both by her father and her future husband as they find their projected idealization of her under threat. Her passive rôle turns into that of victim.

Claudio, meanwhile, appears increasingly repulsive: as a wooer he was unimpressive, but as a potential life-partner he is appalling. He exemplifies perfectly a kind of masculine attitude to women which can cope with them only as extremes: thus, deprived of his idealized image of Hero as pure virgin, he reacts by castigating her as a whore.

Claudio Out on thee, seeming!
I will write against it.
You seem to me as Dian in her orb,
As chaste as is the bud ere it be blown.
But you are more intemperate in your blood
Than Venus or those pampered animals
That rage in savage sensuality.

(IV, i. l. 56-60)

By this stage in the play the bantering, jokey language of the inhabitants of Messina is being shown in a very different light. In earlier scenes it had been presented as something quite attractive: good humour, camaraderie, high spirits. As the play progresses, however, the jokes and the wordplay are seen more and more clearly as a mode of discourse which serves to limit the characters' emotional range. The most striking example of this is given in Act V Scene i, where Don Pedro and Claudio, refusing to accept any responsibility for Hero's supposed death, try to revert to their earlier modes of speech. Having shrugged off Leonato's challenge, they turn with relief to Benedick, trying almost desperately to get him to join in with their jesting in an attempt to prove to themselves that nothing has really changed.

Claudio We have been up and down to seek thee; for we are high-proof melancholy, and would fain have it beaten away.
Wilt thou use thy wit?
Benedick It is in my scabbard. Shall I draw it?
Don Pedro Dost thou wear thy wit by thy side?
Claudio Never any did so, though very many have been beside their wit. I will bid thee draw, as we do the minstrels: draw to pleasure us.
Don Pedro As I am an honest man, he looks pale. Art thou sick, or angry?
Claudio What, courage, man! What though care killed a cat, thou hast mettle enough in thee to kill care.

(V, i. l. 122-33)

The jokes here sound increasingly hollow and forced, not because they are intrinsically any less witty than the earlier banter of the men, but because the context has turned them sour. They need Benedick to join in with their game in order to reassure themselves that things are as they always were: the language of wit is here being used by both men as a shelter behind which to hide. Claudio's resolute lack of response to the news of
Hero's 'death' has already made us realize that he will hear only what he wants to hear. Now, as Benedick, charged with the duty to 'kill Claudio', attempts to challenge him to a duel, Claudio and Don Pedro try not to hear the seriousness in his tone. When Benedick not only refuses to humour them, but finally does make his challenge heard, Don Pedro (ironically) puts it down to the corrupting influence of love! But the Prince's exclamation that 'He is in earnest' (V, i, l. 193) indicates his shocked realization that the camaraderie is at an end; Benedick has dropped his role of jester, and by ceasing to joke he has broken the fellowship.

And yet the language of jokes is reinstated at the very end of the play. Just as Leonato's trick about the 'second Hero' reclaims the practical joke as a benign device, so the jokes which seemed to turn sour in Act V Scene i become light-hearted and celebratory again in the final scene. Whereas most of the characters seem to feel that they must choose either to make jokes or to be in love, Beatrice and Benedick end up by having their cake and eating it. As Benedick says, he and Beatrice are 'too wise to woo peaceably' (V, ii, l. 65); they find, though, that they are able to court each other with banter and jokes—in the very terms, in fact, in which they once abused each other. They reject the language of romantic love in favour of a more everyday language. Benedick, it is true, makes a half-hearted stab at love poetry, but soon gives up:

Benedick … Marry, I
cannot show it in rhyme. I have tried. I can find out no rhyme to 'lady'
but 'baby', an innocent rhyme; for 'scorn' 'horn',
a hard rhyme; for 'school' 'fool', a babbling rhyme.
Very ominous endings. No, I was not born under a rhyming planet. I cannot
woo in festival terms.

(V, ii, ll. 34-9)

For Beatrice and Benedick, their jokes become a means to resist the kind of love-match exemplified by Hero and Claudio. By the end of the play they have constructed a loving relationship which is as much of a sparring match as their enmity was.

Benedick Come, I will have
thee; but by this light I take thee for pity.
Beatrice I would not deny you; but
by this good day I yield upon great persuasion, and partly to save your life,
for I was told you were in a consumption.

(V, iv, ll. 92-6)

The 'happy end' which sees Hero married off to Claudio is fraught with contradictions, for the conventional relationship founded on romantic love which they exemplify has been severely satirized by Shakespeare. Beatrice and Benedick are offered as an alternative to Hero and Claudio. The festive ending is displaced onto the couple who have managed to deploy their jokes and their bantering not only as a defence against desire, but also as a language of desire. Their relationship—for all its anomalies—is a more equal one than either of them might have expected. In their Messina, unlike in the Padua of The Taming of the Shrew, there is no longer any need for the husband to 'win', for him to browbeat the wife into submission as Petruchio does. Beatrice and Benedick end the play more or less even on points, with the promise of frequent friendly re-matches in the future. And if the relationship between the pair is not presented as an ideal, it is nonetheless seen as preferable to the fragility of an idealized romantic love such as Claudio's with all its tendency to collapse into loathing and disgust. And for Beatrice and Benedick to have wrested the language—and the laughter—to their own ends in this way is in itself some cause for celebration.

Notes
Introduction

Much Ado about Nothing

See also, Much Ado about Nothing Criticism and Volume 88.

One of Shakespeare’s most popular comedies, Much Ado about Nothing’s appeal arises largely from the witty banter and charisma of Beatrice and Benedick, whose antagonistic relationship and eventual courtship are dramatized in the play's subplot. However, the main plot of the play, involving the docile Hero and the boorish Claudio, is often viewed as a dramatic failure. The relationship between these plots, as well as Claudio's role in the problematic main plot, are popular areas of critical study. Debate regarding the play’s genre is also a topic of modern criticism, and many scholars have studied the play’s deviations from the conventions of romantic comedy. Additionally, the characters’ use of language and their view of its relation to political and social power, as well as the play’s treatment of the problems related to knowledge and perception, garner much scholarly interest. In critiques of film and stage productions of Much Ado about Nothing, issues regarding characterization, genre, and gender are often discussed, particularly in Kenneth Branagh's 1993 film adaptation.

In his overview of Much Ado about Nothing, Sheldon P. Zitner (1993) discusses the nature of the play's plot construction, highlighting the connections between the Hero-Claudio main plot and the Beatrice-Benedick subplot. Zitner observes that the plots are linked through a number of formal devices, including deception, eavesdropping, and overhearing. Additionally, Zitner examines the play's characters, noting the relevance of contemporary Elizabethan marriage customs to Hero’s loyalty and obedience. Zitner contends that Hero’s passivity is in part explained by immaturity, and that many of Claudio's personality traits, including his immaturity, exemplify the “social style of Honour.” Beatrice and Benedick are also studied extensively by Zitner, who notes that the characters' unconventionality and wit set them apart from Hero and Claudio, but are not their only notable characteristics. Zitner comments on Beatrice's rejection and acceptance of various aspects of patriarchal society, noting that her obedience in her marriage to Benedick will have its boundaries. As for Benedick, Zitner observes that his wit is used to mask his fear of marriage and his longing for Beatrice. In John Wain's (1967) analysis of the play, Claudio is cited as the primary cause of the failure of the main plot. Wain states Shakespeare found the character of Claudio “unattractive,” which caused him to create a “cold, proud, self-regarding, inflexible” hero. Likewise, Richard Henze (1971) focuses on the character of Claudio, finding that it is Claudio, not Don John and his dishonesty, nor Beatrice and Benedick in their unconventionality, that poses the most formidable threat to social harmony. Through Claudio, Henze states, Shakespeare depicted the power that malice attains when it appears respectable.

As Zitner points out, the plot of Much Ado about Nothing relies heavily on deception and the misunderstanding it produces. Critics have also studied a related theme—the play’s treatment of knowledge and perception. Critic Nova Myhill (1999) finds that the numerous depictions of deception in the play highlight Shakespeare's methodology for creating different modes of interpretation. Myhill goes on to argue that while the audience typically assumes it possesses a privileged status in terms of eavesdropping, this notion is undercut by the fact that the characters are repeatedly deceived by their belief that eavesdropping has provided them with direct access to truth. Taking another approach, Carl Dennis (1973) explores the two modes of perception he maintains are at work in the play: wit and wisdom. Whereas wit relies on reason and sensory evidence, wisdom, explains Dennis, is related to a belief in intuitive methods of understanding. In the end, Dennis asserts, wit is portrayed as an unreliable mode of perception, and the fate of the characters depends on their willingness to reject what they perceive through their senses and approach life through faith.
The characters’ attitudes toward language and their use of language to achieve various ends is another area of critical concern. Camille Wells Slights (1993) claims that the characters in *Much Ado about Nothing* view language as the backbone of social harmony and interaction, contending that the play is primarily concerned with the social nature of language, and with the power of language as an instrument and indicator of social and political hierarchy. In her analysis, Slights discusses the ways characters use and view language, observing for example that Beatrice uses language to acquire independence in a patriarchal society, and that both Beatrice and Benedick fear the power of language to deceive and associate this danger with gender roles and sexual relationships. Like Slights, Maurice Hunt (2000) explores the ways in which the characters employ language, particularly patriarchal language—characterized by irreverence, aggression, and authoritarian tone and content. Hunt demonstrates the way in which this type of speech establishes social dominance through the transformation, dismissal, or oppression of the words and thoughts of others. Hunt observes that the male characters, as well as Beatrice, use patriarchal language to assert social dominance.

Concerns regarding the genre of *Much Ado about Nothing* form another area of critical study. Walter N. King (1964) maintains that the play is a comedy of manners, and that like other plays of this genre its central theme is the examination of a morally “flabby” aristocratic class that accepts the established social codes without question. King notes that the society remains essentially unchanged at the play’s end, which is expected in a comedy of manners where “the social health depends upon compromise, adjustment, resilience, not upon fundamental social change.” The critic further maintains that it is the characters’ use of wit that enables them to achieve social harmony. Approaching the genre issue from another angle, Laurie E. Osborne (1990) examines Shakespeare's incorporation of elements of the Italian *novella* into the genre of English comedy. Osborne contends that through his linking of these two genres, Shakespeare explored the contradictions within comic conventions and the problems inherent in combining non-comic and non-dramatic materials with comedy.

Critics also explore issues of genre in their evaluation of modern productions of the play, such as Kenneth Branagh's 1993 film adaptation of *Much Ado about Nothing*. Celestino Deleyto (1997) contends that Branagh's film belongs to the romantic comedy genre, and uses the play to gauge the changes that the genre has undergone in the last four centuries. Deleyto focuses on the sexual politics and gender tension found in the film, and finds that “[t]he culturally ingrained male fear of women is used and reversed by the film in order to produce a happy ending which, … ensures the continuity of the genre’s traditional structure.” Michael J. Collins (1997) also examines Branagh's film, contending that Branagh downplayed the original play's tension regarding gender roles in order to present the film as a typical, popular Hollywood romantic comedy. In modern stage productions, the play receives various treatments. Tom Provenzano (2000) praises the East Los Angeles Classic Theatre adaptation of *Much Ado* by Tony Plana and Bert Rosario. Provenzano notes the play, geared toward school-age children, was an excellent introduction to Shakespeare for young people. The critic also notes that despite the major textual cuts the production was faithful to Shakespeare's story and language. Critic Charles Isherwood (see Further Reading) offers a mixed appraisal of a 1998 Stratford Festival production, directed by Richard Monette. While Isherwood praises the performances of the middle-aged Beatrice and Benedick, the critic finds the production as a whole “uneven.” Steven Oxman (see Further Reading) reviews the South Coast Repertory presentation of *Much Ado about Nothing*, directed by Mark Rucker. Oxman applauds the production, and praises the director’s decision to style the play in a manner reminiscent of a Hollywood Golden Age film.

Criticism: Overviews And General Studies

*[In the following excerpt, Zitner surveys the setting and characters of Much Ado about Nothing and discusses the relationship between the Hero-Claudio main plot and the Beatrice-Benedick subplot.]*
PLACE AND SETTING

Unlike many of Shakespeare's plays, Much Ado does not create a strong sense of place. Shakespeare's Messina, as Mario Praz observes, is 'senz'altro una città imaginaria'. It bears no resemblance to Renaissance Messina or any other Italian city of the day. What it does resemble, however, is an Elizabethan town with a simple municipal organization operating under royal charter. Shakespeare's Messina is something of a social backwater; compare the gorgeous wedding gown of the Duchess of Milan with Hero's modest wedding dress which, according to her fashionable gentlewoman, is appropriate to the occasion. There is a provincial overtone in the strain felt by Leonato on receiving Don Pedro and his party; the formality is excessive and observed to be so. Leonato is unused to such exalted guests or to such entertaining. Public rooms, evidently not often open, must be perfumed by specially hired staff (Borachio); for music Leonato must depend on the Prince's man Balthasar. This is hardly Bandello's upscale Messina of the banquets. What Leonato is used to are easy, informal relations with townsfolk such as Dogberry, whom he can address as friend and neighbour. Evidently he is also used to a household without a wife's control, hence to a rather permissive domestic scene dominated by his teenage daughter, Hero, her two gentlewomen, and the unconventional Beatrice. This makes easier Don John's plot to discredit Hero, something that could have taken place only with difficulty in All's Well, whose household organization left no wall without ears.

In other plays the impression of place derives from mutually defining contrasts; town against country, court against tavern, and from evocative scene-setting. Much Ado has little of such poetry—Hero's description of her garden, a few words from Don Pedro on the beauty of the night—and no great removals of the action from place to symbolic place, to a Dover Cliff or a forest of Arden, for example. Social rather than physical ambience concerns the dramatist, but picturesque settings blur rather than clarify that ambience. As a text Much Ado implies a classical spatial economy and a radically stylized setting. With the exception of the church scene in which Claudio denounces Hero, and possibly the supposed penance in 5.3, the action takes place in or near Leonato's mansion.

Earlier editors often attempted to locate the action of individual scenes in the play, usually following Capell, Theobald, and Pope. Of the play's seventeen scenes, at least nine are localized differently by different editors. Generally the issue is whether to place the scene inside Leonato's house, before it, or in the adjoining garden. In only a few instances does the choice seem significant. For example, the depth of Leonato's anxiety and of the deference he shows Don Pedro can be indicated to some extent by the choice of locale: a public room in the governor's house, with its suggestion of Leonato's status, or a more deferential welcome outside. How casual Shakespeare could be about location unless it affected meaning is clear from 1.2 and 1.3. Scene 1.2 opens with Antonio's second-hand account of Don Pedro and Claudio speaking of Hero when walking 'in mine orchard'. Thus we also ought to locate all of 1.1 in Antonio's orchard, an unlikely place for receiving the Messenger, unless we think Pedro and Claudio repeated elsewhere their exchange of twenty lines earlier in 1.1. In 1.3 Borachio also claims to have overheard Claudio and Don Pedro discussing the proxy wooing, this time in a musty room. These are knots to be cut by directors, not untied by editors.

Where there is a need to define a place, it takes only a few descriptive lines (Hero's in her garden), minor props (trellis and tree for arbour and concealment), or only the stage architecture itself—as in 3.3 when Borachio and Conrad shield themselves from the weather under a 'penthouse', presumably the canopy over part of the stage. The action of Much Ado takes place largely in virtual rather than 'real' space, and the properties Shakespeare required for Much Ado were all on hand, an indication of his professional concern for easy transfer to different venues.

ORGANIZING THE DRAMATIS PERSONAE
The story of Hero and Claudio does not require the whole cast of *Much Ado*. Hero and Claudio yes, but why Beatrice and Benedick? Leonato, but why Antonio? Margaret, but why Ursula? And why both Conrad and Borachio? Characteristically, the Shakespearian dramatis personae goes beyond the necessities of narrative, constituting a system of contrasting dyads and triads (Hal and Hotspur, Lear's three daughters), and even more sophisticated thematic variants (Hotspur as Time's fool, Hal redeeming it, Falstaff wasting it, Henry IV ‘serving’ it). In part, this systemic pairing reflects a view of character, specifically the Pauline voluntarism that prompts us to ‘look here upon this picture and on this’ in order to judge the characters resulting from the life-choices of Claudius and Hamlet's father.

There are further consequences arising from this process of doubling and tripling. In ‘Emotion of Multitude’, his seminal remarks on *Lear*, Yeats observes that the reverberations of parallel lives suggest to the audience the universality and hence the likelihood of what is occurring on stage. Shakespeare does with character what he does with scene and incident, maximizing the differences, here between characters brought together by incident (Leonato and Dogberry) or family or occupation (Hero and Beatrice, Dogberry and Verges). The result is vivid delineation, not only for its own sake, but for rapidity in orientating audience attention and easing the writer's task of generating dialogue.

Finally, the playwright is something of a company manager. In writing the play Shakespeare distributes the burden of work so as to sustain the enterprise, demanding of actors only what they can perform, bringing along novices by creating parts that stretch their talents.

**LOVERS**

*Hero and Leander*, with George Chapman's continuation of what Christopher Marlowe had left undone, was published in 1598. Even without this jog to memory, Shakespeare might have named his *ingénue* Hero after the faithful young woman whose lover is drowned swimming to an assignation. Benedick's ironic reference to 'Leander the good swimmer' in 5.2 suggests that allusions to the story would have been widely understood. Shakespeare's dependence on its associations is clear from Claudio's puerile repetition of Hero's name as he denounces her.

The Hero of *Much Ado* is one of Shakespeare's passive young women: obedient, unquestioning, well brought up, thoroughly conventional and rather prudish. As is Polonius speaking of Ophelia, Leonato can be confident when he says of Hero, ‘My daughter tells us all’. With the gardener in *Richard II*, Hero can gather politically correct platitudes (hers are naïve and unambiguous) from her garden in 3.1; she is uneasy at the sexual innuendo in Margaret's reference in 3.4 to the coming marriage; in 2.1 she is prudenty specific in offering to do any ‘modest’ office to unite Beatrice and Benedick. In the brief self-defence she makes in 4.1, she responds with delicate obliqueness to the implicit charge of fornication, but directly to the apparently mentionable charge of conversation ‘At hours unmeet’.

Shakespeare seems at times to do everything but make Hero disappear; unlike Beatrice, this is a part requiring only a second-best boy actor. In 1.1, in answer to Claudio's request for an opinion of her, Benedick, an admittedly unreliable judge of women, finds Hero merely Leonato’s ‘short daughter’, ‘too low for a high praise, too brown for a fair praise, and too little for a great praise’. Even Hero's most intense reactions (she blushes and goes pale) are conveyed by someone else, by the Friar, who describes her innocence, her shame, and her rage. Later in the scene it is the Friar who provides an apologia which invents more than describes the ‘lovely’ life of a Hero who speaks so little in her own right. No wonder Shakespeare chose a name that was a label. But even so evocative a name as Hero could not compete in implication with ‘Beatrice’, yet another indication of Shakespeare's curious reversal of traditional priorities in subordinating his ‘main plot.’

Shakespeare's Hero is both a foil for Beatrice and a partial explanation of her character. In 2.1 Antonio asks Hero if she will be ruled by her father in the choice of a husband. Beatrice intervenes, saying that it is Hero's
duty to curtsy and act as it pleases her father—adding however, that if the man chosen for her is not handsome, Hero should curtsy again and say “Father, as it please me”. Beatrice, unlike Hero, is not a highly placed heiress. Older, with no father, and moving toward what was thought an unmarrigeable age, she has developed tough—if not single-minded—views which question the constraints imposed on women. She tries to stake out a position of modified obedience for Hero, a position hardly radical when The Miseries of Enforced Marriage, to use the title of a popular play performed by Shakespeare's company in 1607, had long been acknowledged. For Hero, however, Beatrice's compromise might have been unsustainable. The instant change from Hero's preparation for Leonato's 'dream' of a match with Don Pedro to her acceptance of Claudio suggests complete pliability.

Yet Hero's loyalty is not witless acceptance. Like her discreetly flirtatious responses to the Prince during their turn around the dance floor, her answer in 3.1 to Ursula's question, ‘When are you married, madam?’ shows some wit: ‘Why, every day, tomorrow.’ Perhaps this also hints at a long-prepared dedication to the social role that might make her ultimate marriage to Claudio plausible. However, Hero is not all conformity and quiet. Beatrice is a fool and you're another, she tells Margaret after Margaret questions her taste in clothes, a matter not of prime interest to Hero. Perhaps the outburst is pre-nuptial jitters. Hero obviously looks to Beatrice as to an older sister, but there may be truth as well as feigning in the critique she makes of Beatrice when trying to trick her into accepting Benedick. Beatrice, Hero says, is ‘self-endeared’; her being ‘so odd from all fashions’ is not commendable; her spirits are as coy and wild as the haggard of the rock.

From the perspective of conformity those who forsake it must always seem to assert an egotistical superiority. Looked at positively, Hero's choice is to be ‘other-endeared’, and so she can be portrayed but this, one can argue, is precisely the self-sacrifice that has been imposed on her. Hero's reference to the ‘haggard’, the female falcon in the wild, need not mean that she accepts a wholly instrumental role. In Shakespeare and His Social Context, Margaret Loftus Ranald, who discusses the term ‘haggard’ in relation to The Taming of the Shrew, points out that the art of falconry distinguished between training and taming, and recognized that training altered both master and bird, whose native wildness it sought to preserve if only for the sake of the hunt. The analogy reduces a human to an animal relation, an exploitive one at that, and encourages the male master's illusion that women can be 'mastered' without 'breaking their spirit'. Yet to deny the distinction that was made through the analogy is to ignore a small, ameliorative point of argument in the current discussions of marriage.

By the turn of the century matches like that between Hero and Claudio were already looking out of date or at least rather high aristocratic. Shakespeare had been on safe ground with social opinion in questioning parental interference with a love-match, even in the society of Romeo and Juliet. Yet it was (and still largely is) thought unlikely that a Hamlet would ‘carve for himself’. The matching of a governor's daughter and a count—especially a young count so near a prince—comes close enough to a power transaction to 'place' if not extenuate Leonato's heavy-handed management and Hero's acquiescence.

The frequent appearance of dukes and counts in Elizabethan drama may lead to underestimates of the steepness of fortune's hill. Sir Thomas Wilson, describing ‘The State of England’ in a contemporary treatise, estimated that in 1600 there were only 60 peers, 500 knights, and 16,000 lesser gentry in a population of 4,000,000. It would have been easy enough for an Elizabethan audience to set the Hero-Claudio match to one side, accepting its rather bloodless quality as highly probable and well observed. The situation of Beatrice and Benedick, unusual as the two and their wooing were, would have seemed closer to courtships the audience actually knew.

At least some of those courtships were influenced by a degree of clerical support for more latitude for women in the conduct of marriage, though not for their parity. Paul's often quoted Letter to the Ephesians 5: 22 (‘Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord’) could be countered with Galatians 3:28 in which Paul himself had said that ‘in Christ there is no male or female’. But popular sermons teased an appropriate moral
from texts with more picturesque images: Eve was created not from Adam’s foot but from his rib, and so it was the divine intention that she walk by Adam’s side, not be trodden underfoot. The term ‘helpmeet’ suggests both the limitations and advances implicit in the sermons. Milder attitudes toward women were reflected in the sentimental *Frauendienst* of romantic plays and poems, more substantially in sermon and homily and, some speculate, in individual marriages, particularly among couples with puritan sympathies.

It is unlikely, however, that Elizabethan marriages were any closer to the norms of advice and preaching than are marriages now. A passage from I. G.’s 1605 *Apologie for Women-Kinde* seems plausible if only because it seems familiar. According to I. G., women gave way to their husbands’ authority ‘Only for order’, but ‘the authority is vain’ as ‘every one can tell’. Though clearly partisan, I. G. believes that the God who refrained from casting Eve into slavery or servility also ‘left her guidance to her husband’s will’. The result is a familiar blur. The kind of marriage it implies is hardly egalitarian, but as a formula it probably represents, historically, a turn for the better. Progressive humanists could be even more optimistic about the possibilities for mutual contentment in the sexuality and companionship of marriage, as was Erasmus in *A Ryght Frutefull Epistle in Laude and Praise of Matrimonie*, written about 1530. The actualities of Elizabethan marriage in general are impossible to know and, as Carol Thomas Neely points out, there is inadequate evidence for choosing among contradictory assertions about women’s improved or worsened lot during the period.

If we are to draw conclusions from what we know of Hero’s off-stage aristocratic sisters, it is doubtful that Hero could even look forward to the kind of marriage I. G. described. Don Pedro, a bachelor, had to remind Claudio of the minimal behaviour expected of a husband. In *English Society* 1580-1680, Keith Wrightson describes the marital fate of young women of the high aristocracy. Their lives could be quite empty, and they themselves merely ‘ornamental and idle’ as they stitched away solitary hours while their husbands warred or governed.

Shakespeare has given us a submissive Hero, yet he has also given the actor enough to create a more subtle role. Neither her apparent enthusiasm for her ‘own dear Claudio’, nor her conformity precludes apprehensiveness and regret. When her gown is praised in 3.4, Hero replies, ‘God give me joy to wear it, for my heart is exceeding heavy’. This can be played as virginal jitters but, alternatively, it can also express a pang of resignation to a narrow fate. Hero’s answer to Margaret’s question about when she is to be married, ‘Why, every day, tomorrow’ may be spoken with grim anticipation, a tone Leonato’s heavy-handedness could easily motivate.

Hero’s vulnerability is due as much to youth as to social status. Shakespeare remembered Bandello’s adolescent heroine in creating what Don John sourly calls this ‘forward March chick’ and in matching her with a ‘start-up’ suitor. Extreme youth is not unusual in engaged couples of the high aristocracy. There is one other young Claudio in Shakespeare, the unfortunate prisoner of *Measure for Measure*. The two Claudios share only their ordinariness and lack of moral distinction. (The Claudios of the *commedia dell’arte* were young lovers; perhaps Shakespeare recalled them wryly.) In *Much Ado* Claudio is addressed as ‘young Claudio’, ‘Lord Lackbeard’, and ‘boy’. He does not bridle at epithets that would have drawn Coriolanus’ sword, for the epithets are undeniable.

Immaturity explains and extenuates Hero’s passivity, as it does Claudio’s too-quick suspicions and his ready acceptance of Don Pedro’s offer to woo Hero in his stead. Even Claudio’s military prowess, like that of Bertram in *All’s Well*, seems connected with immaturity; indeed, Claudio is a first sketch for Bertram. The Erasmian scepticism about war Shakespeare develops in *All’s Well* through Parolles’ follies and Bertram’s astounding feats as a teenage Alexander touches Beatrice’s tart comments on killing and eating in 1.1 and her deprecation of Benedick’s need to associate with some ‘young squarer’, some precocious master of brawling like Claudio. Through Bertram’s career Shakespeare will imply that war is as much a boy’s as a man’s game; Claudio’s victory over Don John suggests that the idea was already formed.
Alone onstage at the start of 2.3, Benedick tells us that Claudio in love has ‘turned orthography’ and that his words are a ‘very fantastical banquet’. No one familiar with the play will believe it. Having denied Claudio the sighing and sonneteering of the conventional stage lover, Shakespeare repeats the strategy he used in creating Hero. He makes Claudio in love the matter of someone else’s virtuoso soliloquy. The description is a rehearsal of the Benedick-to-be who speaks it. It applies to no Claudio we have seen and it only underscores what he lacks. Claudio does make a brief declaration in 2.1, just after Leonato has offered him Hero in marriage. ‘Lady,’ he says to Hero, ‘as you are mine, I am yours. I give away myself for you, and dote upon the exchange.’ The speech is provoked by Beatrice’s prodding of the lovers to declare themselves. It is weakened rather than justified by Claudio’s insistence that his silence is ‘the perfectest herald of joy’, and by two rather cool formulations: ‘as you are mine’ and I ‘dote upon the exchange’ (italics mine). Why posit what sounds like a condition, and why not dote on the lady herself?

Anyone unfamiliar with Elizabethan marriage laws and customs would not realize that the words Claudio speaks constitute, as do the two other such exchanges in the last scene, espousals _de praesenti_, a form of union then considered virtually indissoluble. Thus there may be some slight extenuation for Claudio’s later misbehaviour in the legal character of the commitments here, in the handfast—a probable piece of stage business—and the kiss. But Shakespeare does nothing to underline the point. Later he will neglect it again in the case of the Claudio of _Measure for Measure_, where the stakes are even higher.

As aristocratic suitor, if not as young lover, Claudio is highly plausible. He consults his elders, Benedick and the Prince, describing to his commander his subordination of his initial ‘liking’ of Hero to the ‘task in hand’. Now that ‘warthoughts / Have left their places vacant’, ‘soft and delicate desires’ have ‘come thronging’ in, ‘All prompting me how fair young Hero is, / Saying I liked her ere I went to wars’. This is a report to a superior rather than a confession of love; Claudio’s thoughts and feelings come curiously self-propelled and nicely prioritized; nor do they overflow their categories. It is tempting to imagine Don Pedro with tongue in cheek when he warns Claudio that he will be ‘like a lover presently, / And tire the hearer with a book of words’. Don Pedro’s offer to intercede with Leonato has the right cachet, and Claudio does not hesitate. Nevertheless he is still concerned about appearances: ‘lest my liking might too sudden seem, / I would have salved it [prepared for his declaration of love] with a longer treatise’.

Claudio can hold his own in scenes of soldierly ragging (indeed he must if Shakespeare is to write them without introducing more characters), but the verbal leanness of a minor part accords with this limited sensibility whose thoughts and feelings come from narrow conceptions of soldierliness and personal honour. As David Cook points out, in both 1.1 and 2.1 Claudio is on stage for sixty lines before he speaks a word. But when he thinks that his honour is at stake, as in the church scene, he can find words enough.

When he does speak at length, Claudio is unsympathetic. Like his mentor Don Pedro and some of Shakespeare's other command-figures (Henry V, the Duke in _Measure for Measure_, Prospero), Claudio is an instigator of spectacle. An unpleasant self-satisfaction prompts both his decision to denounce Hero before all the congregation and the denunciation itself. ‘But fare thee well, most foul, most fair; farewell / Thou pure impiety and impious purity’: the rhetoric is mechanical and absolute. That it has as its primary aim the advertisement of Claudio’s own still spotless honour only makes it worse. However, Don Pedro and even Leonato accept the charges as proved. This may not be the exoneration of Claudio for which T. W. Craik argues, but at least it demonstrates that Claudio is not unique, not exclusively the ‘hateful young cub’ Andrew Lang thought him. However, the Friar's plan to lead Claudio to remorse through Hero's supposed death simply fails, as his behaviour and the Prince's in 5.1 show. Any expression of remorse has to be projected into the two lines (5.1.245-6) in which Claudio tells of the return of Hero’s image ‘In the rare semblance that I loved it first’. No matter how impressive the ritual at Hero's shrine, wishfulness cannot explain away Claudio’s defects, but criticism that isolates Claudio overlooks the ideological breadth of Shakespeare’s unpleasant portrayal of Hero’s accusers.
Propriety, plausibility, laconic speech and cliché, absence of intimate feeling, a touchy concern for (male) opinion—in all these Claudio exemplifies the social style of Honour. Add to this his youth, and his ready suspicion first of Don Pedro and then of Hero becomes ‘natural’. Yet both suspicions are suspicions of Hero, not ‘natural’ but exaggerations of accepted misogynist absurdities, here given a romantic coloration: if Don Pedro has betrayed him it is not because Don Pedro is disloyal but because, as Claudio bitterly observes at the ball after being taken in by Don John's lies, ‘beauty is a witch / Against whose charms faith melteth into blood’, blood being our common sexuality. W. H. Auden wrote that had Claudio's love been ‘all he imagined it to be, he would have laughed in Don John's face’. But Claudio loved honour, not only more, but almost exclusively.

Yet even with honour as a motive for his blindness, can one accept Claudio's excuse, ‘sinned I not / But in mistaking’? And does his response to Leonato's second offer of a bride (‘Your over kindness doth wring tears from me’) give us at last a Claudio ‘fit’ for marriage; or only a Claudio grateful for any way out of a situation in which his honour is at risk? Auden, already generous to Claudio even in condemnation, thought him fit, as have others, if only because exonerating Claudio, according to Robert Grams Hunter, allows audiences to have the ‘comic experience’. Yet the question is not whether ‘we’ exonerate Claudio, although we are free to do so. We can find him innocent and Don John the only guilty party, as does Craik. We can forgive his youth; view the death of Hero as a symbolic purging of Claudio's offence, as does David Cook; or stage it, as did Trevor Nunn, so that ‘Claudio's penance at the tomb [would] not be undervalued’. Or we can take our cue from Leonato and Hero. But if the plot ‘forgives’ Claudio, the script seems less ready to do so. How is the actor to speak and behave in 4.1 and 5.1? How make his eagerness to wed even an Ethiop contrition rather than only care for his honour, which marriage into Leonato's family will clear? The treatment of Claudio in performance is a measure of how far directors are willing to risk the dark side of the play.

It is a mistake to dismiss Hero and Claudio as merely ‘ordinary’ and ‘uninteresting’. The ordinary has its own interest; it is where nature puts her bets on survival. Further, Hero and Claudio are painful historical portraits, and if their attitudes are commonplace they are necessarily so in order to define the rare luck of their quarrelsome intellectual superiors. There is, in addition, a canny irony in Shakespeare's enlisting such agents in a romantic plot. As John Russell Brown observed, Much Ado will not ‘betray its secret to … piecemeal criticism’.

Beatrice and Benedick are older, more experienced, less constrained socially and intellectually, more sensitive and more expressive. They were also intended to be more active physically. In her book On Some of Shakespeare's Characters, one of the great nineteenth-century Beatrices, Helen Faucit, conceived of Beatrice as ‘tall, lithe, quaint and sportive’. The parcelling out of traits among the lovers is a nice instance of theatrical pragmatism. An older (and taller) boy would have been needed for the older, more difficult role of Beatrice; hence a diminutive Hero for the sake of contrast as well as the impression of extreme youth. A tall Benedick was needed as a physical match for Beatrice, and further attributes, such as his being a ‘valiant trencherman’, followed. Beatrice's remark in the last scene that she had been told that, for love of her, Benedick was ‘in a consumption’ may be a joking allusion to the actor's size. Perhaps Thomas Pope, the large comic actor who played Falstaff and Sir Toby Belch, created the role.

Beatrice and Benedick are more than unconventional contrasts to the younger couple's conventionality. They are blessed, not in being the Perfect Conduct-book Couple, but as individuals singled out for unusual gifts, among them their talents, their second chance, and each other. Beatrice, however, is more thoroughly blessed; the gift to Benedick seems centred on words. Appropriately, his name entered the language as a now obsolete generic term for newly married bachelors of long standing; it served as a compliment in the days when that status had a sentimental import.
Beatrice and Benedick are best remembered as linguistic marvels. For aspiring actresses, the role is a pinnacle, like the role of Hamlet for men, and for the same reason: there are so many fine things to be said, and in the theatre the play stands or falls on the role. Beatrice’s first words, like Hamlet’s, have a tart, cryptic quality that sets her apart as distinctly an individual with private concerns, with a public group, but not of it. From then on she too is a social critic, orientating our understanding, expressing herself through irony, and, at a crucial moment, regretting her inability to act.

Helen Faucit, who preferred the gentler role of Rosalind, nevertheless inveighed against the ‘heresy’ of Mrs Pat Campbell’s portrayal of Beatrice as a tomboy, a shrew, and in general an ‘odious woman’. 17 The heresy still surfaces in the theatre as an apparent confusion between Much Ado and The Taming of the Shrew, although there are few similarities between ‘curst Kate’ and Beatrice. Indeed, after overhearing Hero’s Kate-like ‘character’ of her in the arbour scene, Beatrice is appalled. In any case, ‘curst’—for Antonio at least—is a code-word for Beatrice’s failure to obey her male relatives. Ellen Terry took pains to indicate from the beginning that Beatrice was half in love with Benedick; her devotion to the single life is queried before it is expressed since her interest in Benedick is obvious from her first words, despite their sarcasm.

As Helen Faucit observed, there is an edge to Beatrice’s wit that ‘sorrow and wrong’, far from removing, had sharpened. The resistance Shakespeare attributes to Beatrice is not the soft-spoken resignation Faucit tacitly accepts as the proper feminine response to adversity. Despite this verbal edge, a star danced at her birth and she has been thoughtfully amused ever since. Inevitably her thoughts have centred on the situation of women, and her amusement on men, whom she finds both intolerable and desirable.

An intellectual history can be gathered from the order of the topics on which Beatrice exercises her wit. In 1.1 her initial target is Benedick as lady-killer (he ‘challenged Cupid at the flight’), then Benedick as courageous soldier (‘a good soldier to a lady’), Benedick as intellectual opponent (‘four of his five wits went halting off’), then Benedick as faithful companion (‘O Lord, he will hang upon [a male friend] like a disease’). A little later Beatrice calls him ‘a pernicious suitor’. Decoding these complaints requires only Don Pedro’s statement that Benedick had ‘cut Cupid’s bow-string’, or Beatrice’s that Benedick had won her heart ‘with false dice’.

Evidently Beatrice thinks the barrier between them is Benedick’s commitment to the all-absorbing male cults of war, comradeship, and honour. It was the assurance held out by those cults, an assurance of a nobler intimacy and of protection from enervating sentiment and sexual betrayal that prompted the cutting of Cupid’s bow-string and led him to become ‘a professed tyrant to women’. Benedick is not so much older than Claudio as to be free of the adolescent fears, so evident in his misogynistic wit, that lead to false idealisms such as those of the young men in Love’s Labour’s Lost. Against such cults Beatrice has set her wit: for Beatrice war is what riding to hounds was for Oscar Wilde, a hunt for the inedible; male alliances are mercurial and superficial, with ‘every month a new sworn brother’; honour is the treacherous ‘princely testimony’ of the likes of Claudio and Don Pedro. For these Benedick has rejected all that women offer with marriage, which is in every way superior. From hurt and self-concern Beatrice develops both targets and a mechanism of wit.

Yet Beatrice is neither a malcontent nor a radical. Her ‘How long have you professed apprehension?’ is a self-serving bit of class condescension to Margaret. Beatrice, about whose personal fortune we learn nothing (some productions suggest she is an heiress; Michael Langham’s tried her as a poor relation), is as keen as the other lovers on remaining in the circle of privilege. Messina as it is—this is the world in which she has given her heart and in which she must live. There is no contemptus mundi in her, no generalized vituperation, no pining; she will enjoy even leading apes to hell, should it come to that.

The role is frankly physical. In her exchange with Benedick when they are alone after the denunciation in church, the kinetic energy that generates her brief, probing sentences, as much as her cause and her love, is
irresistible. Benedick is overwhelmed. According to the *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving* by the creator of Dracula, Bram Stoker, Ellen Terry played the scene ‘striding to and fro with long paces’; Helen Faucit combined forthrightness with delicacy. One wonders what in the world Dorothea Jordan did on stage that led her to say, admittedly after ten years of acting it, that the role was ‘a very easy quiet part’. Beatrice has little of Hero's maidenly reserve. She wants as handsome a man for herself as for Hero (a claim she makes for all women), and she can trade off-colour repartee with Margaret while keeping her moral distance. Shakespeare may be taking a certain risk to make a point when Beatrice says of Benedick ‘I would he had bored me.’ The sexual innuendo is now diminished, but it could hardly have been lost on the audience.

Beatrice's mode of wit is typically ironic, though she is neither afraid to strike nor unwilling to wound. Indeed at one point she seems willing to kill. Yet irony itself, with its cryptic quality that forestalls reaction and its flattering appeals to laughter and intelligence, indicates that Beatrice speaks under constraint. Despite her position in Leonato's household and the latitude granted her as an amusing ‘original’, she is ‘merely’ a woman. Antonio and Leonato, even Benedick, simply leap away (the ‘jade's trick’) when they've had enough. To be listened to at all, a woman must amuse, or at least observe limits. Her engaging self-deprecatory—Beatrice leading apes to hell, sunburnt Beatrice crying ‘heigh-ho for a husband’—these are Beatrice's recognition that she understands the game. But the self-deprecatory element in Beatrice's wit also reflects long-term anxieties. If Beatrice fears marriage she is also fearful and chagrined at being single: on the one hand she faces the prospect of being ‘overmastered’; on the other the pains of rejection, sexual denial, and exclusion from what was, outside the church, the only career with status open to women.

Though Beatrice objects to much of what men have made of themselves and of society, she also accepts much of it. She wants to marry Benedick, and when this seems possible after the deception in the arbour, she falls at once into the wildness-taming clichés of marital subservience. Typically, however, it is Beatrice herself who will do the taming. From her intellectual and moral domination of the play and from the parody obedience test of 5.2, we can guess that Beatrice’s obedience will be qualified at best, and that it is not a sentimental anachronism to see the play hinting at something for Beatrice rather different from strictly patriarchal marriage.

In the modern theatre these issues can rarely arise; audiences sense the future of fifth-act marriages as happy or unhappy according to current standards. Criticism, however, puts the question of Beatrice's future on the agenda of interpretation. Beatrice's language and behaviour argue that her view of marriage is not extreme. Men are valiant dust (no cleric would quarrel), but women are overmastered by them nevertheless. (Even Goneril will legitimize male rule when she speaks contemptuously of her husband as a fool who ‘usurps’ her body.) Beatrice says she would have women exert power through a veto, and then during courtship, but Beatrice would not be the first of Shakespeare's characters to present orthodox credentials and then speak, act, or simply be in ways that question convention. An elegiac tone enters criticism that sees ‘the masculine world’ of *Much Ado* ‘unquestioned from within’ or sees Beatrice entering a repressive patriarchal marriage. Carol Cook's article is instructive on this point. Yet though the play does more, only to have created a Beatrice questions her future total subordination, and her mental force, which brings Benedick to some understanding, suggests a continuity of instruction beyond ‘I do’.

Yet if the marriage of Beatrice and Benedick may not be conventional, it is unlikely to outrage opinion. Beatrice's strictures against ‘honour’ rest on scepticism born of the violations of the code. In 4.1 when Benedick seems to defend his comrades, Beatrice scorns Claudio as ‘a sweet gallant’, and deplores the decline of manhood, which has become only ‘curtsies’ and compliment; ‘men are only turned into tongue, and trim ones, too.’ It is the conventional ideal that Beatrice admires; moreover it is a conventionally aggressive ‘man of honour’ that she wishes she were: ‘O God that I were a man! I would eat his [Claudio’s] heart in the market place.’ (This echo of Beatrice's scornful offer in 1.1 to eat anyone Benedick killed in war is awkward.) Perhaps Beatrice's wish ‘to be a man’ reflects a self-denigrating accommodation to the idea of male superiority; more likely it is simply an outraged recognition of the way things are. Though something of
the feminist that Ellen Terry, truly a feminist and perhaps the greatest of Beatrices, praised her for being, Beatrice is of her class and day. Occasionally her statements have connotations that time has made more radical than the character.

This tug of motives dictates the strategy of her wittiest remarks, which mock conventional ideas, especially those on the role of women, by appealing to conventional sources that usually support those ideas. The strategy allows for both the thrust and the drawing back that comprise irony. Beatrice, still ‘orthodox’ in objection, will not marry because Adam’s sons are her brothers and she refuses to violate the Anglican Table of Affinity by a ‘match in [her] kindred’.

Inevitably, we take Beatrice’s wittiest remarks less seriously than those—such as her sharp thrusts at Benedick in the first scene—in which the balance tips from ingenuity toward scorn. Her manifestos of bachelorhood come from too lively and sexually inclusive a sensibility not to undermine themselves, at least in that historical context. She proposes to remain single because of the imperfections of men. But she concludes by acknowledging that, like Adam’s sons, she too is a kind of valiant dust, so her demand for male perfection is suspect. The acceptance of mutual imperfection, necessary to sustained love, is already implicit in her continuing interest in Benedick, despite his past errors. Before the play ends that acceptance becomes explicit. ‘For which of my bad parts didst thou first fall in love with me?’ Benedick asks in 5.2. ‘For them all together’, Beatrice replies.

In phrases like ‘valiant dust’ and ‘wayward marl’, with the amusing metaphysical upset of noun by adjective, and the repetitions that suggest opulent verbal resources, Beatrice’s wit comes close to Benedick’s. Freud’s Jokes and the Unconscious reworks traditional distinctions between humour and satire as distinctions between innocent and tendentious wit. Humour, Freud argues, has no reformist tendency, accepting its nominal object as it is. Misogynist jokes are an attractive store of wit to some of those otherwise underendowed who would regret losing them through changes in the condition of women, even though they might welcome those changes. Jokes generate a minor interest in their survival somewhat apart from their social origins or social effects. Shakespeare makes us aware that Benedick, who is not underendowed, has none the less assumed misogyny as a persona, in part as a thematic aid to his wit. When solicited for an opinion of Hero, he asks Claudio, ‘Do you question me as an honest man should do, for my simple true judgement, or would you have me speak after my custom, as being a professed tyrant to their sex?’ Apparently Benedick thinks himself capable of providing true judgements of women apart from his ‘tyrannical’ comic turn. Yet when Claudio asks him to speak ‘in sober judgement’, he does not. His negative portrait of Hero is a wit-cracker’s set-piece directed not at her intellect, where a charge of mediocrity might have held, but at her physical appearance—against the evidence of the play. Benedick’s mask of misogyny is evidently difficult to remove, a telling observation. His consciousness of his self-division, acknowledged in the mocking word ‘tyrant’, is small excuse, though it does prepare us for his later turnabout.

Anyone fed up with girl-friend, wife, and mother-in-law jokes will no doubt bridle at the notion that Benedick’s wit is self-protective and largely of the ‘innocent’ sort. It takes the rapid elegance of a Gielgud or the brio of a Sinden to focus attention on Benedick’s language as adroit performance rather than on its social implications. But marriage and Beatrice are as much its occasions as its targets. It is a rhetoric of masked fear, and it flourishes where there is no opposition to query it, as in soliloquy or in the extended treatment of a single subject to which there is no reply; otherwise it would collapse at once. Beatrice, however, is at her best in contention, and always victorious.

Typical of Benedick’s good moments are his ingenious variations on the theme of Beatrice’s attacks on him. His exotic offers to go to the ends of the earth to avoid her say less about Beatrice than about Shakespeare’s store of picturesque allusion. None of this lessens our (or Benedick’s) admiration of the lady who can inspire such distinguished nonsense. What gives the game away—in addition to Benedick’s sheer extravagance—is his
repetition of Beatrice's description of him as ‘duller than a great thaw’. The comparison is suggestively different in its homeliness, yet so much in his own vein of witty metaphor that he cherishes it verbatim.

Most innocent of his ‘innocent’ witticisms is an exemplary sentence in Benedick's soliloquy after the deception: ‘When I said I would die a bachelor, I did not think I should live till I were married.’ The gentle self-mockery of this verbal sleight suggests how Benedick's tyranny to women is to be taken. When his guard is down Benedick reveals a saving modesty. Beatrice is wise, he says, ‘but for loving me’. This prepares for the self-questioning in his question to Beatrice: ‘Think you in your soul the Count Claudio hath wronged Hero?’ Knowing what the audience knows, the question must seem naïve, but it shows why Benedick has no need of the tendentious and reformist strategies of Beatrice's wit. Frustration and disadvantage are obviously not his themes.

Yet ‘language is always a matter of force; to speak is to exercise a will for power; in the realm of speech there is no innocence’—so Barthes observed. Finally Benedick's wit rests on the self-serving clichés of male victim and persecuting virago. These are, however, qualified by the intimation that they are not deeply held, and mask both his fear of marriage and an attraction to Beatrice so great as to need disguising, especially from Benedick himself.

Another strain of wit in Much Ado deflects its social implications almost as well as does Benedick's. Dogberry's rationales for avoiding police duties are impeccable: contact with criminals defiles, and so the police should avoid it; only those subject to police jurisdiction may be arrested, so those who refuse arrest are obviously not subject to it. This logic recalls Beatrice's strategy for marshalling conventional morality and legalism to mock both. Dogberry's physical prudence is matched by his judicial caution. Of Conrad and Borachio, by now clearly guilty, he says that they are ‘little better’ than false knaves, or at least ‘will go near’ to being thought so (italics mine). The Dogberry scenes are hardly intended to prompt reform, and Dogberry droll is only perfected by being also Dogberry insufferable. What he is and his not knowing what he is flatters the observer, and for a moment rights the social balance. The presence of the Watch alone is proof that crime does not pay in Messina.

The almost constant wittiness of Much Ado—even Conrad and Borachio execute multiple puns as they are led off by the Watch—has been judged a defect, making Messina a cold and artificial place where what Johnson called the ‘reciprocation of smartness’ seems to some critics to dampen authentic passion and justify cruel remarks. It is difficult to convey cleverness as an index to feeling, and actors sometimes manage only half the task, in itself a considerable achievement. Yet read backwards from the moment when Beatrice and Benedick are alone after the denunciation of Hero, Much Ado hardly fits the charge. Moreover, as Rossister observes, ‘It is a notable point in Shakespeare's contrivance that he gives both wits their off-day, as soon as love [which Rossiter sees begun only after the deception scenes] has disturbed their freedom.’ It is only a step to recognizing earlier connections between wit and love. The wit serves as shield against vulnerability; when the shield is less needed, it can be lowered.

Like Dogberry, Beatrice and Benedick are vain of their wit. Wit is their mode of being and since it allows so epicurean a response to life, evidently something of a raison d'être. Through their rhetoric we come to know a great deal about Beatrice and Benedick, especially about their self-deceptions and vulnerability. Their instant capitulation to the plots to unite them is a sure-fire cliché of comedy, but nonetheless psychologically sound. We learn just enough about their earlier estrangement to make sense of this mutual capitulation in their ‘merry war’.

Explaining his determination not to marry Beatrice (but how did marriage to her pop up on his agenda? or to him on hers?), Benedick says that ‘She would have made Hercules have turned spit . . .’. Is this fear of domination only another patriarchal conceit? The context here is the story of Hercules' three years' expiatory bondage with Omphale. (Benedick unwittingly states not only his fears but his guilt.) Yet Beatrice seeks no
expiation. For all her condemnation of Benedick's male alliances, Beatrice is also solicitous of them. When the need to right the wrong done Hero arises in 4.1, Beatrice answers Benedick's question, 'May a man do it?' with 'It is a man's office, but not yours.' I do not think that Beatrice's answer turns only on Benedick's extra-familial status. Not until the two have made their mutual declarations of love and she has a right to assume that Benedick's alliance with Claudio is now secondary is she free to say 'Kill Claudio'. But such alliances are not broken in an instant. To Beatrice's credit she persists after Benedick's initial refusal, and to his credit he soon recognizes the absoluteness of the new commitment he has made.

For all their sophistication, the most likely cause of their obscure earlier difficulties is a common one, consistent with the text: a woman ready for marriage, a man for courtship. Yet the two continued to care for each other as is indicated by the mutual resistance it requires all their wit to sustain. Most of Benedick's wit has this resistance as its obvious theme; Beatrice's confession of love in 4.1 barely pierces an armour-plate of equivocation. But if words obscure their love, words—their matched sonnets—finally reveal it. Their resistance breached, what we know of them promises the self-completion that comes from mutual acceptance. In this lies their difference from Hero and Claudio who, as Joan Rees observed, 'seem to have no principle of growth in them'.

BROTHERS

The two pairs of brothers, Don Pedro and Don John, Leonato and Antonio, are as ingeniously differentiated as the two pairs of lovers: Don Pedro and Don John noble and powerful bachelors with no significant age difference, both of them initiators of spectacle and intrigue, assured, intelligent and formal in speech, at odds—one apparently trusting, the other full of the dangerous discontent attributed to illegitimacy; Leonato and Antonio both apparently widowers, privileged but in a lesser sphere, older and with a pronounced age difference between them, slightly inept and provincial in manner, deferential and unable to act as they would like, eloquent but in an old-fashioned idiom, mutually supportive and loyal.

Shakespeare evidently wasted little thought on the names themselves. Leonato he inherited from Bandello; Antonio is Shakespeare's common name for fathers or father figures. In any case, he abandoned Q's 'Old Man' only when it became useful to do so. In the speech-prefixes Don John is plain English, as was Don Peter (Bandello's King Piero) before Shakespeare Hispanicized the name.

Leonato and Don Pedro are the significant members of the two pairs. Antonio is necessary as brotherly support and intensifier; a younger man could not have served these ends. Confronting Claudio and Don Pedro alone in 5.1, Leonato would have elicited a pathos Shakespeare thought undesirable; or so the caricature dialogue for Antonio seems to demonstrate. Antonio's description of errant youth is yesterday's Letter to the Editor, doubly amusing if Antonio were played by a boy, as was quite possible. Elsewhere he is a convenient voice for exposition, as in 1.2; and in the ball scene exchange with Ursula for some of the geriatric humour that Shakespeare had used in Richard II.

Don John is necessary but not important; his fate and nature are clear at once. Defeated rivals for power had no future, as Machiavelli and the history plays demonstrated, and Don John's illegitimacy is as much a marker as Hero's name. Although we do not learn of it until 4.1, Shakespeare's speech-prefixes show what was uppermost in his conception of the character. Don John is a plausible, 'plain-dealing villain', something he tells us 'must not be denied'. The actor is helped to create the proper effect by portentous runs of monosyllables like, 'I know not that when he knows what I know', spoken just before Don John slanders Hero. There is a sturdiness in his determination to 'claw no man in his humour', but a sinister undertone in the violence of 'claw', which in this context should mean 'stroke gently as if to placate'. Just the sight of him gives Beatrice heartburn. John Russell Brown relates how the Prospect Company's 1970 production of the play in Edinburgh dealt with the villain. Don John was brought onstage at the very end and shot by Don Pedro just before the jolly command, 'Strike up, pipers.'
Don Pedro himself is another matter: legitimate, triumphant, honourable, helpful, well-spoken—if rather formally so—and on occasion humorous. Yet his share in the denunciation of Hero, his proxy courtship, his stage-management of the deceptions, his trial offers of a husband to Beatrice—all these add up to a less competent figure than his entrance or the sources promise. *Much Ado* ends with Don Pedro, like his brother, an odd man out.

Shakespeare often dissociates power from sexual intimacy and makes the point in plays as different as *Henry IV* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. But Don Pedro is not as limited a personality as a Henry IV or an Octavius and in *Much Ado* the point is made in a way that suggests loss rather than tacit choice or native coldness. His ‘Will you have me, lady?’ in 2.1 may be interpreted as only a light-hearted rejoinder, but Beatrice is taking no chances. Yet Don Pedro’s later declaration that, were Beatrice interested, he would have ‘doffed all other respects and made her half [him]self’ can be spoken truly, even though it is intended for the eavesdropping Benedick.

More revealing is Don Pedro’s readiness to ‘win’ Hero for Claudio. Neither Claudio’s youth nor the political importance of the alliance are invoked overtly in the play as reasons for Don Pedro’s offer. The possibility that Don Pedro woos for himself is taken seriously by Leonato and by Benedick, as well as by Claudio. When Benedick’s rather callous hints draw an explanation from Don Pedro, his ‘I will but teach them to sing, and restore them to the owner’ suggests that the Prince, if unwittingly, may be doing something more than eliciting a simple yes. At the ball Don Pedro’s ambiguous introduction of himself to Hero as ‘your friend’ sets a flirtatious tone she then maintains and he does nothing to correct. Hero has every reason to believe that the Prince is approaching her on his own behalf.

Yet Shakespeare’s handling of the Don Pedro-Hero material is not loose or careless. The speech that ends 1.1 is further evidence of a strategy to cloud intention. Don Pedro tells Claudio that he will ‘assume thy part’, ‘tell fair Hero I am Claudio’, and ‘take her hearing prisoner’ with his ‘amorous tale’, all of which seems uncomfortably like an anagram of Don John’s later deception. Don Pedro’s efforts to help his juniors are to his credit, but some lack in him feeds vicariously on the courtships of the four lovers. This is preferable to his brother’s preying on them as ‘medicinable’ to his ‘sick … displeasure’. Yet against the glitter of the double wedding the figure of the Prince can seem rather sad.

Leonato is more recognizably literary (an echo of Kyd’s anguished elders), more commonplace (the stock father of a marriageable stock daughter), and more surprising (a father who immediately accepts his daughter’s guilt). There is a congenial side to Leonato, who can address the Watch as ‘friend’ and ‘neighbour’, appreciate Beatrice, forgive Margaret, and raise a laugh at the end with his vain effort to ensure that his daughter is safely off his hands before the dancing begins. He can make a snappy reply in 1.1 to Benedick’s uncalled-for query about cuckolding, but this is the familiar men’s-club topic and everyone knows the jokes. Yet in the deception of Benedick Leonato’s awkward turning to others when he cannot think of useful lies is amusing.

The rest is unpleasant senex. Leonato’s welcome to Don Pedro is sycophantic. The rhetoric of Elizabethan formal greeting of superiors was sycophantic, but here the excess is underlined by the Prince’s dry response: ‘You embrace your charge too willingly’. Later in 1.1, the Prince tells Claudio and Benedick that he has told Leonato they will stay in Messina at least a month, and that Leonato ‘heartily prays some occasion may detain us longer’. This is said in Leonato’s presence, and whether delivered as an intended small cruelty or as matter of fact, reflects well on no one. Such entertainments were a notorious burden.

Leonato’s response to Hero’s distress is a disaster. Treating her as an appendage, he has little sense of Hero as a person, hence nothing of Beatrice’s—or even the Friar’s—grounds for thinking Hero innocent. Leonato depends on what he thinks he knows, that princes and counts are men of honour and women sexually unreliable. When Claudio has finished his accusations, Leonato wonders why no one has stabbed him, wishes
Hero dead, regrets her birth and nurture, insists that two princes would not lie, rebukes the Friar, relents only when Benedick accuses Don John, then claims he will avenge Hero and boasts of his wealth, strength, friends, and ‘policy of mind’. His last speech in the scene insists on the extremity of his grief. This theme is congenial; he elaborates it in a thirty-line speech at the start of 5.1. It is as though Shakespeare were determined to forestall audience sympathy for him. Leonato’s confrontation of Claudio and Don Pedro later in that scene goes some way to redeeming him, but in the offer of another bride to a chastened Claudio, Leonato as a character succumbs to the necessities of the romantic plot.

Clearly, such speeches as Leonato’s are as little to the modern taste as the attitudes they express. Productions generally trim them. However, Shakespeare’s audiences enjoyed grand declamation and sententious wisdom. The tawdriness of what grand declamation could express, here as in Hamlet, must not have been lost on the author or on the ‘wiser sort’. But the primary implications of Leonato’s speeches are ideological rather than literary. The deliberate organization of the negative reactions to Hero emphasizes their common misogynist premisses. Against an indifferent Don John, a benighted, self-centred Leonato, and both Claudio and Don Pedro, Shakespeare poises Beatrice, a humane Friar—remote from gender alignments yet a male, hence authoritative voice—and a Benedick slowly able to believe in the criminality of a prince and, later, in a close friend's outrageous behaviour, inexcusable though the friend has been duped.

GENTLEWOMEN, CONSPIRATORS, AND OTHERS

Ursula and Margaret, and Conrad, Borachio, and Balthasar have in common their consciousness of social position. Ursula ‘knows her place’ and forgets it only once; Margaret cannot forget hers and would like to leave it. Conrad insists he is a gentleman; Borachio is critical of gilded youth and reveals qualities above his conspiratorial calling; Balthasar is a minor retainer whose forte is apology for being less than he thinks he ought to be.

To Hero, Ursula and Margaret are Ursley and Meg. The homely English intimate forms suggest an easy-going relationship between a young mistress and what, despite the title of ‘gentlewoman’, were essentially upper servants. (The social origins and social prospects of gentlewomen were various, as the Marias and Helens in Shakespeare’s plays can testify. In effect, their title was a reflection of the rank of their mistresses. A suggestive modern analogy is the notion of ‘assimilated rank’ given temporarily to certain civilians on military assignment during wartime.)

Ursula and Margaret are rough parallels of Hero and Beatrice; Ursula apparently the more sober of the two, less imaginative and less articulate. Oddly, it is Ursula who is the more active in helping Hero in the deception of Beatrice. Claudio states in 3.2 that it was Hero and Margaret who ‘played their parts with Beatrice’. This accords with the ingenious character of Margaret. Perhaps making Ursula Hero’s co-conspirator was a simple error, perhaps a mis-step taken in an effort to balance two minor roles.

Both women fetch and carry for their betters. The contrast lies in social attitudes. Ursula seems to have accommodated herself to her place; not so Margaret. At the masked ball, Ursula partners old Antonio, saying that she knows him by his dry hand and tremor. Antonio denies his age. When Ursula persists, he becomes testy. She backs off at once, prudently admiring Antonio’s wit. Dressing Hero for the wedding, Margaret criticizes her mistress’s rebato. Hero, for once, rebukes her sharply. Margaret mollifies her mistress by praising Hero’s new head-dress but, unhappy in retreat, risks wishing the ‘tire’ were ‘a thought browner’. Margaret is one of a trio of aspiring gentlewomen Shakespeare created—all of them sympathetically—at about the same time. Margaret is less fortunate than either Maria in Twelfth Night, who marries Sir Toby Belch, or Helen in All’s Well, who is presented as at once manipulative and submissive. Like Helen and Maria, Margaret is a woman of superior intelligence and wit and, like Helen, she can be frank, though at times also tasteless and ill-considered about sexual matters. Indeed, Shakespeare seems to pit Margaret’s innuendos in 3.4 and
elsewhere against Hero's prudish reticence in order to locate Beatrice's views on sex as a proper mean. But Margaret's situation is hopeless. During the exchange that opens 5.2, Benedick praises Margaret's wit and beauty, but when she asks if she will always 'keep below stairs' for want of a proper husband, he provides more compliments but no reply. In addition to coveting status obtainable only through a husband, Margaret covets pretty things. Her description of the Duchess of Milan's gown is detailed and enthusiastic; her opinions on 'rebatos' and 'tires' have the assurance of envious observation. Such a Margaret would have been delighted to serve unwittingly in Borachio's plot, playing the engaged heiress and in her mistress's gown. Leonato's forbearance toward her is gracious, but it consigns Margaret, as before, to living below stairs on grace and favour. In the last scene she says nothing. Perhaps she should not be present at the wedding at all, but the scene would be poorer without her pathetic silence.

Margaret's unwillingness to take up with Balthasar is to her credit. Balthasar emerges from Shakespeare's early false starts with possible relatives for Leonato (see the Textual Introduction below). Balthasar apparently becomes a member of Don Pedro's retinue. His precise social status is unclear, but he seems to have aristocratic pretensions, or so commentators conclude from his disclaimers of musical ability before he sings in 2.3. Such disclaimers follow the advice of Castiglione, among others, against being vain of talents for which one can hire clerks and fiddlers. But Balthasar's disclaimers are so excessive as to be ludicrous; hence Don Pedro's punning rebuke.

There is no reason to disbelieve Benedick's comparison of Balthasar's singing to a dog's howling. Benedick is hidden and has no one on stage to amuse. In a neat comic manoeuvre Shakespeare has Don Pedro respond to this criticism by addressing Balthasar as though Benedick were not in hiding: 'Yea, marry, dost thou hear, Balthasar? I pray thee get us some excellent music' for serenading Hero, clearly a rebuke. Balthasar's talent is apparently too small to warrant so great a disclaimer. If he sings again in 5.3, he can be neutralized by other voices. There is some slight evidence that this may have been the case. The attribution of the song at 5.3.12 is Dover Wilson's; Q has only the introductory title 'Song'. Margaret's rejection of Balthasar during their turn at the ball prepares for this comedy; his first words to her are the pathetic, 'Well, I would you did like me'.

Don John's tools, Conrad and Borachio—after the Spanish for wine-flask—are a complementary pair. Conrad functions as an ear for Don John's complaints in 1.3 and for Borachio's commentary in 3.3. His birth under Saturn presumably induced the sullen manner that sets off Borachio's tipsy energy. Conrad's initial advice to his master is intelligent and moderate, but his loyalty, 'To the death, my lord', has no reservations. Beyond this, his behaviour in resisting the Watch at the end of 4.2 shows him more pugnacious than Borachio, and when aroused by Dogberry's 'sirrah', Conrad insists that he is a gentleman, another marker for Messina's social dimension.

Borachio is more interesting. His response when called to account in 5.1 is full acceptance of his guilt: 'Yea, even I alone', and a generously specific exoneration of Margaret. His insistence on paying for his villainy with his death recalls his earlier moralizing on the subject of fashion. There is a hint of the déclassé in the attitudes and circumstances of both Conrad and Borachio. Like Margaret, Borachio is one of a group of related characters Shakespeare created within a few years of one another. With Falstaff, Sir Toby, and Michael Cassio, Borachio is a difficult alcoholic; the others have fallen socially or are in the course of doing so. In his case alone (Sir Toby is universally incontinent) is drink made the central attribute, and so something of an explanation for his circumstances. In Shakespeare and the Experience of Love Arthur Kirsch details the sacred allusions in Borachio's speech to baptism, redemption, and idolatry. The passage has been cut or played as merely tipsy chatter, but Kirsch is right about the seriousness of the moment. It is a brief lifting of the curtain on a possibly unelected anguish different from the self-chosen unhappiness of love and politics elsewhere in the play.

Borachio's strictures against that 'deformed thief' Fashion in 3.3 were conventional, and would have have elicited agreement. The application of those strictures to both sexes precludes misogynist inferences from the
discussion of women's fashions in the scene that follows.

The Textual Introduction below discusses the logistics and individuation of the Watch, whose prime figures are Dogberry and Verges. ‘Dogberry’ can refer to either the red European dogwood or to its berry, or it can be an excremental metaphor. Verges may refer to the ‘verge’ or staff of office, and ‘verjuice’, the sour-tasting juice of unripe fruit such as grapes. The names suggest the hearty ordinariness and the ‘verjuice face’ (OED sb. 2b cites the phrase from Marston’s 1598 Scourge of Villainy), respectively of the popular comic actors Will Kemp and Richard Cowley (see Commentary 4.2.1, 2). Dogberry provides Verges with sufficient occasion for sourness. The Watch appears in the nick of time, and Borachio's slightly vain observation that 'what your wisdoms could not uncover these shallow fools have brought to light' becomes a sobering mockery of comedy's artifice of Utopian endings.

Amusing as he is, Dogberry is also arrogant, smug, and sycophantic. His patronizing of Verges is dismaying as well as sadistically funny. When Leonato ironically praises Dogberry for his superior wit, Dogberry's delicately modest, ‘Gifts that God gives’, is delicious. The Dogberryism from whose practical consequences its fictionality protects us is recognizably one of the nastier faces of minor authority. Yet Dogberry's confident, unearned jollity is something like the wonderfully cosseted omnipotence of infancy. What need for such vanities as reading and writing? All one needs is to be ‘a rich fellow enough’ with ‘two gowns and everything handsome about [one]’. Is there perhaps an explanatory personal survival hinted at in Dogberry's proud reference to his 'losses' and in his surprising and funny response with the traditional beggar's thanks, ‘God save the foundation’, when Leonato gives him money?

Finally, the roles of Messenger and Friar fix the moral boundaries of male Messina even more clearly than do more important characters such as Don John and Benedick. The Messenger begins the play with news of victory, but he defines a formal, hierarchical male world in which birth, rank, and military prowess are of supreme importance, and a common soldier counts for nothing, even in death. At the opposite end of male moral possibility is the Friar, urging moderation, reason, and faith, but within the bounds of custom. That this requires yet another lie is a sombre qualification, as is (feminists would insist), his vow of celibacy.

PLOT CONSTRUCTION

In his Multiple Plot in English Renaissance Drama, Richard Levin has a detailed analysis of the formal connections between the two plots of Much Ado.28 The Hero-Claudio courtship is initiated by Don Pedro, who also proposes the deception to unite Beatrice and Benedick. Hero and Claudio help in the deception, and in the last act their evidence finally seals the match. The crisis in both plots occurs at almost the same point for it is the plight of Hero after the denunciation that leads Beatrice and Benedick to their declarations of love. Moreover, Benedick's commitment to Beatrice and her acceptance of him are predicated in part on his understanding of Claudio's behaviour. Without the intervention of the Watch, of course, neither marriage might have taken place.

In addition to these causal connections, the two plots are bound by formal devices, the most important of which are the variant scenes of deception and ‘noting’, deliberate eavesdropping or casual overhearing. Leonato and Antonio receive a false idea of Don Pedro's intentions toward Hero. Claudio thinks he has overheard proof of Hero's infidelity. Beatrice and Benedick accept without question deceptive (yet not unfounded) accounts of their feelings for one another, and the Watch overhear Conrad and Borachio discussing Don John's plot against Hero and Claudio. The device pervades even details: in 5.1 Don Pedro mishears Benedick's sotto voce challenge to Claudio. These instances of noting occupy the spectrum of possibility: speakers without motive or malice or deliberately deceptive; hearers merely unfortunate in mishearing, naïve, or perverse in interpreting, or—like the Watch—just lucky; and information conveyed that is disastrous or happy in its effect.

296
The three narrative centres are connected and contrasted by their distinctive social ethos. The Claudio-Hero courtship is conventional, upper-upper-class, and thoroughly serious. These two are handbook personalities caught in a romantic plot. Beatrice and Benedick are a notch lower socially—she no governor's heiress, he no count; both are rather unconventional high-comedy sophisticates with a rather commonplace story. The Watch are predictably farcical low-comedy proles.

Taken together, the lovers exemplify the alternatives of gender behaviour: female passivity and female assertiveness, male control and male concessions to power-sharing. At the end of the play extremes are, however briefly, suspended, or seem to be so: a subdued if not chastened Claudio is on good behaviour that Hero need not assert herself to demand; Beatrice seems only nominally and humorously 'obedient', and Benedick may dwindle gracefully to a husband. Fears that his assertiveness in demanding dancing before the wedding may signal a second tyranny seem exaggerated. …

Notes

1. M. Praz, Shakespeare e l'Italia (Florence, 1963), 91: ‘above all, an imaginary city’.
4. Quoted in L. Woodbridge, Women and the English Renaissance (Brighton, 1984), 76.
15. H. Faucit, On Some of Shakespeare's Characters (Edinburgh, 1885), 376.
23. The style of this mutuality may be suggested in a passage from a 1992 Observer interview: ‘[The author and his wife] have a specialized Darby and Joan act all their own, a continuous line in back-chat—mutually solicitous, happily contradictory. You can see that they're sufficient social life for each other most of the time.’ This is what Leonato had in mind when he predicted in 2.1 that if Beatrice and Benedick ‘were but a week married, they would talk themselves mad’.
26. The sexual overtones of ‘sing’ are clear in the example from Troilus and Cressida cited by Eric Partridge in Shakespeare's Bawdy (1947), 187.
[In the following essay, Wain investigates the flaws and the novelistic qualities of Much Ado about Nothing, focusing in particular on the weaknesses of the main plot and the play's verse.]

I

_Much Ado about Nothing_ is a play that might well halt the critic of Shakespeare in his amble through the plays, in much the same way as _Hamlet_ halts him: a strong, buoyant, uneven piece of work. It could not possibly be called a failure, and yet it could not be described as a total success either. I believe the play has interesting things to tell us about the nature of Shakespeare's impulses as an artist, and in particular about the state of his mind in the closing months of the sixteenth century.

This essay will be concerned mainly with two topics: the play's overwhelmingly prosaic nature, its almost complete lack of the poetry which permeates Shakespearean comedy in general; and its novelistic quality, that drive towards three-dimensional characterization which forces us to stand back and allow the characters, at whatever risk, to come out of their dramatic framework; for both of which I hope to suggest plausible reasons.

II

To begin with the play's undeniable success. It has always been a great favourite on the stage. If the verses contributed by Leonard Digges to the 1640 edition of Shakespeare's Poems are to be accepted as evidence, and I see no reason why they should not, this play already stood out as one of the most popular in the theatre:

> let but Beatrice
> And Benedick be seen, lo in a trice
> The cockpit, galleries, boxes, all are full.

Yet Digges's manner of referring to the play by its sub-plot indicates, thus early, an imbalance that has continued to make itself felt. _Much Ado_, for all its glitter and pace, does not leave us, either as spectators or readers, with that complete satisfaction, that sense of participating in something perfectly achieved, that we associate with _As You Like It_ or _Twelfth Night_—and, for that matter, with the earlier _Midsummer Night's Dream_. In all those plays, Shakespeare has been able to create a unity of mood which encircles and contains the many abrupt changes of tone—changes which a comedy, far more than a tragedy, is apt to invite and to live by. The total effect is of a glittering restlessness subjected to a harmony that governs and enriches. _Much Ado_ lacks this harmony. It belongs, in that respect, with the notoriously fragmented _Merchant of Venice_.

Still, there is a fascination in the failures or near-misses of a great artist. If we are interested in those works in which he completely succeeds, we cannot help being interested in those in which the success is limited and flawed. And some failures are resplendent. The Romantic poets, we recall, honoured Milton for his failure to carry out in poetry the full range of his Puritan programme. Blake praised him for being 'of the devil's party without knowing it'. Odd, to praise a great poet for a failure of self-knowledge! Yet that is what we sometimes find ourselves doing with Shakespeare. Like Milton in _Paradise Lost_—or, more strictly speaking, like Milton in the Romantics' characteristic account of him—he failed to estimate in advance, when blue-printing a work, which parts of it he could warm and illumine with his imagination and which parts would remain obstinately cold and dark.
The parallel with Milton, however, I introduce only to indicate the drift of my argument. It certainly does not hold good in any but superficial respects. For Milton's art, like his biography, shows everywhere the marks of a grand stubbornness. He confronted literary problems as he confronted political ones, by large and extreme solutions, carried through with courage and inflexibility. Cut off the king's head; leave your wife and sue for divorce; plan an immense epic and drive it through like a super-highway. Even in the weakest and dullest parts of *Paradise Lost*—those passages towards the end where plainly the poem is being heaved along by heroic will-power rather than driven by the immense and flowing urgency that we feel in the opening Books—Milton is still in control, still, though with a painfully visible effort, mastering his materials.

Shakespeare is the opposite. As an artist, he is more often commanded by his imagination than commanding it. He is instinctive, spontaneous, lacking in the effrontery which can simulate inspiration in those parts of a large construction where it fails to come naturally. Where Shakespeare fails, he makes no attempt to varnish the failure. He is always doing several things at once, and if he loses interest in one of them, he leaves it frankly as a mock-up. But always for a good reason. He worked at speed, had to make a rapid choice of materials, and when a situation, or a character, fails to come to life under his hand, the fault is rarely—I think, never—the poet's. Some surfaces will not take a mural; some clay resists life; some situations, which looked neat enough in the blue-print, disintegrate under the weight of actuality and energy that Shakespeare cannot help putting into them.

Shakespeare, to put it in a more pedestrian way, was not a good hack-writer. He lacked the unvarying professional skill that can arrange even the poorest material into a pleasing shape, keeping its weaknesses out of sight. When things began to go wrong, he had his own remedy, which was to send even more energy flowing through those parts of the work which he did find congenial. As a result, the typical Shakespearean failure is a play at once lop-sided and brilliant—so brilliant that the lop-sidedness does not keep it from being acted and read.

III

These general considerations should help us in making our estimate of *Much Ado*. The comic scenes are warm and genial as well as genuinely funny; the story of Beatrice and Benedick, couched in a dialogue that sparkles like a handful of diamonds, is also a gentle and sympathetic story of how two gifted people are led towards a happiness they were in danger of missing; dramaturgically the play is brilliant, working out with a deft intricacy its major theme. This theme, as usual in Shakespearean comedy, is self-recognition, the journey from confusion to clarity: knowledge of one's own truth, leading to the possibility of happy relationships, symbolized by the multiple wedding and the dance. But in *Much Ado* this habitual theme is given an original twist, which John Masefield aptly described as 'the power of report to alter human lives'. All the truths that are discovered, as well as all the lies and fake reports that are spread, are communicated by report. And this anchors the theme of self-recognition firmly to the related theme of social harmony. We form our opinions of ourselves and others always partly, and sometimes largely, on the basis of what other people say. No one quite trusts his own unaided perception of the world. ‘What a beautiful child you have’, says one woman to another. ‘That's nothing’, is the reply, ‘you should see his picture’. When Claudio is denouncing Hero's supposed faithlessness at the altar, he says to her father,

Leonato, stand I here?
Is this the Prince? Is this the Prince's brother?
Is this face Hero's? Are our eyes our own?

The play's answer to that last question is, of course, No. Our nature as human beings is such that we inevitably see as much through other people's eyes as through our own. When Claudio, in the first bitterness of his impression that Don Pedro has robbed him of Hero, says,

Therefore all hearts in love use their own tongues;
Let every eye negotiate for itself
And use no agent,

he is asking the impossible. He himself, on first seeing Hero after his return from the wars, has turned to
Benedick and asked, with a kind of rapturous anxiety, ‘Benedick, didst thou note the daughter of Signior
Leonato? … Is she not a modest young lady?’ And, longing to be serious in spite of Benedick's joking, pressed
him, ‘I pray thee tell me truly how thou likest her’.

In the same vein is Friar Francis's remark (IV, i) that Claudio's attitude to Hero will change when he hears the
report that she is dead; report will do for him what his own unaided perceptions would not:

When he shall hear she died upon his words,
The idea of her life shall sweetly creep
Into his study of imagination.

Thus the machinery of this play links up with the cheated-vision symbolism of A Midsummer Night's Dream
and also with the clothes-symbolism of Cymbeline; it is an essential Shakespearean preoccupation.

Yet the major deficiency remains. Everything is seen in the dry light and the straight perspective of prose.
Poetry—however we define the word—is missing. Except here and there in the turn of some phrase of
Beatrice's, the play never approaches it.

Like virtually every play of Shakespeare's, Much Ado is written in a mixture of prose and verse, and one of
the first things we notice when we look at it attentively is that the prose is everywhere more memorable and
satisfying than the verse, which at its best is workmanlike and vivacious, but never more; and, at its all too
frequent worst, weak, monotonous and verbose.

The nature of the malaise is clear enough. The verse is weak because the verse-plot is weak. It was
Shakespeare's custom, in comedy, to use a verse-plot alongside a prose-plot. In As You Like It and Twelfth
Night, the two are of equal ease and vivacity. As the prose is supple and vivacious, so the verse is springy and
memorable; the change from one to another falls on the ear as a delightful variation. It also serves as an aid to
the attention. All plays are to some extent written for the first-night audience, and even the Elizabethans, with
their quick wits and boundless appetite for complicated intrigue, must have welcomed the decisive difference
in idiom which signalled the switch from plot to plot and back again. But in those plays, as in A Midsummer
Night's Dream whose moon-lit atmosphere effortlessly embraces a prose-plot and a tight web of three
verse-plots, Shakespeare's imagination was equally involved in all parts of the play. In Much Ado, it was not.
The verse-plot fails to convince or interest us because it failed similarly with Shakespeare himself.

IV

This, I know, is the conventional view, and recent critics like Graham Storey and John Russell Brown have
registered various disagreements with it. Their arguments are ingenious and interesting and I find myself
giving assent to them—until the next time I turn back to the play. That spoils everything. The old objections
reappear in full force. Shakespeare has fallen into his old trap of beginning to handle a story without realizing
that at bottom it simply does not interest him. When the realization comes, it is too late; he is stuck with the
intractable material, and, as usual, he gives up any attempt to make it live.

Why did the Hero-and-Claudio plot go so dead on its author? The answer is not easy to find. Because it is not,
per se, an unconvincing story. Psychologically, it is real enough. The characters act throughout in consistency
with their own natures. Hero, her father Leonato and his brother Antonio, are all perfectly credible. Don John,
though he is only briefly sketched and fades out early from the action, is quite convincing in his laconic
disagreeableness, a plain-spoken villain who openly wishes others harm. Conrade and Borachio, mere
outlines, are at any rate free of inherent contradictions; so is Margaret. None of these characters presents any major difficulty. It begins to look as if the trouble lay somewhere in the presentation of Claudio.

This young man, according to the requirements of the story, has only to be presented as a blameless lover, wronged and misled through no fault of his own; convinced that his love is met with deception and ingratitude, he has no choice but to repudiate the match; later, when everything comes to light, the story requires him to show sincere penitence and willingness to make amends, finally breaking out into joy when his love is restored to him. On the face of it, there seems to be no particular difficulty. But Shakespeare goes about it, from the start, in a curiously left-handed fashion. First we have the business of the wooing by proxy. Claudio confesses to Don Pedro his love for Hero, and Don Pedro at once offers, without waiting to be asked, to take advantage of the forthcoming masked ball to engage the girl's attention, propose marriage while pretending to be Claudio, and then speak to her father on his behalf. It is not clear why he feels called upon to do this, any more than it is clear why Claudio, a Florentine, should address Don Pedro, a Spaniard, as ‘my liege’ and treat him as a feudal overlord. Doubtless we are supposed to assume that he is in Don Pedro's service. It is all part of the données. There cannot be much difference in age between them, and Don Pedro is represented throughout as a young gallant, of age to be a bridegroom himself.

The scene is perfunctory, and carries little conviction; it seems to have been written with only half Shakespeare's attention. Why, otherwise, would he make Claudio bring up the topic with the unfortunate question, ‘Hath Leonato any son, my lord?’ as if his motives were mercenary. Don Pedro seems to fall in with this suggestion when he replies at once that ‘she's his only heir’. This is unpromising, but worse is to come. Immediately after the conversation between them, we have a short scene (I, ii) whose sole purpose seems to be to provide the story with an extra complication—one which, in fact, is never taken up or put to any use. Antonio seeks out his brother Leonato; he has overheard a fragment of the dialogue between Claudio and Don Pedro, and evidently the wrong fragment, so that he believes the prince intends to woo Hero on his account. Leonato wisely says that he will believe this when he sees it; ‘we will hold it as a dream till it appear itself’; but he does say that he will tell Hero the news, ‘that she may be better prepared for an answer’. Apart from confusing the story, the episode serves only to provide an awkward small problem for the actress who plays Hero. When, in the masked-ball scene in II, i, she finds herself dancing with Don Pedro, and he begins at once to speak in amorous tones, is she supposed to know who he is? Since she has been told that Don Pedro intends to woo her, she can hardly fail to guess that he will seek her out; presumably she is ready to be approached by him; does she intend to consent? There is no coldness or refusal in her tone, no hint of disappointment at not being approached by Claudio; she is merely gay and deft in her answers. It is a small, obstinate problem that is in any case hardly worth solving; on the stage, most producers cut out the scene where Antonio makes his mistake, and this is certainly what I should do myself. But it is hardly a good beginning.

Claudio is then convinced, by the unsupported assertion of Don John, that the prince has doubled-crossed him, that he made his offer merely to get Claudio to hold back while he went after the girl himself. If Claudio were a generous character we should expect him to put up some resistance to the story; he might say something like, ‘I have the prince's own word for it that he would act on my behalf; we have been comrades in arms, he wishes me well and I trust him; I know him better than to believe he would stoop to this’. In fact, he believes the story straight away, with a depressing, I-might-have-known-it alacrity.

'Tis certain so; the Prince woos for himself.
Friendship is constant in all other things
Save in the office and affairs of love;
Therefore all hearts in love use their own tongues.
Let every eye negotiate for itself,
And trust no agent; for beauty is a witch
Against whose charms faith melteth into blood.
This is an accident of hourly proof,
Benedick, who has heard the rumour and sees no reason to disbelieve it, now enters and tells Claudio the unwelcome news again, in no very gentle manner; when Claudio goes off to nurse his grievance, Benedick looks after him with ‘Alas, poor hurt fowl! Now will he creep into sedges’. This, though unconcernedly genial, is a contempt-image: Claudio has no more spirit than a dabchick.

At the next general muster of the characters (II, 1) Claudio appears with a sour expression that makes Beatrice describe him as ‘civil [Seville] as an orange’, an image that later recurs in his bitter speech of renunciation at the altar (‘Give not this rotten orange to your friend’). When the misunderstanding is abruptly removed, and he is sudenly thrust into the knowledge that Hero is his after all, he is understandably speechless and has to be prompted by Beatrice, who, like Benedick, seems to have a slightly contemptuous attitude towards him.

Claudio is now launched on felicity, yet he has so far been given no memorable lines, has shown no gaiety or wit, and we know nothing about him except that he has a tendency to believe the worst about human nature. He has been brave in battle—offstage, before the story opens—but all we have seen is the poor hurt fowl creeping into sedges. Why Shakespeare treated him like this, when it was important to win the audience’s sympathy for such a central character, I cannot say. But it is clear that, for whatever reason, Shakespeare found him unattractive. Already the altar scene, at which Claudio must behave with cold vindictiveness, is casting its shadow before.

The trick is played; the victims are planted, the charade is acted out, Don Pedro and Claudio believe that Hero is false and vicious. What, one wonders for the second time, would be the reaction of a generous young man, with decent feelings and a tender heart? There are several possibilities; he could seek out the man who had stepped into his place and challenge him to a duel; or he could take horse and gallop out of town within that hour, leaving the wedding-party to assemble without him and the girl to make her own explanations. What he actually does is to get as far as the altar and then launch into a high-pitched tirade in which he not only denounces Hero but sees to it that her father is made to suffer as much as possible.

In all this, there is no psychological improbability. Such a youth would in all likelihood behave just in this way, especially if he were a Renaissance nobleman, touchy about his honour. Claudio’s basic insecurity, already well demonstrated in the play, would naturally come out in vindictiveness if he thought himself cheated. The story, qua story, is perfectly credible. The reason we do not believe it is simply that it is put into an artificial idiom. If Shakespeare had told this story in the same swift, concrete, realistic prose with which he presented the story of Beatrice and Benedick, it would be perfectly convincing. But he has, for some reason, written consistently poor verse for the characters to speak, mishandled the details (we will come to that in a moment), and in general made such a poor job of it that everyone feels a blessed sense of relief when Leonato, Friar Francis and Hero take their departure, and the stage is left to Beatrice and Benedick. How reviving it is, to the spirits and the attention, to drop from the stilted heights of Friar Francis’s verse, full of lines like

For to strange sores strangely they strain the cure,

to the directness and humanity of

—Lady Beatrice, have you wept all this while?
—Yea, and I will weep a while longer.

The tinsel and the crape hair are laid aside with the attitudinizing and the clumping verse; we are back in the real world of feeling. Shakespeare obviously shares this relief. His writing, in this wonderful scene in which Benedick and Beatrice admit their love, has the power and speed of an uncoiling spring.
But to come back to Claudio. His vindictiveness towards Hero and her father is not in the least unconvincing; it springs from exactly that self-mistrust and poor-spiritedness which we, and some of the other characters in the play, have already noticed. The question is, why are they there? Why does Shakespeare give this kind of character to Claudio, when he could easily have made him more sympathetic?

The answer, as so often, lies in the exigencies of the plot. Claudio has to humiliate Hero publicly, has to strike an all but killing blow at her gentle nature, for the same reason that Leontes has to do these things to Hermione. In each case, the woman has to be so emotionally shattered that she swoons and is later given out as dead. So that Shakespeare had no alternative but to bring the whole party to the altar and let Claudio renounce his bride before the world. This, I believe, is the central spot of infection from which the poison pumped outwards. Having to make Claudio behave in this way, Shakespeare could feel no affection for him. And he had, as I remarked earlier, no gift for pretending. If he disliked a character, one of two things happened. Either, as in the case of Isabella in Measure for Measure, his pen simply ran away with him, providing more and more repulsive things for the character to say; or it refused to work at all. In Much Ado it was the second of these two fates that befell Shakespeare. As the play went on, he must have come to dread those scenes in which he would have to introduce Claudio. It became harder and harder to think of anything to make him say. Perfectly good opportunities presented themselves and were refused; he just could not try hard. The Shakespearean lie-detector was at work.

Think, for instance, of the closing scenes of the play's last act. Claudio, however heartless he may have been, has here several golden opportunities to redeem himself. Shakespeare has only to show him as genuinely penitent, give him some convincing lines to say, and we shall begin to feel sorry for him, to look forward with pleasure to the time when his happiness is restored. In fact, nothing of the kind happens. In spite of the harm done to the play by Shakespeare's true opinion of Claudio, he cannot help showing that opinion. In the scene (V, i) where he and Don Pedro are confronted by Leonato and Antonio, he appears as having disengaged himself, emotionally, from the whole situation.

DON Pedro.

Nay, do not quarrel with us, good old man.

ANTONIO.

If he could right himself with quarrelling,

Some of us would lie low.

CLAUDIO.

Who wrongs him?

An unfortunate question from one in his position; and it would be difficult, to say the least, for an actor to speak it in a tone of kindly innocence. It comes out inevitably with a hard, sneering edge.

That scene develops interestingly, bearing out the view that the story in itself was not repugnant to Shakespeare; he found plenty of interest in it. Antonio, a very minor character whose general function in the play is simply to feed the plot, suddenly comes to life in this scene. Leonato, knowing that his daughter is not really dead yet unable to keep down his anger at the sight of the two smooth young gallants who have brought such sorrow on his grey hairs, begins to rail at Claudio and the prince, whereupon Antonio, catching his mood and feeling it more deeply—for we have no reason to suppose that he is in the secret—begins to rage and threaten, becoming more and more beside himself while his brother, alarmed at the passion his own words have set in motion, plucks at his sleeve with ‘Brother—’ and ‘But, brother Antony—’. ‘Do not you meddle;
let me deal with this’, cries the enraged old gentleman. The whole tiny episode is splendidly alive and convincing. But that life does not reach as far as Claudio. He says nothing until the two old men withdraw and Benedick comes onstage. Then he at once begins his accustomed teasing. He has it firmly in his head that Benedick is there to provide sport, either by his own wit or by providing a target for the infinitely more clumsy jokes that occur to himself or Don Pedro. Lightly dismissing the grief and anger of the previous encounter with, ‘We had lik’d to have had our two noses snapp’d off with two old men without teeth’, he challenges Benedick to a wit-contest, and in spite of Benedick’s fierce looks and reserved manner, goes clumping on with jokes about ‘Benedick the married man’ until he is brought up sharply by an unmistakable insult followed by a challenge. He can hardly ignore this, but his is a mind that works simply and cannot entertain more than one idea at a time. He can change, when something big enough happens to make him change, but he cannot be supple, cannot perceive shifts in mood. Even after Benedick has challenged him, he cannot get it clear that the time for teasing is over; he keeps it up, woodenly enough, right up to Benedick’s exit. So unshakable is his conviction that Benedick equals mirth and sport.

Psychologically this is exactly right. Shakespeare saw clearly what kind of person Claudio would have to be, if he were to behave in the way called for by the plot. What depressed him, inhibiting his mind and causing him to write badly, was the iron necessity of making such a man—cold, proud, self-regarding, inflexible—the hero of the main story in the play.

We see this more and more clearly as the last act unfolds. In Scene iii, when Claudio, accompanied by the prince and ‘three or four with tapers’, comes to do penance at Hero’s tomb, Shakespeare shies away from the task of putting words into his mouth. Instead, he makes the scene a short formal inset; Claudio recites a few stiff, awkward rhymes and then a song is sung. The song has merit; the scene, lit by tapers and with a dramatic solemnity, is effective on the stage; but Shakespeare has missed the chance of bringing Claudio nearer to a humanity that would help us to feel for him. It is too late for that; the case is hopeless.

The characters then go home (evidently they are no longer houseguests at Leonato’s) and put on ‘other weeds’ for the marriage of Claudio and the supposed daughter of Antonio, which he has agreed to with the words,

I do embrace your offer, and dispose
For henceforth of poor Claudio.

Arriving there, they find Benedick waiting with Leonato. Incredible as it may seem, Claudio again begins his clumsy pleasantry about Benedick’s marriage (‘we’ll tip thy horns with gold’, etc. etc.). Neither the challenge, nor the sobering effect of the occasion, nor the fact that he is newly come from the tomb of Hero, can make him forget that Benedick’s presence is the signal for an outbreak of joshing. Shakespeare knows that this is the kind of man he is, and with his curious compulsive honesty he cannot help sharing that knowledge with us, whatever it may do to the play.

The cost is certainly great. Antonio goes off to fetch the girls, and brings them in wearing masks. Here, obviously, is an excellent opportunity for Shakespeare to give Claudio some convincing lines. When he is at last confronted with the girl he is to marry instead of Hero, there is plenty that even the most ordinary writer could make him say. He can speak, briefly but movingly, about his love for the dead girl, and his remorse; he can declare his intention of doing everything in his power to bring happiness into the family that has been plunged into misery through his error; he can thank the good fortune that has made him happy, even in this misery, by uniting him to a girl closely related to his love and closely resembling her. Then the unmasking and the joy. It is not my intention to try to take the pen out of Shakespeare’s hand and write the play myself; I give these simple indications merely as a way of showing that it is not in the least difficult to imagine an effective speech that Claudio might make at this point in the action—how he might, even now, show some saving humanity.
What Shakespeare actually does is to give him the one line,

Which is the lady I must seize upon?

This, coming as it does at a crucial moment, has a strong claim to be considered the worst line in the whole of Shakespeare. It is the poet's final admission that Claudio has imposed his ungenerous personality on the story and ruined it beyond repair. After that, there is nothing for it but to get the unmasking scene over as quickly as possible and hurry on to the marriage of Beatrice and Benedick. Hero unmasks, and Claudio utters two words, 'Another Hero!' before the action sweeps on and everyone turns with relief to the sub-plot.

V

Before we can so turn, however, we must pause and consider the extent of the damage that was done to the Hero-and-Claudio plot by Shakespeare's distaste for it. Dr. Johnson, in dismissing the plot of Cymbeline, spoke of 'faults too evident for detection, and too gross for aggravation'. This could certainly be applied to the Hero-and-Claudio story; one can more easily say what isn't wrong with it than what is. To begin with we might note that the whole contriving of the plot by Borachio is just about as maladroit as it could be. When he is outlining to Don John what he means to do, Borachio says,

They will scarcely believe this without trial; offer them instances; which shall bear no less likelihood than to see me at her chamber-window; hear me call Margaret, Hero; hear Margaret term me Claudio; and bring them to see this the very night before the intended wedding.

There is here one of those contradictions 'too gross for detection;' how would it serve the deception to 'hear Margaret term me Claudio'? If Claudio is supposed to be listening, he would surely suspect that something very strange was happening if he heard someone else called by his name. To be fair, this particular bit of the scheme is never afterwards referred to, and it has been argued that 'Claudio' is a slip of the pen for 'Borachio'; many editors, from Theobald to Peter Alexander, boldly substitute the name 'Borachio', thus tidying up after a fit of Shakespearean absent-mindedness. But even if we accept this, we are still left with the problem of Margaret. Why should she consent to take part in the masquerade, to wear her mistress's clothes, and then remain silent when the storm breaks? What is she supposed to be doing? Why is she absent from the wedding, which as Hero's personal lady-in-waiting she might naturally be supposed to attend?

Margaret, obviously, is one of those characters on whom Shakespeare has simply given up. After the Watch has unmasked the plot, Leonato expresses his intention of seeking Margaret out and confronting her with Borachio. In the very next scene (V, ii) we see her, talking to Benedick, but the scene is entirely without function except in so far as Benedick asks her to go and fetch Beatrice and she agrees to do so; the rest is merely an interlude of rather arid sparring. Shakespeare was glad to bundle Margaret out of sight, just as he was wise to provide such good comic by-play in the scene of the overhearing of the plot by the Watch ('I know that Deformed'), to keep us from noticing the threadbare device that is being used. Conrade, evidently, is a character whose sole function in the play is to be present in the street in the middle of the night (why?) and have Borachio tell him what has happened. They do not meet by arrangement; Conrade, though he has earlier declared that he will back Don John in any wickedness, is not present when Borachio outlines his plot, and knows nothing about it until the pair happen to meet in the street. We do not, at any rate in the theatre, feel the weakness of this device, partly because the antics of the Watch are so amusing and partly because, in the rather laboured dialogue with which they work up to the disclosure, the pair introduce the important theme of appearance versus reality. 'Thou knowest that the fashion of a doublet, or a hat, or a cloak, is nothing to a man'. And this is part of the 'nothing' that causes all the play's much ado. It is excellent dramaturgy to have the audience reminded, at this point, of the play's serious backbone; it keeps our attention busy at an awkward moment. The same function is served by the brilliant stagecraft of the altar scene itself, which gives every
character something to say and do, so that we are carried along on the dramatic current and do not pause for questioning. For that matter, it is likewise excellent dramatic sense to have the Watch overhear the plot before we come to the altar scene and not after; it prevents the altar scene from being flooded with that dark tragic colouring that would overbalance the lighter tones of the rest of the play. Shakespeare had learnt this lesson the hard way in *The Merchant of Venice,* and it is interesting to see him getting out of trouble by shaping the plot so artfully: since there is, of course, no inherent reason why Borachio should not have met Conrade in the street on the night after the wedding débâcle rather than the night before.

VI

The Hero-and-Claudio plot, we have now established at perhaps tedious length, is a ruin. And what ruined it, in my opinion, was the pull towards psychological realism that seems to have been so strong in Shakespeare's mind at this time. Certainly this made the character of Claudio unworkable, and once that was hopeless it was all hopeless. Because the plot demanded that Claudio should behave ungenerously to a girl he was supposed to love, because Shakespeare could not stick to the chocolate-box conventions but had to go ahead and show Claudio as a real, and therefore necessarily unpleasant, youth, the contradictions grew and grew until they became unsurmountable.

It is this that must be my excuse for applying realistic criteria to the play, probing into questions of probability and motive, tut-tutting at the filmsiness of the main plot, and generally talking about the play as if it were a novel. In the last thirty years we have had many sharp warnings against this. It has been explained often enough that ‘character-criticism’ is a hangover from the later nineteenth century, when the novel was the dominant form in English literature and thus influenced everyone's way of looking at any literary work; that it climbed to its zenith in the days of Scott and then of Dickens, and has no business to live on into the age of *Finnegans Wake.* Dramatic characters are real only in action; they do not, or at any rate should not, invite the kind of biographical fantasy that we attach to characters in prose fiction. *Und so weiter.* I know this line of argument well enough. But it seems to me that Shakespeare, who overflows the boundaries in every direction, also overflows this one. His plays differ very widely in the extent to which he rounds out the characters as a novelist might. We feel this instinctively, and no amount of preaching will alter that feeling.

Virtually all influential academic critics, in the last few decades, have turned against this tradition of Shakespearean criticism, itself largely entrenched within the older academicism. And not only academics. We find a successful novelist and dramatist like Mr. J. B. Priestley saying, in his printed lecture *The Art of the Dramatist* (1956) that ‘the professors’ are still at their work of obfuscation.

‘The professors almost persuade us that dramatists are not concerned with theatres and audiences. There are no longer any parts to be acted: The characters become historical figures, real people. “Now what”, the professors ask, “was Hamlet doing during those years?” As if we were all private detectives employed by King Claudius! When and where, they wonder, did the Macbeths first meet? And so it goes on. They cannot—or will not—grasp the fact that Hamlet has no existence between the two stage directions *Exit Hamlet* and *Enter Hamlet,* that the Macbeths never had a first meeting because Shakespeare never wrote a scene about it. The dramatist's characters exist in their scenes and nowhere else.’

Well, I am not a professor, but this seems to me to settle some intricate questions a little too summarily. What is the nature of imaginative creation? What are we doing when we think of Hamlet? When we see Othello strangle Desdemona on the stage, do we believe he is really strangling her? If not, what do we believe? That we are watching an actor and actress, who will soon be cleaning off the greasepaint and putting on ordinary clothes to take a taxi home? If ‘a dramatist’s characters exist in their scenes’, if they can be said to exist at all, why should we not have a sense of them as existing in a continuum of experience? Surely anyone who has ever created an imaginary character knows that it can only be done by living with that character for long
periods, getting the feel of a whole lived life behind the much smaller area in which we show the character actually doing and suffering. The novel, with its flash-backs and leisurely accumulation of detail, can, if the novelist so wishes, supply a great deal of background of the kind postulated by the question, ‘What was Hamlet doing during those years?’ The drama cannot. But it is not, to me, self-evident that the imaginative process involved, for either writer or spectator, is so very different; or that it is different in kind at all.

At the time when Shakespeare wrote *Much Ado* he was just moving into that phase of his work in which we find most of his really solid character-creations. In the next five or six years he was to give us Brutus, Hamlet, Macbeth, Cleopatra. After that, the interest in three-dimensional character lapses and the plays become ‘romances’, dream-like, openly symbolic. Clearly, one of the activities of his mind, during that period, was the kind of character-building which we associate mainly with the novel. This was the period when everything was rushing along at once, when Shakespeare, at the full torrential flood of his energies, was novelist, poet and dramatist combined. The three ‘golden comedies’, *Much Ado, As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, were a springboard for this great leap. Above all else, they are plays, and plays on a definite theme: self-knowledge as manifested in the making of choices and particularly in courtship. But they are also great dramatic-lyrical poems. And they are also novelistic in that they tell credible stories about fully imagined, realistic characters.

At least, the other two mature comedies are all these things. Only in *Much Ado*, the first of the series, the springboard to a springboard, is the balance missing. In it, the poetic element is absent; the dramatic and the novelistic elements are unusually strong. Shakespeare’s mind was very like a river in spate. If it found one channel blocked, it would hurl itself with greater and greater force through the channels that remained. Dramatically—except for a stumble or two in the Hero-and-Claudio plot—*Much Ado* is more expert than the other comedies. Novelistically, if I may be permitted the term, it stands beside *Hamlet*: another play in which the whole is eclipsed by the brilliance of the parts.

As much as any novelist, Shakespeare, while writing this play, delighted in the depth and solidity of his characters. This delight comes out even in the purely mechanical business of the hoaxing of Beatrice and Benedick. Two eavesdroppings, two faked conversations, are contrived in that cuckoo-clock manner with which Shakespeare had enjoyed pleasing his audience ever since *Love's Labour's Lost*. But if we compare the hoodwinking of Benedick in II, iii, with the hoodwinking of Beatrice in III, i, we see that there is a considerable difference between the two scenes and that the difference springs from character. The men, in hoping to entangle Benedick with Beatrice, are simply diverting themselves; they may share in the general recognition that Beatrice and Benedick are meant for each other, they may even be aware of the warmth of feeling that already unites them, but they are not primarily interested in these things. Their main object is merriment. Hero, on the other hand, when she addresses Ursula on the subject of Beatrice's haughtiness, is engaged in the essential business of her life. Except for the pretence of being unaware of Beatrice's presence, there is no deception in her speech at all; she genuinely wants to caution Beatrice against the witty aggressiveness that is likely to spoil her life, and she genuinely finds it impossible to do so face to face.

She would mock me into air; O, she would laugh me Out of myself, press me to death with wit! Therefore let Benedick, like cover'd fire, Consume away in sighs, waste inwardly: It were a better death than die with mocks, Which is as bad as die with tickling.

She speaks feelingly because she is quite certain that her account of the situation is the true one; and so it is. Beatrice, like Olivia in *Twelfth Night*, is offending against one of the supreme laws of Shakespeare's world; namely, that girls exist to make wives for men and mothers for children. Olivia, by clinging to her grief for a dead brother and refusing the love of Duke Orsino, is flying in the face of nature by refusing the function and the fulfilment that nature offers her. The other characters see this, and gently but firmly the play eases her out
of this impossible position and brings her to the altar. In exactly the same way, Beatrice is clinging to something which she thinks of as a protection—her wit—which is in fact not protecting her at all but pushing her out of reach of happiness.

Why do Beatrice and Benedick communicate by witty squabbling? In its characteristic way, the play suggests a biography behind them, and we gather that they have been close at some previous time and that they have fallen out, without, however, falling out of love with each other. This is indicated in II, i.

DON PEDRO.

Come, lady, come; you have lost the heart of Signior Benedick.

BEATRICE.

Indeed, my lord, he lent it me awhile; and I gave him use for it, a double heart for his single one: marry, once before he won it of me with false dice, therefore your Grace may well say I have lost it.

The high-spirited girl chooses to speak in riddles because she has no mind to speak openly of her troubles and sufferings in this proud, hard-hearted company; but what she means by saying that she gave Benedick ‘a double heart for his single one’ is plain enough; and the allusion to ‘false dice’ seems to indicate some suspicion that Benedick deceived her; a suspicion, perhaps, as groundless as Claudio's suspicion of Hero.

Starting from this misunderstanding, the two of them have got trapped in a psychological box. Their need for each other is intense, but they can express it only by quarrelling; a situation we have all seen many times in life, but not very often, I think, in literature, and certainly never as skilfully shown as here. The initial difficulty is heightened by the fact that their verbal defences are so highly developed; left to themselves, they will fence and fence their lives away; cleverness will be their undoing unless the much less clever characters who surround them come to their aid with heavy-handed facetiousness which breaks down the elaborate rhythms of their mating-dance. As Hero plainly tells the listening Beatrice, cleverness has no place in the business of selecting a partner.

So turns she every man the wrong side out;
And never gives to truth and virtue that
Which simpleness and merit purchaseth.

To give to truth and virtue the love and respect that are ‘purchased’ by simplicity and merit—this, Hero thinks, is all that is necessary for happiness, and the play agrees with her. Dogberry, who has climbed to a position of respect among his fellow-townsmen by virtue of his age and his sufferings as well as his upright ways—for he is ‘a fellow that hath had losses’—describes himself with honest, wrathful pride as ‘one that hath two gowns, and everything handsome about him’. This is echoed in Benedick's speech in the closing minutes of the play, when he renounces his pride in superior powers of repartee.

Dost thou think I care for a satire or an epigram? No: if a man will be beaten with brains, a' shall wear nothing handsome about him.

I am sure this echo is intentional; cleverness is rebuked although it is enjoyed. The constables are not clever, but they restore the harmony that has been upset by quick-witted schemers; if a man will only give up judging people, himself included, by their cleverness, he will be an honest man, like Dogberry, and have everything handsome about him.

This may seem a pawky moral to find in so glittering a play, but it is in line with the import of all Shakespearean comedy; the verbal pugnacity of Beatrice and Benedick is a more attractive fault than the moping of Orsino and Olivia or the artificial disillusion of Jaques; all the comedies deal with the correction of
faults that obstruct life, and what they tell us is that human beings, in spite of all the difficulties that beset them, are unquenchably vital and must, somehow, find the strength to go on being unquenchably vital. All the rest is vain expense of breath, mere to-ing and fro-ing, much ado.

Richard Henze (essay date 1971)


[In the following essay, Henze offers an analysis of Claudio's character that focuses on the threat Claudio poses to social harmony.]

Two major difficulties in Much Ado About Nothing, the question of unity and the character of Claudio, periodically reappear to be resolved or unresolved by the critics. On the first problem, critical opinion has been divided. While some critics feel that there is an inartistic disharmony in the combination of Hero and Claudio with Benedick and Beatrice,1 that the play’s serious and comic plots are involved with each other rather than integrated,2 that there is an “inconsistency of purpose,”3 or that the play as we have it represents a less than perfect revision of an earlier play,4 other critics see instead considerable skill in the combination of elements in Much Ado.5 Some critics grant the play a kind of unity by ignoring Beatrice and Benedick or Claudio, but others have dealt with all characters in discovering a single theme. While all critics do not agree that the major theme is deception (some think instead that the play is primarily about such things as the uncertain course of true love6 or the significance of nothing7), most do agree that deception or improper noting is an important factor in the progress of the action of the play.8

The critics neglect to note, however, that deception in Much Ado is of two sorts. One deception leads to social peace, to marriage, to the end of deceit. The other deception breeds conflict and distrust and leads even Beatrice to desire the heart of Claudio in the market place. Wrong deception occurs when one trusts appearances and not one's intuition or “soul,” when one depends on eavesdropping and circumstantial evidence instead of careful study, when one has too little trust in human nature. Right deception supports that trust. I want, in this paper, to describe the double deception in Much Ado About Nothing, to show that the play's major images, eating, hunting or angling, and noting, reflect the double theme by being themselves double in significance, and to place Claudio, one of the play's major problems, in this context of theme and image.

One major, proper deception in Much Ado, that of Benedick and Beatrice by Don Pedro and his friends, is pleasantly designed to end another deception, the pretense of Benedick and Beatrice that each is the last person the other would marry, in order to draw together two people who will nourish each other and society itself. Both Beatrice and Benedick seem strongly against romance and marriage. She “had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me” (I.i.132-133)9 and will have no husband until “God make men of some other metal than earth” (II.i.62-63). Her attitude deserves modification. Shakespeare's comic heroines (Rosalind, Rosaline, Viola) are often aware of the artificiality of romantic convention, but each heroine is nevertheless ready, as Beatrice soon is also, to listen to a man who swears honestly that he loves her. But Beatrice's deception is mainly self deception, for with her first words she reveals her concern for Benedick; she is already in love; her deception is not really deceptive except to one who notes superficially. Having helped arrange the marriage of Claudio to Hero, Beatrice reveals just how much she too would like to be caught in her nest: “Thus goes everyone to the world but I, and I am sunburnt, I may sit in a corner and cry ‘Heigh-ho for a husband!’” (II.i.330-333) Beatrice, like Petruchio's Kate, is willing enough to be caught, but self-protective enough to avoid the shame of rejection.

Nor is Benedick truly deceptive, except to Beatrice. Although he likewise seems opposed to romance and marriage, sure that he will “live a bachelor,” everyone but Beatrice knows just how small the deceit needs to be in order to unmask Benedick. Even while Benedick chides Claudio because he “wilt needs thrust thy neck
into a yoke, wear the print of it and sigh away Sundays” (I.i.203-204), we remember that Beatrice has called
Benedick a “thruster” himself. Although Beatrice’s “thrust” has bawdy implications that Benedick’s lacks,
Beatrice’s word is appropriate in Benedick’s sense too, for Benedick, as the baiting scene shortly shows, is
more eager than Claudio ever will be to thrust his neck into the yoke. For Benedick to vow not to love as
Claudio does is a sensible vow, but not to love at all is an anti-social and anti-romantic vow that matches
Beatrice’s assertion that she would rather not listen to a man say that he loves her.

Don Pedro depends on Benedick’s and Beatrice’s self-deception in order to end that deception, for if Benedick
and Beatrice were not deceptive in their dislike of each other, they would not be drawn together by a scheme
like Don Pedro’s. One deception, therefore, requires the other. For fullest comic effect, Don Pedro needs to
know that his deception is less than deceptive. For that same comic effect, Benedick and Beatrice must each
actually consider the other opposed to love and marriage in order that the moment of surprise, when each
immediately believes that Don Pedro’s bait is the truth, may be as satisfying as it is. Leonato and Don Pedro
play their parts well; they are expert hypocrites; but their hypocrisy is justified because it leads to social
harmony. Luciana in The Comedy of Errors recommended just such hypocrisy to Antipholus of Syracuse:
“‘Tis holy sport to be a little vain / When the sweet breath of flattery conquers strife” (III.ii.27-28). In Much
Ado the holy sport is a carefully controlled deception that likewise conquers strife.

The other major deception, that of Claudio, depends, like Don Pedro’s scheme, on a victim not being what he
superficially appears to be. Claudio seems a noble fellow, one who “hath borne himself beyond the promise of
his age, doing in the figure of a lamb the feats of a lion” (I.i.13-15), who, like Benedick and Beatrice, should
better expectation. Instead, in his poor repayment of the trust others have in him, he is worse than expected.

The criticism of Claudio is a curiously mixed bag. At one extreme are those critics, like Thomas Marc Parrot,
who condemn Claudio for his treatment of Hero: “It is, perhaps, too hard to call Claudio, as Swinburne does,
‘a pitiful fellow,’ but only in romantic comedy could such a character be at last rewarded with the hand of
the lady he had so publicly slandered.” A less severe judgment is furnished by Nadine Page, who finds
Claudio “interested only in the financial aspect” (p. 742) and “reacting true to type in trying
circumstances” (p. 744). Charles Prouty agrees: “the plain fact is that Claudio is not a romantic lover and
cannot therefore be judged by the artificial standards of literary convention.” He is instead a very careful
and sensible young Elizabethan seeking a profitable marriage. Kerby Neill feels that the judgments against
Claudio are “based more on what Claudio does than on the interpretation which the text puts on his
actions.”

The Claudio in Much Ado seems not so consistent as Schoff or Prouty would have him be. In order to make
Claudio “an admirable hero,” one must ignore (as Schoff does) what Beatrice has to say about the repudiation
of Hero, or one must prove that Beatrice is unjust in her judgment. In order to make Claudio a villain, one
must ignore the fact that he is, without irony, called noble and that he is a close friend of Benedick and Don
Pedro (or one can, as John Palmer does, make Don Pedro less noble for being ignoble Claudio’s friend).

The crux of the problem seems to be the nature of the Claudio-Hero relationship. If that relationship is a
purely mercenary Elizabethan example of a young man seeking a “good” match, and if such a relationship is
justified by the play itself, then Claudio is justly angry when he thinks that he is being forced into a bad
bargain, and perhaps then even the public repudiation of Hero will seem “proper, and of an ‘established’
order of things.” On the other hand, if that relationship is more than merely mercenary, or if the repudiation
is unjust in spite of the fact that it reflects Elizabethan practice, then Claudio’s mistrust and public rejection of
Hero can hardly be “proper.” Kerby Neill feels that the problem “is the belief in the slander, not the
subsequent repudiation of Hero” (p. 92), but it would seem that both are pretty serious if either one is.
The very bulk of the criticism that condemns Claudio's treatment of Hero, both in his initial suspicion and in the cruel rejection, would seem to indicate that, in spite of Page and Prouty's description of the Elizabethan attitude toward marriage as a business arrangement, Claudio is doing more than refusing to honor a contract. Walter N. King, even while he agrees with Page and Prouty that the Claudio-Hero relationship is more socially traditional than romantic, detects the flaw in that relationship and fault in the repudiation: “It is here that the social abnormality of aristocratic society in Messina is exposed once and for all for what it is—shallow and perverse application of a standard of behavior that is both automatic and uncharitable.”

A code may be in effect during the repudiation, but that code, as Claudio defines it, is unsatisfactory—it breeds mistrust and disharmony: “Those who marry according to the philosophy of caveat emptor, like Claudio, are bound to be predisposed to sexual distrust” (p. 150); and Don John thrives on sexual distrust.

But another problem appears: the code is not the only factor in the Claudio-Hero relationship, for Claudio and Hero follow the conventions of romance as well as those of the arranged marriage. T. W. Craik points out that “the whole point of Benedick’s comments is that Claudio loves according to the romantic tradition” (p. 303), even though the arranged marriage makes the Claudio-Hero relationship more complicated than romance alone would be. The fact is that Claudio and Hero have both an arranged marriage and a romantic attachment—the one does not preclude the other. But in each case, as Claudio falls in love with Hero’s beautiful face but not with her feelings while Don Pedro arranges a profitable marriage, convention is excessively restrictive and sincere human feeling is deficient. However “proper” or conventional the repudiation may be, it violates another code of love, beauty, and trust that a romantic attachment between Hero and Claudio has established. However conventional that romantic attachment might be, it is, as Benedick points out, too easily silly and too easily selfish unless it includes a concern for more than a pretty face. In Shakespearian comedy, convention that has become restrictive, whether it be the law at the beginning of The Comedy of Errors and A Midsummer Night’s Dream, the mercenary marriage in Much Ado About Nothing, or the artificial language of romance in Love’s Labour’s Lost and As You Like It, needs to become sufficiently flexible to allow for humanity. That flexibility is achieved in The Comedy of Errors when Aegeon is freed, in As You Like It when romance operates under the control of Hymen, in Much Ado when the arranged marriage enriches society, not just one man. Beatrice and Benedick indicate the modification that needs to take place in the Hero-Claudio relationship. Beatrice and Benedick, under the guidance of Don Pedro, likewise have arranged marriage and romantic attachment, but their relationship, unlike Claudio’s to Hero, is characterized by sincere feeling and trust. They participate in the conventions, although lamely (Benedick can find no rime to “lady” but “baby”), but they are more concerned for Hero and for each other than they are for convention.

Claudio effectively shows what happens when superficial romance and selfish, suspicious social concern are combined. His “love” for Hero is much too shallow to preserve him from doubting both his friend Don Pedro and Hero. When told that Don Pedro loves Hero, Claudio instantly believes “‘Tis certain so” (II.i.181). When Claudio wishes the Prince “joy of her,” Benedick hardly believes that Claudio could “think the Prince would have served you thus” (II.i.202-203). Benedick calls Claudio a “poor hurt fowl! Now will he creep into sedges.” The image makes Claudio the victim of Don John; but also, by pun, the foul quality that must be purged. With Hero, Claudio’s suspicion is again immediate and so much in control of Claudio that he decides on Hero’s punishment before he has witnessed her crime: “If I see anything tonight why I should not marry her to-morrow, in the congregation where I should wed, there will I shame her” (III.ii.126-128).

Claudio's suspicion is exactly the characteristic that enables him to fulfill his role in the play. Through Claudio, Much Ado displays the power that malice acquires when it is allowed to operate behind a respectable appearance. The greatest danger to society comes not from Benedick and Beatrice, who are very ready to increase the social harmony, nor even from Don John, who is known to be a villain to all but one who mistakenly decides that Don John is honest when he has proved himself dishonest. The dangerous one is Claudio, who conceals a huge and active suspicion behind a mask of virtue and fidelity. One can anticipate Don John's villainy; one does not expect Claudio's suspicion. If everyone were like the Friar and Beatrice—disinclined to accept slanderous accusations without clear proof—Don John would have no success.
whatever. Again, as with Don Pedro's deception, the primary scheme depends on a secondary deceit: Benedick's and Beatrice's distaste for each other has to be pretense for Don Pedro's scheme to work; Claudio's faithfulness has to be deceptive for Don John's plan to succeed, a plan which is, appropriately, not even Don John's, but Borachio's.

The consequence of Claudio's lack of trust is the repudiation of Hero. While, as Prouty shows, the repudiation would have been less offensive in Shakespeare's day than it is now, the fact remains that it could hardly have been completely inoffensive. Beatrice, in her impassioned demand for revenge, points out exactly the problem that we detect if we have watched or read the repudiation scene at all. Claudio is cruel, shamefully cruel. However well, according to some concept of "honor," Claudio may be acting in trying circumstances, he is not acting well according to the more general standards of human decency. T. W. Craik argues that Claudio is cleared of blame "by the facts that Don John (as villain) draws all censure on himself and that Don Pedro (hitherto the norm, the reasonable man) is also deceived" (p. 314). I would argue that the emphasis of the play is on Don John's inability to bite until someone else gets close enough to him and that Claudio is to blame for putting himself that close. Don Pedro's agreement with Claudio does not exonerate Claudio; rather, it indicates the spread of suspicion until someone notes evidence carefully, as the Friar does, and opposes that suspicion with trust. Craik says that Friar Francis becomes the "new point of reference" after Don Pedro implicates himself in error. Beatrice is surely part of that new point of reference too. She knows intuitively that Hero is innocent; the Friar adds to that intuition a careful study of the evidence. This combination of intuitive trust and careful observation seems to be the one that the play recommends.

Craik argues that Beatrice's "revengeful invective against Claudio … does not justify itself" (p. 314) because Beatrice is wrong in her judgment of Claudio's guilt. I agree that Beatrice is too passionate, too much inclined to help Don John's feast of malice to its conclusion, but Claudio is not, therefore, innocent. Beatrice recognizes exactly the problem: "O that I were a man! What? bear her in hand until they come to take hands, and then with public accusation, uncover'd slander, unmitigated rancour—O God, that I were a man!" (IV.i.305-309) Here as in Lear even a dog deserves better treatment than that. Claudio's fault is both his lack of trust that leads him to doubt Hero so easily and his lack of decency that leads him to accuse her so unfairly at that very moment when he should be most concerned for her. Yet, the very magnitude of that accusation of Hero makes it more effective dramatically than a gentler accusation would be, for it better indicates the consequences of wrong deception, the social disruptiveness of a lack of trust. If Hero's shame were less, Claudio's fault would likewise be less; and the power that malice can have when it is allowed respectability would loom less large. The problem is not malice itself; that as Benedick points out and as the end of the play indicates, may be recognized for what it is. The problem is that Claudio, who should measure up to an expectation of nobleness, conceals beneath his noble appearance a lack of trust, a lack of soul.

Even at the moment that the success of the wrong kind of deception seems assured, however, its failure is evident, for the shameful result of Claudio's suspicion immediately awakens the decency of others and makes them observe carefully what Claudio has seen only superficially and inaccurately. While Claudio condemns Hero, the Friar and Beatrice assure themselves, on the basis of human evidence that Claudio ignores that Hero is guiltless. And, at the same time, Dogberry and Verges, apparently the most inept officers of law that one could ever fear to have, have in hand the originators of the deception, Borachio and Conrade. They have noted what Borachio and Conrade said; in this case noting ends the very mischief that noting began.

Possible confusion is usually limited in Shakespeare's comedies. In A Midsummer Night's Dream, Theseus ordains that the festivities shall last only so long. In Love's Labour's Lost, all of the young men's scheme is foreknown by the ladies; thus they are armed to resist confusion. In The Comedy of Errors, chains and ropes rapidly bind those who would wander too far from social restrictions. In Much Ado, two of the villains are arrested before the accusation takes place; the villainy will come to light; the asinine Dogberry is required in order to keep it from coming to light too early and spoiling the dramatic intensity of the play.
The control that society finally exercises is shown not only by Dogberry but also by Don Pedro's earlier guidance of Beatrice and Benedick toward marriage. That earlier control serves as a pattern for the later handling of Claudio and Hero, who are likewise led into marriage by a deception that undeceives. Claudio shows what happens when society loses its tight control over the deceptiveness of individual members of society; Beatrice and Benedick and later Hero and Claudio show the harmony that will occur when society, represented here by Don Pedro and Leonato, prince and father, regain that control.

The theme of deception is double in nature; the primary images, eating, fishing or hunting, and noting, that help carry that theme, reflect that doubleness. Beatrice, who would eat the heart of Claudio in the market place if she were a man, also feeds on the meet food of Benedick. One feast would satiate the appetite for revenge perhaps, but the other surely furnishes a nobler and a fuller satisfaction. Don John fishes for Claudio, and through him for Don Pedro, while Don Pedro angles for Benedick and Beatrice, but the two fishermen's goals and methods are as disparate as are their own characters. The Friar, by closely noting Hero, assures himself that she cannot be false. Claudio, after noting from some distance Margaret playing Hero, decides that Hero cannot be true. Both the methods and results of the two notings are contradictory.

In spite of Benedick's “excellent stomach” at the beginning of the play (I.i.52), Benedick and Beatrice at first feed the appetite that Don John feels most, the appetite for conflict. Beatrice says that her disdain will not die while “she hath such meet food to feed it as Signoir Benedick” (I.i.122-123). Benedick calls Beatrice “a dish I love not! I cannot endure my Lady Tongue” (II.i.282-283) and vows that he “would not marry her though she were endowed with all that Adam had left him before he transgress'd” (II.i.258-261). Don Pedro points out that Benedick now has a ‘queasy stomach’ which must be overcome for him to “fall in love with Beatrice. If we can do this, Cupid is no longer an archer; his glory shall be ours, for we are the only love gods” (II.i.401-404). They are the only orderly love gods, more interested in social harmony than in romance.

Benedick's stomach does settle. Properly deceived, he decides that he will be “horribly in love” with Beatrice: “I have railed so long against marriage. But doth not the appetite alter? A man loves the meat in his youth that he cannot endure in his age” (II.iii.245-248). No longer will Benedick's queasy stomach reject the meat of the marriage table; instead it rejects the pleasures of selfish bachelorhood. As Margaret says, Benedick has “become a man. He swore he would never marry and yet now, in despite of his heart he eats his meat without grudging” (III.iv.88-90). Both meals and marriage are socially sustaining; the image is an appropriate one for the sort of love that Benedick accepts: “No, the world must be peopled. When I said I would die a bachelor, I did not think I should live till I were married” (II.iii.251-253). Sent to fetch Benedick in to dinner, Beatrice decides that he “has no stomach”; actually, he now has just the right sort of stomach.

Don John, who will “eat when I have stomach, and wait no man's leisure” (I.iii.16-17), is able to feed his villainous appetite while wrong deception prevails. In Claudio, Don John sees “food to my displeasure” (I.iii.68). Don John's private meal is to be at the expense of “the great supper” where too many healthy appetites are indisposed. Even Beatrice finds her appetite troubled by Don John: “I never can see him but I am heart-burn'd an hour after” (II.i.3-5). Don John's villainy and Claudio's suspicion are the acids that cause such indigestion.

In contrast to Claudio, who notes superficially and mistrusts Don Pedro and Hero, are all those who are not deceived because they recognize, as Hero tells Don Pedro, that “the lute should be like the case” (II.i.98). With proper noting, the lute plays, and relationships are like harmonic musical notes. As Beatrice tells Hero, “The fault will be in the music, cousin, if you be not wooed in good time” (II.i.72). Music is harmonic if, as Richard II says, time is kept at all. Beatrice, more interested in being witty than in being wise, is wise nevertheless. Claudio, Benedick, and Beatrice must properly note together and attain such accord if social harmony is to be attained.

The “noting” trap set for Benedick is itself harmonic both in goal and in method, for part of the bait is music:
PEDRO.

Come, shall we hear this music?

CLAUD.

Yea, my good lord. How still the evening is,
As hush'd on purpose to grace harmony!

(II.iii.38-41)

Don Pedro notes “where Benedick hath hid himself” (II.iii.42), and has Balthasar do his noting in order to establish the graceful harmonic mood appropriate for getting a husband for a lady.

Balthasar protests:

Note this before my notes:

There's not a note of mine that's worth the noting.

PEDRO.

Why, these are very crotchets that he speaks!

Note notes, forsooth, and nothing!

(II.iii.56-59)

But Balthasar's notes are more than nothing; they are harmonic in sound and informative in message. The song warns ladies that “Men were deceivers ever,” always capable of fraud; the message is more appropriate for Claudio than for Benedick, although Benedick too has been guilty of attempted deception. As Balthasar sings his song, Benedick, like Hotspur who would rather listen to his hound, reveals his own discord in his unflattering appraisal of musical harmony: “I had as live have heard the night raven” (II.iii.83). But Benedick is to be made to accord whether he will or not, and beneath the deceptive self-protective wit, Benedick will.

Don Pedro says of Benedick, “if ever thou dost fall from this faith, thou wilt prove a notable argument” (I.i.257-258). Later Leonato describes Claudio as a notable argument also: “Which is the villain? Let me see his eyes, / That when I note another man like him, / I may avoid him” (V.i.268-270). Both notable arguments, finally, prove the same points, that one needs to note carefully before making an important judgment, and that one who is properly guided by society and its harmonic restrictions will avoid deceit and disharmony.

The fishing and hunting imagery, often combined with the noting image, likewise is of two sorts: while Don John angles deceptively for Claudio, Don Pedro fishes properly for Beatrice and Benedick. After Benedick is caught on a carefully baited hook, Beatrice hides in the bushes “like a lapwing” in order to “note” her bait:

URSALA.

The pleasant'st angling is to see the fish
Cut with her golden ears the silver stream
And greedily devour the treacherous bait.
So angle we for Beatrice, who even now
Is couched in the woodbine coverture.

(III.i.26-30)

The treachery is pleasant, and the pleasantness is not after all very treacherous; for Benedick and Beatrice are caught by the mere truth. Beatrice greedily eating all that she can find is feeding the very appetite that ought to be fed, the desire to marry Benedick. After the trap catches Beatrice, Hero points out that “Some Cupid kills with arrows, some with traps.” The traps are perhaps less conventionally romantic than Cupid's arrows, but they are more carefully controlled than haphazard romance would be.

Feasting, noting, and angling become proper when society directs them. Don Pedro angles for Benedick with bait worth noting and gets him to the feast. Claudio, “a poor hurt fowl,” finally escapes Don John's trap and corrupt appetite and takes Leonato's bait. Through Don Pedro, who decides that Beatrice “were an excellent wife for Benedick,” and Leonato, who selects Claudio's wife, society exercises its control. Angling and noting in Benedick's and Beatrice's case, and finally in Claudio's as well, gather sufficient game for a feast of trust and fellowship.

The play is finally much ado about nothing because a sufficient bedrock of trust exists to support social harmony. Appearances do not deceive, at least not importantly, if one trusts one's friends. Just as every man should know that Dogberry is an ass because he has proved himself so, so every man should know Hero for a chaste woman and Don John for a villain.

Beatrice and the Friar, in contrast to Claudio, know men and women for what they are. Beatrice trusts Hero: “O, on my soul, my cousin is belied!” (IV.i.147) After his initial shock, Leonato agrees with Beatrice: “My soul doth tell me Hero is belied” (V.i.43); the soul is better evidence than the word of a villain. Benedick perceives where one source of confusion may lie: “The practice of it lives in John the bastard, / Whose spirits toil in frame of villainies” (IV.i.189-190). The Friar, after careful “noting of the lady,” decides that she is “guiltless here / Under some biting error” (IV.i.170-171). But Don John's feast is soon to end, for with the Friar's plan, proper deception replaces improper deception.

Only now, after the shame of Hero, do Benedick and Beatrice confess their love. Benedick says, “I do love nothing in the world so well as you. Is not that strange?” (IV.i.269-270) But concern for Hero takes precedence over romance. Although Beatrice assigns her knight a knightly duty, she does so exactly because she loves Hero.

After Benedick's declaration of love, the language strikes the ear rather harshly, but the language and its harshness are appropriate:

BENE.

By my sword, Beatrice, thou loveth me.

BEAT.

Do not swear, and eat it.

BENE.

I will swear by it that you love me, and
I will make him eat it that says I love not you.

BEAT.

Will you not eat your word?

(IV.i.276-280)

Of the two kinds of eating in the play, the biting conflict and suspicion that consumes social peace and the pleasant feast of harmony and love that settles a queasy stomach, the eating that Beatrice would like to do on Claudio is not the one that will nurture social harmony. The duty that Beatrice assigns Benedick, to kill Claudio, is likewise an antisocial task, however much Claudio may seem to deserve killing at this point. Happily, Benedick does not have to fulfill that duty in order to win Beatrice.

Beatrice's concern for Hero defines her essentially generous nature that has been hidden behind a witty counterfeit. Benedick's refusal to kill Claudio defines the same quality in his character:

BENE.

Come, bid me do anything for thee.

BEAT.

Kill Claudio.

BENE.

Ha! Not for the wide world!

(IV.i.289-291)

Although Benedick does finally agree to fulfill Beatrice's request, he does so because he trusts her intuition:

BENE.

Think you in your soul the Count Claudio hath wronged Hero?

BEAT.

Yea, as sure as I have a thought or a soul.

BENE.

Enough, I am engag'd.

(IV.i.331-335)

Now, very late, Don Pedro and Claudio discover what their intuition should have told them. Don Pedro remembers that Don John "is compos'd and fram'd of treachery" (V.i.257). Claudio sees Hero's innocence, admits his fault, but denies its magnitude: "Yet sinn'd I not / But in mistaking" (V.i.283-284). But that mistaking, as Beatrice has told us, was a large fault, a violation of trust and social harmony. We cannot expect Claudio to achieve tragic recognition, but we have been furnished sufficient evidence to see Claudio's fault. Leonato forgives Claudio easily after all, for Claudio's only penance is to marry Leonato's mystery niece,
“Almost the copy of my child that's dead” (V.i.298). Claudio's penance may seem light, but comedy does not require the more severe logic of tragedy, particularly not when the comedy is concerned to show the failure of suspicion and success of trust. We are happy, as is Antonio, that “all things sort so well” (V.iv.7). While they sort so well, the firm hand of society pushes a properly deceived Claudio and an innocent Hero into marriage; with social restrictions in control, malice is ineffectual.

As in Shakespeare's other comedies, that control is disguised by sentiment even while the conventional language of sentiment is handled less than seriously. Benedick and Beatrice, witty to the end, are finally permitted to join wits:

BENE.
Come, I will have thee; but, by this light, I take thee for pity.

BEAT.
I would not deny you; but, by this good day, I yield upon great persuasion, and partly to save yo (V.iv.92-97)

Benedick and Claudio are friends again. The play ends with dancing, music, peace. With society in control, with suspicion replaced by trust and with destructive biting by a marriage feast, Don John is no problem. He has been brought back to Messina, but as Benedick says, we need not think on him “till to-morrow.”

Notes

7. Paul A. Jorgensen, “*Much Ado About Nothing,*” *Shakespeare Quarterly,* V (Summer, 1954), 287-295. In *Much Ado* says Jorgensen, we have “a dramatic, rather than expository, elaboration” of the significance of nothing: “Out of a trifle, a misunderstanding, a fantasy, a mistaken over-hearing, a ‘naughtiness,’ might come the materials for a drama. . . .” (p. 295)
9. All Shakespeare quotations are from *The Complete Works of Shakespeare,* ed. George Lyman Kittredge (Boston, 1936).

Donald McGrady (essay date 1993)


*In the following essay, McGrady reviews the way Beatrice inverts rhetorical tradition through her persistently negative appraisal of her suitors, and argues that upon overhearing Hero’s description of her, Beatrice is made aware of her flaws and is finally able to open herself up to love.*

In act 3, scene 1, of *Much Ado About Nothing*, Hero incites Beatrice to love Benedick by staging a scene for her to overhear in which Hero censures Beatrice’s custom of criticizing all her suitors, of turning their spiritual virtues or physical characteristics into defects:

> How wise, how noble, young, how rarely featur'd,
> But she would spell him backward: if fair-fac'd,
> She would swear the gentleman should be her sister;
> If black, why, Nature, drawing of an antic,
> Made a foul blot; if tall, a lance ill-headed;
> If low, an agate very vilely cut;
> If speaking, why, a vane blown with all winds;
> If silent, why, a block moved with none.
> So turns she every man the wrong side out,
> And never gives to truth and virtue that
> Which simpleness and merit purchaseth.

(ll. 59-70)

Hero's tactic is to point out to her cousin that she is hypercritical, being unfair with all the men attracted to her. Hero and her maid Ursula have already stated that Benedick loves Beatrice (ll. 37-43) but that she is so “self-endeared” as to be incapable of requiting his affection (ll. 49-56). They therefore conclude that Benedick should forget Beatrice (ll. 41-43 and 77-86) and end by praising Benedick’s qualities (ll. 91-99). Hero's strategy works to perfection, as the eavesdropping Beatrice becomes aware of her mistakes (“Stand I condemn'd for pride and scorn so much? / Contempt, farewell, and maiden pride, adieu! / No glory lives behind the back of such” [ll. 108-10]) and yields her formerly scornful heart to love (ll. 111-16). From this moment on, Beatrice is a changed woman, as love's flame refines her temperament, turning arrogance to sweetness (see 3.4.38-73); the proverbial illness of love makes her yearn for “a hawk, a horse, or a husband” (ll. 39-40, 67-70, and 50), all interchangeable, since the hawk and the horse traditionally symbolize eroticism.

That Hero’s stratagem proves so effective with Beatrice may in part be due to its use of an ancient rhetorical tradition, although Beatrice, as an incorrigible man-hater, has turned that tradition inside out. The immediate inspiration for Hero’s speech (as George Steevens pointed out two centuries ago) appears in two passages of Lyly’s *Euphues*. In the first of these passages, Lyly, like Shakespeare, accuses women of describing men’s
positive or neutral characteristics in negative terms:

Dost thou not know that women deem none valiant unless he be too venturous? That they account one a dastard if he be not desperate, a pinchpenny if he be not prodigal, if silent a sot, if full of words a fool? Perversely do they always think of their lovers and talk of them scornfully, judging all to be clowns which be no courtiers and all to be pinglers [i.e., farm-horses] that be not coursers. … Do you not know the nature of women, which is grounded only upon extremities? Do they think any man to delight in them unless he dote on them? … If he be cleanly then term they him proud, if mean in apparel a sloven, if tall a lungis [i.e., long, slim person], if short a dwarf, if bold blunt, if shamefast a coward. …

Four of Shakespeare's ten examples (tall, low, speaking, silent) are listed in Euphues. (Those missing are the corporeal fair-fac'd and black and the spiritual truth, virtue, simpleness, and merit.) Shakespeare undoubtedly recognized Lyly's critique of feminine faultfinding as an echo of a classical topos.

The original form of the motif—which to the best of my knowledge has never been studied—reverses the version that Beatrice employs: it consists quite simply of a lover who characterizes his beloved's various physical or spiritual defects as laudable attributes. Naturally this form applies to young boys rather than to women:

“… Glaucon,” said I, “… It does not become a lover to forget that all adolescents … sting and stir the amorous lover of youth and appear to him deserving of his attention and desirable. … One, because his nose is tip-tilted, you will praise as piquant, the beak of another you pronounce right-royal, the intermediate type you say strikes the harmonious mean, the swarthy are of manly aspect, the white are children of the gods divinely fair, and as for honey-hued, do you suppose the very word is anything but the euphemistic invention of some lover who can feel no distaste for sallowness when it accompanies the blooming time of youth? And, in short, there is no pretext you do not allege and there is nothing you shrink from saying to justify you in not rejecting any who are in the bloom of their prime.”

Plato here begins a tradition that has lasted more than two millennia. Not surprisingly, his attention to the imperfect nose did not find favor with subsequent imitators, but the beloved's complexion (swarthy, too fair, or honey-colored) became one of the standard characteristics often repeated by later writers.

From Plato the motif passes to Lucretius, who adds to the meager list in the Republic many more instances of lovers' blindness:

For for the most part men act blinded by passion, and assign to women excellencies which are not truly theirs. And so we see those in many ways deformed and ugly dearly loved, yea, prospering in high favour. … A black love is called “honey-dark”, the foul and filthy “undorned”, the green-eyed “Athena's image”, the wiry and wooden “a gazelle”, the squat and dwarfish “one of the graces”, “all pure delight”, the lumpy and ungainly “a wonder” and “full of majesty”. She stammers and cannot speak, “she has a lisp”; the dumb is “modest”; the fiery, spiteful gossip is “a burning torch”. One becomes a “slender darling”, when she can scarce live from decline; another half dead with cough is “frail”. Then the fat and full-bosomed is “Ceres' self with Bacchus at breast”; the snub-nosed is “sister to Silenus, or a Satyr”; the thick-lipped is “a living kiss”. More of this sort it were tedious for me to try to tell.

Lucretius retains Plato's swarthy and honey-hued skin, but introduces additional blemishes perceived by the suitor as positive qualities; of these, the most enduring have proved to be excessive thinness, shortness,
tallness, and taciturnity. Plato lists only a few purely physical faults; Lucretius expands this list considerably and then adds the mental characteristics of reticence and loquacity (ll. 1164-65), which will reappear in Lyly and Shakespeare.

Horace, the next cultivator of the motif, barely alludes to the lover’s propensity to excuse his beloved’s defects before proposing that we extend our benevolent evaluations of our sweethearts to our friends and offspring as well:

Let us turn first to this fact, that the lover, in his blindness, fails to see his lady's unsightly blemishes, nay is even charmed with them. … I could wish that we made the like mistake in friendship and that to such an error our ethics had given an honourable name. At any rate, we should deal with a friend as a father with his child, and not be disgusted at some blemish. If a boy squints, his father calls him “Blinky”; if his son is sadly puny, like misbegotten Sisyphus of former days, he styles him “Chickabiddy”. … But we turn virtues themselves upside down, and want to soil a clean vessel. Does there live among us an honest soul, a truly modest fellow? We nickname him slow and stupid. Does another shun every snare and offer no exposed side to malice, seeing that we live in that kind of a world where keen envy and slanders are so rife? Instead of his good sense and prudence we speak of his craftiness and insincerity. Is one somewhat simple … ? “He is quite devoid of social tact,” we say.8

Although most of Horace’s treatment of the motif falls outside our principal area of interest, focusing as it does upon the faults of offspring and friends, rather than on those of the beloved, it is important in the evolution of our topos, for it juxtaposes the figure of the indulgent suitor with the crucial notion of unjust criticism of the virtuous. In other words, to the lover's natural tendency to depict his sweetheart's faults as positive qualities, Horace adds the idea that that same wooer may describe moral merits as blemishes—a concept borrowed from the larger motif of the “inversion of virtues and vices.” With this fundamental accretion, our amorous motif of the reversal of values nears its complete form.

The last known classical instances of our theme appear appropriately enough in Ovid; one such passage is in the Ars Amatoria:

Particularly forbear to reproach a woman with her faults, faults which many have found it useful to feign otherwise. Her complexion was not made a reproach against Andromeda by him on whose either foot was a swift moving pinion. All thought Andromache too big: Hector alone deemed her of moderate size. … With names you can soften shortcomings; let her be called swarthy, whose blood is blacker than Illyrian pitch; if cross-eyed, she is like Venus; yellow-haired, like Minerva; call her slender whose thinness impairs her health; if short, call her trim; if stout, of full body; let its nearness to a virtue conceal a fault.9

Unlike his predecessors, Ovid here makes no original contribution whatsoever to the development of our motif; he simply repeats the notion that lovers praise their girlfriends' physical flaws. Four of the blemishes enumerated by Ovid—swarthiness, thinness, shortness, and stoutness—coincide with items from Lucretius's list, and he does not include any mental faults, as do Lucretius and Horace. Subsequently, however, in his Remedia Amoris, Ovid introduces a fundamental change in the motif; here he recounts how his advances were rejected by a certain girl, and he describes a remedy that he used to forget her:

“How ugly,” would I say, “are my girl's legs!” and yet they were not, to say the truth. “How short she is!” though she was not; “how much she asks of her lover!” that proved my chiefest cause of hate. Faults too lie near to charms; by that error virtues oft were blamed for vices. Where you can, turn to the worse your girl's attractions, and by a narrow margin criticise amiss. Call her fat, if she is full-breasted, black, if dark-complexioned; in a slender
Ovid's remedy for rejection consists, then, in persuading himself that the disdainful lady's qualities and virtues are but so many faults and blemishes. That is, Ovid here turns inside out the original motif of the lover who perceives all his beloved's imperfections as positive qualities: the suitor who once regarded his sweetheart with rose-tinted glasses, when rejected by her, should exchange those spectacles for others that present her in a wholly jaundiced light. This Ovidian passage was incorporated by Lyly into his *Euphues*, in a paragraph that immediately follows the passage from *Euphues* quoted above; in response to a woman who turns his qualities into failings, the man should do the same:

> Be she never so comely, call her counterfeit; be she never so straight, think her crooked; and wrest all parts of her body to the worst, be she never so worthy. If she be well set then call her a boss [i.e., fat], if slender a hazel twig, if nut-brown as black as coal, if well coloured a painted wall; if she be pleasant then is she a wanton, if sullen a clown, if honest then is she coy, if impudent a harlot.

Here, then, we have the background for Beatrice's negative depiction of her suitors. The classical commonplace was for the man to perceive even his lady's faults as endearing qualities. Ovid—who apparently knew all there is to know about love—initially registers this masculine trait and then gives the antidote for it; if a girl rejects you, reverse your attitude, construing her good points as bad. Lyly reproduces this Ovidian remedy, but without mentioning its opposite, the lover's natural tendency to turn his lady's faults into positive attributes.

It is only when Lyly's satire is set against the background of the ancient writers that his use of an old device—as well as the distinctiveness of his treatment of it—become apparent. It was in *Euphues* that Shakespeare found just the model he needed for Beatrice's posture toward men. (Indeed, it is even arguable that the conception of this man-hater came from Lyly.) The influence of *Euphues* on Hero's portrait of Beatrice is clearly established by the style: Shakespeare follows Lyly in prefacing each phrase of reversal with the conjunction *if* ("if fair-fac'd," "if black," "if tall," etc.). Moreover, Shakespeare's "if tall" and "if silent" are identical to characteristics in Lyly, while his "if low" and "if speaking" are equivalent in meaning to Lyly's "if short" and "if full of words."

It would be a mistake, however, to ascribe to Lyly the exclusive inspiration for Hero's description of Beatrice's negativity; the closest parallel to Shakespeare's contrastive pair "if fair-fac'd ... if black ..." remains Plato's "the swarthy ... the white. ..." It is reasonable to assume that both Shakespeare and Lyly knew the classical texts cited above, given the standard educational readings of the time and these authors' level of cultural literacy; however, I believe that Shakespeare imitated the motif found in *Euphues* because it coincides exactly with the character he wished to portray in Beatrice.

An awareness of the age-old topos of the "inversion of values," as applied to lovers, allows us to identify—for the first time—Beatrice's criticism of her wooers as a rhetorical commonplace. An acquaintance with the motif also tells us something about Beatrice's personality: since the time of Plato, it has been considered natural for lovers to excuse their beloveds' faults, praising their physical and mental blemishes as positive attributes; by inverting that tradition, Beatrice reveals a serious psychological flaw of her own. Seeing herself harshly reflected in her cousin's verbal mirror, Beatrice lowers her defense and allows herself to fall in love with the accomplished (though of course imperfect) courtier that is Benedick. Although this denouement is placed in doubt by Beatrice's habit of reversing the ancient custom whereby lovers turn their sweethearts' defects into virtues, the fact that the name Beatrice means "she who blesses," while Benedick means "he who is blessed," hints from the very beginning of the play that these two will end up happily wedded. 14
Notes

2. See, for example, Ad de Vries, Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery, 2d ed. (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1976), 14 E and I 4, respectively.
3. See The Plays of William Shakespeare, with notes by Samuel Johnson and George Steevens, ed. Isaac Reed, 15 vols. (London: Longman, 1793), Vol. 4, pp. 463-64. Since that time, however, few scholars have appreciated the significance of the parallel. Two editors of Much Ado who have reproduced the passages from Euphues are George Lyman Kittredge ([Boston: Ginn, 1941] p. 113) and Humphreys (p. 146), although neither mentions the motif of the “reversal of values” or the classical antecedents. The most recent editor of the play, F. H. Mares (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988), follows the great majority of his predecessors in failing to cite the Euphues parallels.
5. This limited motif of the indulgent suitor is an offshoot of the much larger topos of the “inversion of values,” which usually deplores the decadence into which a state or society has fallen, with corrupt or weak individuals being preferred over more worthy ones. This broader commonplace is likewise much older than the more restricted amorous motif, going back to Thucydides (III, 82, 4-8) and reappearing in such writers as Isocrates (Areopagitica, 20; Antidosis, 283-84), Plato (The Republic, VIII, 560 D), Cicero (Partitiones Oratoriae, XXIII, 81), Sallust (LI, 11), Seneca (Epistles, XLV, 7), Quintilian (III, vii, 25; VIII, vi, 36), Plutarch (Moralia, “How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend,” 74 B), and Juvenal (VIII, 30-38). The device continued throughout the Middle Ages (scattered documentations have been gathered for Spanish literature, for instance), and in the Renaissance was cultivated in particular by Erasmus (e.g., Enchiridion, LB V 16A: “We must merely be careful not to disguise a vice of nature with the name of virtue, calling depression gravity, harshness sternness, envy zeal, stinginess frugality, adulation friendliness, or scurility wit” [The Collected Works of Erasmus (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1988), Vol. 66, Spiritualia, ed. John W. O’Malley, p. 45]).
10. ll. 317-30, in The Art of Love, pp. 198-201; Mozley does not see the relationship between the two passages (which was pointed out to me by my friend and colleague Marvin Colker).
11. p. 103. The Ovidian sources are registered by Croll and Clemons.

12. We have already alluded to Lyly's use of Ovid (see nn. 4 and 11, above). Shakespeare's acquaintance with the general motif of the “inversion of values” is apparent in Beatrice's subsequent tirade against the lack of manliness (“But manhood is melted into curtsies, valour into compliment, and men are only turned into tongue, and trim ones too: he is now as valiant as Hercules that only tells a lie and swears it” [4.1.317-21]), and in a phrase from his Sonnet 66: “And simple truth [is] miscall'd simplicity” (cf. Horace, 63 and 66).


14. These meanings are noted by Humphreys and Mares in their editions (respectively, pp. 87-88 and 52), but neither draws any conclusions from them.
Much Ado about Nothing (Vol. 78)

Introduction

Much Ado about Nothing

For further information on the critical and stage history of Much Ado about Nothing, see SC, Volumes 8, 18, 31, 55, and 67.

Set in Messina, Sicily, Much Ado about Nothing (c. 1598) is generally considered Shakespeare's happiest comedy. It certainly remains one of his most popular—and most frequently performed—plays. Beneath the play's merriment, however, runs a strain of melancholy, because Much Ado about Nothing tells a powerful warning tale of the potential tragedy that can result from deception and miscommunication. The play has two plots. One centers around the wooing of Hero by the soldier-courtier Claudio, a courtship that is temporarily halted by the scheming of the play's villain, Don John. The other plot focuses on the “merry war” between the play's other romantic protagonists, Beatrice and Benedick. Modern audiences tend to identify most with the Beatrice/Benedick story, although scholars point out that Shakespeare intended it as the play's subplot rather than the primary plot. “The first thing to notice about Much Ado about Nothing is that the subplot overwhelms and overshadows the main plot,” claims W. H. Auden (1946). According to Paul and Miriam Mueschke (1967), however, Much Ado about Nothing centers on Hero and Claudio rather than on the more likeable Beatrice and Benedick because the troubled lovers more clearly illuminate the play's major theme: honor. The relationship between the two plots, as well as Claudio's role in the problematic main plot, are popular areas of critical study. Other areas of critical study include the role of rumor and false reports in the play, and the significance of the word “nothing” in the play's title.

Part of the problem with the play's Hero/Claudio story line is that, to modern audiences at least, Claudio appears as an inconsistent and discreditable lover who is too eager to assume the worst about his bride-to-be—character traits not worthy of a story's hero, as many commentators of the play have noted. Other scholars have come to the defense of Shakespeare's characterization of Claudio. Lodwick Hartley (1965) argues that Claudio's supposed inconsistencies can be explained when viewed as the actions of a soldier rather than of a courtier. Jeanne Addison Roberts (1987) suggests that Claudio represents Benedick in his callow youth—the Benedick whom Beatrice says she knew of old. Much of Much Ado about Nothing's comedy comes from the witty exchanges between Beatrice and Benedick. But, as C. O. Gardner (1977) points out, these two comic heroes are weighty characters “with an intense sense of individuality.” Marvin Felheim (see Further Reading) also notes that when they are alone, Beatrice and Benedick always speak in prose, which he says supports the “impression that there is a serious non- or antiromantic side to these Shakespearean comic lovers.” Many scholars have claimed that Beatrice and Benedick are “original” characters, drawn entirely from Shakespeare's imagination. Hugh H. Richmond (1979) believes, however, that literary sources for Beatrice and Benedick can be found, particularly in characters that appear in the Heptameron, a sixteenth-century collection of French tales. The other memorable comic character of Much Ado about Nothing is Dogberry, the vulgar, malapropism-spewing constable who ends up exposing Don John's scheme to block Claudio and Hero's marriage. Dogberry's ego seems to know no bounds, although, as John A. Allen (1973) asserts, he is not the only male character in the play who suffers from an exalted opinion of himself.

Much Ado about Nothing has been popular on the stage since Shakespeare's day. The witty banter of Beatrice and Benedick and the comical bumblings of Dogberry and the Watch have charmed audiences and made the play a success for centuries. Peter Marks (1998) reviews the 1998 Stratford Festival production of Much Ado at New York's City Center. Marks contends that the production was unremarkable and “short on laughs,” criticizes the sterile sets and unappealing costumes, and notes that there was no spark between Martha Henry's Beatrice and Brian Bedford's Benedick. Page R. Laws (2002) describes how New York's Aquila Theatre Company successfully turned Much Ado into a fun, giddy spoof of television's secret agent shows of the
1960s and 1970s. Laws notes that the extensive cutting of the play's original text and the deletion of characters did take their toll—the play's darker elements were lost and the characterization was weakened. However, the critic claims that the “gain in giddiness seemed worth the loss.” Toby Young (2002) declares that he was completely won over by the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2002 production of *Much Ado*, which was set in Mussolini's Italy. Young calls the production an “unapologetic crowd-pleaser” and particularly praises Nicholas Le Prevost's Benedick. Markland Taylor (2002) examines the Hartford Stage/Shakespeare Theater 2002 staging of the play directed by Mark Lamos. Taylor notes that the production was “surprisingly bloodless and lacking in spontaneity” and finds Karen Ziemba's shrewish Beatrice and Dan Snook's “cutely coy” Benedick unimpressive.

Hearsay plays a major role in the development of *Much Ado about Nothing*'s dual plots; it draws Claudio and Hero apart and Benedick and Beatrice together. As Steven Rose (1970) points out, hearsay also resolves both plots: in one, the Watch overhears the details of Don John's conspiracy to stop Claudio and Hero's marriage; in the other, Beatrice and Benedick are forced to reveal their love-sonnets to each other. Hearsay thus governs love in *Much Ado*—a point, Rose argues, that is central to understanding the play's more serious comment on “the essentially arbitrary nature of human passion.” Some scholars have suggested that Shakespeare set certain crucial scenes, such as the chamber-window scene in which Claudio and Don Pedro mistake Margaret for Hero, offstage in order to draw audiences' attention to the destructiveness of rumor and false reports. Mark Taylor (see Further Reading) proposes, however, that Shakespeare's failure to dramatize certain plot-driving scenes represents not the absence of something but the presence of the *nothing* suggested in the play's title. The significance of *Much Ado about Nothing*'s title has long intrigued scholars. Paul Jorgensen (1954) describes how Shakespeare's use of the word *nothing* in the title and text of *Much Ado* would have held significant, if sometimes ambiguous, religious and philosophical meanings for Elizabethan audiences. Many scholars have commented on how the play's title serves as a pun on the word *noting*, which can be defined as the act of observing and eavesdropping as well as the actual writing of physical notes. Anthony B. Dawson (1982) points out that notes are featured throughout the play—from the opening scene, when a note heralds the imminent arrival of Don Pedro and his soldiers to Messina, to the final scene, when the love of Beatrice and Benedick for each other is revealed through their handwritten love-sonnets. This last scene of the play, with its “rebirth” of Hero, comments Dolora Cunningham (see Further Reading), exemplifies how Shakespeare used wonder in his comedies. The audience, Cunningham says, is “expected to join the on-stage characters to contemplate with wonder—with amazement or astonishment or admiration—the unexpected turn of troubled events which lead to marriages and apparent happiness in the end.”

Criticism: Overviews And General Studies

W. H. Auden (essay date 1946)


*[In the following reconstructed lecture, originally delivered in 1946, Auden discusses how Shakespeare kept Much Ado about Nothing’s tragic subplot—the conspiracy of Don John—from overshadowing the play’s comic main plot: the romantic duel of wits between Beatrice and Benedick.]*

The first thing to notice about *Much Ado About Nothing* is that the subplot overwhelms and overshadows the main plot. The main plot consists of the story of Hero and Claudio and the conspiracy of Don John. Its sources are Bandello, Ariosto, and a Greek romance. Shakespeare treats the story perfunctorily, and except for Don John, it's boring. And Shakespeare shows some carelessness in putting it together: for example, Margaret—didn't she know what she was doing? And Borachio's plans to be called Claudio from the window don't come off—anyhow, Claudio is listening. The whole story is a foil to the duel of wits between Beatrice and Benedick.
How have we seen Shakespeare use the subplot? First, as a parallel. In *Love's Labour's Lost* Armado parallels the gentry—his affected language is a comment on Berowne's poetic affectations, and he has to accept Jacqueline, an inferior wife, as Berowne has to “jest a twelvemonth in an hospital” (V.ii.880). In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Bottom suffers from the same kinds of illusion as the lovers, and, like the lovers, he is eventually delivered from them. Shakespeare also uses the subplot as a contrast: Shylock is juxtaposed against Venetian life in *The Merchant of Venice*, and Falstaff is elaborately developed as a contrast to the heroic life of Hal and the nobles in *Henry IV*. There is also a very sketchy contrasting subplot in the *Comedy of Errors*—the tragic background of the father doomed to death unless he can raise the money to pay a large fine.

*Much Ado* provides another case of contrast, with the comic, light duel of wits in the foreground and the dark malice of Don John in the background. How does Shakespeare keep the tragic plot from getting too serious? He treats it perfunctorily as a background. This draws attention to an artistic point—the importance of boredom. In any first-class work of art, you can find passages that in themselves are extremely boring, but try to cut them out, as they are in an abridged edition, and you lose the life of the work. Don't think that art that is alive can remain on the same level of interest throughout—and the same is true of life.

The relation of pretense and reality is a major concern of the play, and the keys to understanding it can be found in two passages. One is Balthazar's song, “Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more” (II.iii.64-76). Where and how songs are placed in Shakespeare is revealing. Let's look first at two or three other examples. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, we have the song, “Who is Silvia? What is she, / That all our swains commend her?” (IV.ii.39-53). The song, which is sung to Silvia, has standard Petrarchan rhetoric—cruel fair, faithful lover—but the music is being used with conscious evil intent. Proteus, who has been false to his friend, has forsaken his vows to Julia, and is cheating Thurio, serenades Silvia while his forsaken Julia, disguised as a boy, listens:

**HOST.**

How now? Are you sadder than you were before? How do you, man? The music likes you not.

**JUL.**

You mistake, the musician likes me not.

**HOST.**

Why, my pretty youth?

**JUL.**

He plays false, father.

**HOST.**

How? Out of tune on the strings?

**JUL.**

Not so; but yet so false that he grieves my very heartstrings.

**HOST.**

You have a quick ear.
JUL.

Ay, I would I were deaf! It makes me have a slow heart.

HOST.

I perceive you delight not in music.

JUL.

Not a whit, when it jars so.

HOST.

Hark, what fine change is in the music!

JUL.

Ay, that change is the spite.

HOST.

You would have them always play but one thing?

JUL.

I would always have one play but one thing.

(IV.ii.54-72)

“O mistress mine, where are you roaming?” in Twelfth Night (II.iii.40-53), which is sung to Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek, is in the “Gather ye rosebuds” tradition, but taken seriously the lines suggest the voice of elderly lust, not youth, and Shakespeare makes us conscious of this by making the audience for the song a pair of aging drunks. In Measure for Measure, the betrayed Mariana is serenaded by a boy in a song that does not help her forget her unhappiness but indulges it. Being the deserted lady has become a role. The words of the song “Take, O, take those lips away” (IV.i.1-6) mirrors her situation exactly, and her apology to the Duke when he surprises her gives her away:

I cry you mercy, sir, and well could wish
You had not found me here so musical.
Let me excuse me, and believe me so,
My mirth it much displeas'd, but pleas'd my woe.

(IV.i.10-13)

In each of these three cases, the setting criticizes the song's convention. The same is true in Much Ado About Nothing. The serenade convention is turned upside down in Balthazar's song, and its effect is to suggest that we shouldn't take sad lovers too seriously. The song is sung to Claudio and Don Pedro for the benefit of Benedick, who is overhearing it, as they plot to make him receptive to loving Beatrice. In the background, also, is the plot of Borachio and Don John against Claudio.

Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more!
Men were deceivers ever,
One foot in sea, and one on shore;
To one thing constant never.
Then sigh not so,
But let them go,
And be you blithe and bonny,
Converting all your sounds of woe
Into Hey nonny, nonny.

Sing no more ditties, sing no moe,
Of dumps so dull and heavy!
The fraud of men was ever so,
Since summer first was leavy.
Then sigh not so, &c.

(II.iii.64-76)

Claudio, in his dreamy love-sick state, is shortly to prove such a lover as the song describes, and Benedick, who thinks himself immune to love, is shortly to acknowledge his love for Beatrice. If one imagines the sentiments of the song being an expression of character, the only character they suit is Beatrice, and I do not think it is too far-fetched to imagine that the song arouses in Benedick's mind an image of Beatrice, the tenderness of which alarms him. The violence of his comment when the song is over is suspicious: “An he had been a dog that should have howl'd thus, they would have hang'd him; and I pray God, his bad voice bode no mischief. I had as live have heard the night raven, come what plague could have come after it” (II.iii.81-85).

Historically and individually there are new discoveries, like courtly love, which create novelty and give new honesty to new feelings. As time goes on, the discovery succeeds because of its truth. Then the convention petrifies and is employed by people whose feelings are quite different. Petrarchan rhetoric had its origin in a search for personal fidelity versus arranged marriage, and was then used to make love to a girl for an evening. To dissolve the over-petrified sentiments and unreality of a convention, one must apply intelligence. “Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more” is Petrarchan convention seen comically through the lens of a critical intelligence.

Man must be an actor, and one always has to play with ideas before one can make them real. But one must not forget one is playing and mix up play with reality. When Antonio tries to comfort his brother Leonato about Hero, Leonato resists his counsel:

My griefs cry louder than advertisement.

ANT.

Therein do men from children nothing differ.

LEON.

I pray thee peace. I will be flesh and blood;

For there was never yet philosopher

That could endure the toothache patiently,

However they have writ the style of gods

And made a push at chance and sufferance.

(V.i.32-38)
This is the other key to the issue of pretense and reality in Much Ado: just as feeling can petrify, there can be a false rhetoric of reason that genuine grief can detect. Too much concern for play widens the gap between convention and reality, resulting in either a brutal return to reality or a flight to a rival convention. Leonato’s grief is not real—it is an expression of social embarrassment. Antonio, though he tries to console Leonato, is the one who really grieves, as his curses against Claudio and Don Pedro for their lack of faith show:

\[
\text{God knows I lov'd my niece,}
\]

And she is dead, slander'd to death by villains,
That dare as well answer a man indeed
As I dare take a serpent by the tongue.
Scambling, outfacing, fashion-monging boys,
That lie and cog and flout, deprave and slander.

(V.i.87-91, 94-95)

So it is Antonio who really feels, Leonato who puts on an act.

Beatrice and Benedick are essentially people of good will—their good will and honesty are what create their mockery and duels of wit. Don John is honest and cynical, but behind that is ill will. All three characters are intelligent, able, and honest. Much Ado About Nothing is not one of Shakespeare’s best plays, but Benedick and Beatrice are the most lovable, amusing, and good people—the best of combinations—he ever created. They are the characters of Shakespeare we’d most like to sit next to at dinner. The great verbal dexterity of Beatrice and Benedick is paralleled by the great verbal ineptitude of Dogberry, an ineptitude which itself becomes art. All three love words and have good will—they are divided in verbal skill and intelligence. The honest, original people in the play use prose, the conventional people use verse. A general criticism of an Elizabethan sonneteer is that he is too “poetic.” Every poet has to struggle against “poetry”—in quotes. The real question for the poet is what poetic language will show the true sensibility of the time.

Much Ado About Nothing is full of deception and pretense. Benedick and Beatrice fool themselves into believing they don’t love each other—they mistake their reactions against the conventions of love for lovelessness. Claudio, Hero, and Don Pedro pretend to Benedick and Beatrice that the two love each other, and—with good will—they use Benedick and Beatrice to bolster their own conventions of love. Don John, Borachio, and Margaret’s pretense, on the other hand, is animated by pure malice and ill will. Their deception succeeds because those who are deceived are conventionally-minded. They are stupid and don’t recognize malice, unlike Benedick, who at once suspects Don John (IV.i.189-90), and Beatrice, who at once believes that Hero is innocent (IV.i.147).

Claudio turns away from Hero, Hero faints instead of standing up for herself, and Leonato is taken in by Don John’s pretense because he doesn’t want to believe that princes lie—he’s a snob. When Beatrice says that she was not Hero’s bedfellow on the night in question, though she has been so for a twelvemonth, Leonato declares:

\[
\text{Confirm'd, confirm'd! O, that is stronger made}
\text{Which was before barr'd up with ribs of iron!}
\text{Would the two princes lie? And Claudio lie,}
\text{Who lov'd her so that, speaking of her foulness,}
\text{Wash'd it with tears? Hence from her! Let her die.}
\]

(V.i.151-55)

Leonato and Hero subsequently follow the Friar’s advice to pretend that Hero is dead and to disguise her as a cousin—yet more pretense. And, finally, Dogberry pretends to know language and to be wiser than he is.
The individual versus the universal. Among animals there is no universal like marriage or justice—only man can be false by following his nature. A human being is composed of a combination of nature and spirit and individual will. Laws are established to help defend his will against nature and to get the individual meaningfully related to the universal. When the individual has only an abstract relation with the universal, there is a hollow rhetoric and falsity on both sides. There are three possibilities in relating to law. First is the defiant rebel, who is a destructive misfit. Second is the conformist, whose relation to law remains abstract. And third is the creative, original person, where the individual relation to law is vivifying and good on both sides. Don John the bastard is in the first, temperamentally melancholic, group. Don John uses that temperament to take a negative position outside the group, like Shylock, as opposed to a character like Faulconbridge, who is an outsider with a positive attitude. “I thank you,” Don John says sullenly to Leonato at the start of the play, “I am not of many words, but I thank you.” (I.i.158-59). To Conrade, who advises him to behave more ingratiatingly to his brother Don Pedro, he says, I had rather be a canker in a hedge than a rose in his grace, and it better fits my blood to be d

CON.

Can you make no use of your discontent?

JOHN.

I make all use of it, for I use it only.

Who comes here? What news, Borachio?

BORA.

I came yonder from a great supper. The Prince your brother is royally entertain'd by Leonato, and

JOHN.

Will it serve for any model to build mischief on? What is he for a fool that betroths himself to

(I.iii.28-50)

Don John's discontent is infinite. His view of marriage is superficially like Benedick and Beatrice's, but his motive is the hatred of happiness. Like the Devil, he wants to be unique. He has little feeling, great intelligence, and great will.

Claudio is chief among the conventional characters—characters who are either functions of the universal or are destroyed by it. Claudio has some intelligence, some feeling, and very little will. Don Pedro has to coax him to declare his love for Hero. When Claudio asks whether Leonato has a son, he's indirectly saying he wants to marry for money, an attitude that Benedick's honesty has already detected: “Would you buy her, that you enquire after her?” (I.i.181-82). There's some conventional stuff about his having been at war and having had no time for love. He really wants to get married—no matter to whom, and he turns to entirely conventional forms of love-making. Benedick says of him,

I have known when there was no music with him but the drum and fife; and now had he rather hear the tabor and the pipe. I have known when he would have walk'd ten mile afoot to see a good armour; and now will he lie ten nights awake carving the fashion of a new doublet. He was wont to speak plain and to the purpose, like an honest man and a soldier; and now is
he turn’d orthography; his words are a very fantastical banquet—just so many strange dishes.

(II.iii.13-23)

Claudio is a conventional tough soldier, a conventional Petrarchan lover—and his jealousy is conventional, expressed in conventional puns: “fare thee well, most foul, most fair! Farewell, / Thou pure impiety and impious purity!” (IV.i.104-5). The remedy for the conventional is the exceptional: Hero’s supposed death makes him a killer, and he is punished by being forced to marry her “cousin,” which proves that he’s not an individual. The song Claudio sings for Hero in the churchyard, “Pardon, goddess of the night” (V.iii.12-21) is a suitably bad song that keeps the tragedy cursory. Don Pedro and Claudio skip off to the final reconciliation nonchalantly.

Now to the people who are both critical and creative. The conventions of love-making are criticized in the courtship of Berowne and Rosaline in Love’s Labour’s Lost, in which Rosaline is superior, and in the courtship and marriage of Petruchio and Katherina in The Taming of the Shrew, in which Petruchio is superior. Benedick and Beatrice mark the first time that both sides are equally matched. Both are critics of Petrarchan convention, and both hate sentimentality because they value feeling. When they really love, they speak directly:

BENE.

I do love nothing in the world so well as you. Is not that strange?

BEAT.

As strange as the thing I know not. It were as possible for me to say I loved nothing so well as

BENE.

By my sword, Beatrice, thou lovest me.

BEAT.

Do not swear, and eat it.

BENE.

I will swear by it that you love me, and I will make him eat it that says I love not you.

BEAT.

Will you not eat your word?

BENE.

With no sauce that can be devised to it. I protest I love thee.

BEAT.

Why then, God forgive me!

BENE.

What offence, sweet Beatrice?
BEAT.

You have stayed me in a happy hour. I was about to protest I loved you.

BENE.

And do it with all thy heart.

BEAT.

I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest.

BENE.

Come, bid me do anything for thee.

BEAT.

Kill Claudio.

(IV.i.269-91)

Beatrice wants action here, though Benedick is right in thinking Claudio is not entirely responsible.

Beatrice and Benedick have a high ideal of marriage. Before the dance, Beatrice kids Hero:

For, hear me Hero: wooing, wedding, and repenting is as a Scotch jig, a measure, and a cinque-pace:

LEON.

Cousin, you apprehend passing shrewdly.

BEAT.

I have a good eye, uncle; I can see a church by daylight.

(II.i.75-86)

Beatrice and Benedick demand a combination of reason and will, a combination Benedick displays in the soliloquy in which he resolves to love Beatrice after hearing how she loves him:

This can be no trick. The conference was sadly borne; they have the truth of this from Hero; they seem to pity the lady. It seems her affections have their full bent. Love me? Why, it must be requited. I hear how I am censur’d. They say I will bear myself proudly if I perceive the love come from her. They say too that she will rather die than give any sign of affection. I did never think to marry. I must not seem proud. Happy are they that hear their detractions and can put them to mending. They say the lady is fair—’tis a truth, I can bear them witness; and virtuous—’tis so, I cannot reprove it; and wise, but for loving me—by my troth, it is no addition to her wit, nor no great argument of her folly, for I will be horribly in love with her. I may chance have some odd quirks and remnants of wit broken on me because I have railed so long against marriage. But doth not the appetite alter? A man loves the meat in his youth that he cannot endure in his age. Shall quips and sentences and these paper bullets of the brain awe a man from the career of his humour? No, the world must be peopled. When I said I would die
a bachelor, I did not think I should live till I were married.

(II.iii.228-53)

Benedick's reasons are not those of feelings. Conventional people protest in a rhetoric of feeling.

There is a gay conclusion for Benedick and Beatrice. At the end one feels absolutely confident of the success of their marriage, more than of other marriages in Shakespeare. They have creative intelligence, good will, a lack of sentimentality, and an ability to be open and direct with each other in a society in which such directness is uncommon. For us, the modern convention of "honesty" is now the danger. People must learn to hide things from each other a little more. We need a post-Freudian-analytic rhetoric.

The play presents law in a comic setting. Dogberry is an imperfect human representation of the law, and he's conceited. He and the Watch don't understand what's happening, and they succeed more by luck than ability. Dogberry's "line" is like Falstaff's, but he's not against law. He says to the Watch and Verges,

If you meet a thief, you may suspect him, by virtue of your office, to be no true man; and for su

2. Watch.

If we know him to be a thief, shall we not lay hands on him?

DOG.

Truly, by your office you may; but I think they that touch pitch will be defil'd. The most peacea VERG.

You have been always called a merciful man, partner.

(III.iii.52-65)

Dogberry and his company do indeed raise the problem of mercy versus justice. They are successful against probability, and that they are suggests (1) that police are dangerous because they become like crooks in dealing with crooks, and (2) that good nature pays off better than efficiency. Efficiency at the expense of kindness must be checked, which is more a British than an American attitude.

A contrast between light and dark is always present in Shakespeare. It is made explicit in *Much Ado About Nothing* in the contrast Don Pedro draws, after visiting Hero's tomb, between kindness and the possibilities of malice and tragedy, between the gentle day and the wolves of prey:

Good morrow, masters. Put your torches out. The wolves have prey'd, and look, the gentle day, Before the wheels of Phoebus, round about Dapples the drowsy east with spots of grey. Thanks to you all, and leave us. Fare you well.

(V.iii.24-27)

With this passage in mind, let me conclude by reading from Rimbaud's "Génie":

He is affection and the present since he has made the house open to foamy winter and to the murmure of summer—he who has purified food and drink—he who is the charm of fleeing
places and the super-human delight of stations.—He is affection and the future, love and force
whom we, standing among our rages and our boredoms, see passing in the stormy sky and
banners of ecstasy.

And we remember him and he has gone on a journey … And if Adoration goes, rings, his
promise rings: “Away! superstitions, away! those ancient bodies, those couples, and those
ages. It is this present epoch that has foundered!”

He will not go away, he will not come down again from any heaven, he will not accomplish
the redemption of the angers of women and the gaieties of men and all this Sin: for it is done,
he being and being loved.

He has known us all and all of us has loved; take heed this winter night, from cape to cape,
from the tumultuous pole to the castle, from the crowd to the shore, from look to look, force
and feelings weary, to hail him, to see him and to send him away, and under the tides and
high in the deserts of snow, to follow his views,—his breaths,—his body,—his day.

Ruth Nevo (essay date 1980)

[In the following essay, originally published in 1980, Nevo suggests that by putting the Hero/Claudio and
Beatrice/Benedick plots in Much Ado about Nothing on equal footing, Shakespeare focused our attention on
the conflicting motifs of the play.]

Much Ado about Nothing contrasts notably with the early Shrew, which is similarly structured in terms of
antithetical couples, not only in its greater elegance of composition and expression, but in its placing of the
comic initiative in the hands of its vivacious heroine Beatrice. In both plays, as indeed in all of the comedies,
courtly love conventions and natural passion, affection and spontaneity, romance and realism, or style and
substance, saying and believing, simulation and dissimulation interlock; while the dual or agonistic structure
of courtship allows for reversals, exchanges and chiastic repositionings of those contraries during the dynamic
progress of the plots. In Much Ado, moreover, Shakespeare modifies his usual multiple-plot practice. He
normally has a sub- or midplot which functions as a distorting mirror for the main plot, exaggerating to a
degree of positive aberration the deficiencies adumbrated in the latter, while the lower-order fools provide at
once a ridicule of the middle characters and a foil for the higher recognitions of the higher ones. As
Salingar points out, “it appears to be necessary for the lovers to act out their fantasies, and to meet living
images or parodies of themselves before they can rid themselves of their affectations and impulsive
mistakes.” Here, however, as in The Shrew, it is at first blush hard to tell which is model and which parody.
Beatrice and Benedick's unorthodox views on marriage are a parody of normal conventions and so confirm
Hero and Claudio in their soberer ways. Only later do we perceive that it is the conventionality, and
subsequent frailty, of the Hero/Claudio relationship that provides a flattering reflector for the freewheeling,
impulsive, individualist demands of Beatrice and Benedick.

That it is the authenticity of the subplot Beatrice-Benedick relationship which is finally paramount is vouched
for by the response of audiences. From its earliest appearances the play was received as the story of Beatrice
and Benedick—Charles I himself is a royal witness. But this again does not do justice to the whole. D. P.
Young would have us “stop speaking of plot and sub-plot in Shakespearean comedy” altogether, finding the
“uniqueness of the form” in the mirroring of themes in all the strands of action. But it is the specific
equilibrium of the two plots in Much Ado, with Hero and Claudio remaining insistently, and not only
formally, the official main protagonists, and Beatrice and Benedick challenging their monopoly of attention,
which buttresses our perception of the dialectic of contraries the play embodies. As Alexander Leggatt has
skillfully argued, in opposition to those who tend to ignore Hero and Claudio, or to find them insipid or pasteboard figures:

The love affair of Beatrice and Benedick, so naturally conceived, so determined by individual character, is seen, at bottom, as a matter of convention. In praising its psychological reality we should not overlook how much the pleasure it gives depends on the essential, impersonal rhythm it shares with the other story.

Benedick and Beatrice are the latest in a line of heretics and mockers and the most complex. In the earlier comedies the lover is perceived as the absurd and predictable victim of his love-longing and his lady's imperious aloofness, and is mocked by impudent individualists like Speed and Moth. Shakespeare's dialogue with the courtly lover has advanced in stages, and by the constant locating and relocating of couples in dynamic opposition to each other. In The Comedy of Errors it is the Antipholus twins who are opposing doubles: one the worried, married man—a realist; the other the ardent and idealistic courtly lover. In The Shrew there is a neat reversal of oppositions which foreshadows Much Ado: the antiromantic couple find love-in-marriage, the apparently ardent lovers find cold comfort in theirs. In The Two Gentlemen doubles appear again, more complexly, in Valentine the devoted ex-heretic, and Proteus the treacherous ex-votary of courtly love. The deadlocking of these extremes is resolved only by the substantial presence of the loving Julia. In Love's Labour's Lost all the men—initially heretics—become courtly-love romantics, while all the women play the role of satirical realists. Berowne, who mocks love, both style and substance, becomes an advocate and acolyte of the very dolce stil nuovo he formerly disdained. But he can still be fooled by a reliance on rhetoric which lacks real substance, as Rosaline points out. The conventions and the substance of courtly love are turned upside down for the doubled couples in A Midsummer Night's Dream, but balance is restored through the “cure” of the married lovers. Anne Page and Fenton, those honest bourgeois lovers, have no romantic style, overshadowed as they are by the matrimonial problems of the stout matrons of Windsor; but they sensibly make off, leaving their worthy parents to patch up their marriages as best they may. Now Benedick and Beatrice, forewarned apparently, disavow love, placing no faith in its conventional vows and protestations, but are very much affected by the substance of the passion; while for Claudio and the compliant Hero the courtly love conventions camouflage a courtship of convenience, the substance of which will be tested and found wanting. Further turns are to come. Rosalind, deeper in love than there are fathoms to measure it, becomes a pert Moth herself, mocks her sonneteer lover, and exposes the conventional style of the quasi-courtly lovers Phebe and Silvius as very cold Pastoral and quite empty of substance; while Orsino, the very impersonation of the courtly-love style, is liberated from its insubstantiality by the substantial discovery of a girl in his personable young page's clothes. And there the dialectic rests, a romantic heroine having been created whose various follies, acted out, prove transcendentally beneficial, and whose self-assured wit can contain even what Leggatt calls “the comically unoriginal situation of being in love.”

What is wanting at the outset of Much Ado is a match for Claudio, and a match for the high-spirited Lady Beatrice—the two “matches” are poised against each other in double antithesis. Claudio, back from the wars and eager to “drive liking to the name of love,” replies gratefully and decorously to the Duke's offer of intercession:

How sweetly you do minister to love,  
That know love's grief by his complexion!  

(1.1.312-13)

But already in act 1, scene 1, Claudio's “Hath Leonato any son, my Lord?” alerts us to the substance behind the rhetoric of “Can the world buy such a jewel?” “Seven hundred pounds, and possibilities, is a good gift” as Evans sensibly put it in The Merry Wives. Matchmaking is afoot and Claudio has a weather eye for material circumstances. “Love's griefs, and passions” are perfunctory, the accepted, conventional, romantic rhetoric
which masks a relation essentially impersonal. Claudio is asking “Who is Hero, what is she?” but his enquiries it will be noticed, are about others’ opinions of her, with which to endorse her value for him. And the Prince's agreement to act proxy suitor for him is both further endorsement that the match is desirable, and further indication of the absence of need on Claudio's part for the direct challenges and intimacies of courtship. He does, when he feels himself cheated, bitterly exclaim:

Therefore all hearts in love use their own tongues.
Let every eye negotiate for itself,
And trust no agent; for beauty is a witch
Against whose charms faith melteth into blood.

(2.1.177-80)

But his eye is on the treachery of the proxy suitor, not on the object of his attentions.

Nothing could be more appropriate than that such a relationship should be vulnerable to the slightest breath of scandal. Nor that in the church scene Claudio should utter the contemptuous

There, Leonato, take her back again.
Give not this rotten orange to your friend.

(4.1.31-32)

He is accusing a business associate of bad faith in the conveyance of shoddy goods, and blatantly violating all accepted convention to do so. But he also thereby gives expression to the animosity latent behind the chivalric mask. Poor Hero faints away under the shock, as well she might. For this is her world upside down—a nightmare of hostility, a midsummer night's dream without benefit of magic, and a revelation of the hollowness and inauthenticity of their relationship.

The match has been counterfeit; its romantic rhetoric camouflage for purely practical proprieties and proprietorships; and it is consonant with the exquisite symmetry of this play that Claudio's second wedding, formally reversing the ill effects of the first, is with an anonymous and unknown—a camouflaged—bride. It is her anonymity, however, that turns out to be, mercifully, counterfeit. Unreconstructed aggressiveness has been exorcized in the church scene and the ritual expiation makes possible a second chance.

Against this pair, stand Beatrice and Benedick. These would-be lords and owners of their faces are sturdily nonconformist. “I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me” (1.1.131-32). Thus Beatrice, and Benedick is of a similar mind: “God keep your ladyship still in that mind! so some gentleman or other shall scape a predestinate scratched face” (1.1.133-35). Benedick is a professed tyrant to the opposite sex, an “obstinate heretic in the despite of beauty” (1.1.234-35), and Beatrice, too, a confirmed “batchelor”:

For hear me, Hero: wooing, wedding, and repenting, is as a Scotch jig, a measure, and a cinquepace; the first suit is hot and hasty, like a Scotch jig, and full as fantastical; the wedding, mannerly-modest, as a measure, full of state and ancientry; and then comes repentance, and with his bad legs falls into the cinquepace faster and faster, till he sink into his grave.

(2.1.72-80)

In these two hostility is not latent but flagrantly proclaimed. They give each other no quarter in the merry war. Benedick is a braggart, a stuffed man, little wiser than a horse, as fickle as fashion itself, caught like a disease, the prince's jester, a dull fool; it is a dear happiness to women that he loves none. Beatrice is Lady Disdain,
Lady Tongue, a parrot teacher, a chatterer, a harpy; he will go to the world's end rather than hold three words with her. However, though they maintain loudly that they cannot stand each other it does not require superhuman powers of perception to observe the marked interest, little short of obsession, they take in each other.

It is no other than Signior Mountanto that Beatrice enquires about, and no other than Beatrice who occurs to Benedick as the model with which to compare Hero, to the latter's disadvantage: “There's her cousin, and she were not possess'd with a fury, exceeds her as much in beauty as the first of May doth the last of December” (1.1.190-92). Their antiromantic posture is therefore also a mask, as has frequently been noted, aggressive-defensive and designed to forestall the very pain it inflicts. For example, “I wonder that you will still be talking, Signior Benedick, nobody marks you” (1.1.116-17), is an interesting opening ploy. It translates into a whole set of messages. First of all, someone does. She does. Clearly she has, provocatively, caught his attention, when (we infer) he was ostentatiously not marking her. Then, I wish no one did mark you, you great fool, not being marked being the greatest punishment possible to a boaster like yourself, and therefore a good revenge. Revenge for what? Not for your not having marked me, certainly. Don't imagine that I mark you, or that you are the least important to me, or that I in the least care whether you mark, marked, or will mark me. “What, my dear Lady Disdain! Are you yet living?” (1.1.118-19). And they are off.

What came between these two in the past is half concealed and half revealed. One infers a quarrel: “In our last conflict four of his five wits went halting off, and now is the whole man govern'd with one; so that if he have wit enough to keep himself warm, let him bear it for a difference between himself and his horse” (1.1.65-70). One infers a roving eye on Benedick's part: “He set up his bills here in Messina and challeng’d Cupid at the flight” (1.1.39-40) and “He wears his faith but as the fashion of his hat: it ever changes with the next block” (1.1.75-77). Later, we hear explicitly: “Indeed, my lord, he lent it [his heart] me awhile, and I gave him use for it, a double heart for his single one. Marry, once before he won it of me with false dice, therefore your Grace may well say I have lost it” (2.1.278-82).

Benedick's protestations too, partly conventionalized caution against cuckoldry, smack of the once bitten, who now demonstratively projects an image of invulnerability: “Prove that ever I lose more blood with love than I will get again with drinking, pick out mine eyes with a ballad-maker's pen, and hang me up at the door of a brothel-house for the sign of blind Cupid” (1.1.250-54). “Alas, poor hurt fowl! Now will he creep into sedges” (2.1.202-3), says Benedick of Claudio, whose proxy wooer has stolen his girl, it seems; and immediately reverts to his own affront: “But that my Lady Beatrice should know me, and not know me!” (2.1.203-4). A similar image appears again, significantly, just before the gulling of Beatrice:

For look where Beatrice like a lapwing runs
Close by the ground, to hear our conference.

(3.1.24-25)

One infers wounded susceptibilities on both sides and one therefore perceives that where Claudio's idealization of love-and-marriage is the packaging he and his milieu regard as suitable for an eminently practical and profitable marriage arrangement, these others deidealize love and marriage as an insurance against a recurrence of loss.

At the masked ball the comic disposition of Messina is paradigmatically dramatized. Hearsay and conjecture dominate. That the Prince woos for himself is assumed by all, and how can one know with so much rumour about? The point about the limitations of knowledge and the tendency to jump to conclusions is made graphically by the masked ball itself. Pedro and Hero evidently recognize each other. Margaret and Balthasar (possibly) don't; Ursula knows Antonio, whom she recognized by the wagging of his head and whom she flatters upon his excellent wit, though he swears he counterfeits. What of Beatrice and Benedick? Who is
pretending? Does Benedick, recognizing her, take the opportunity of a gibe about her having her wit out of the *Hundred Merry Tales*? Does Beatrice, as he evidently believes, not recognize him and therefore speak from the heart when she calls him “the Prince’s jester”? Or is this taunt her knowing revenge for Benedick’s gibe about the *Hundred Merry Tales*? Which possibility is confirmed by Benedick’s soliloquy after the ball: “But that my Lady Beatrice should know me, and not know me”? Does he mean at the ball specifically, or in general? Is he angry at not being recognized, or at not being appreciated? These two take particular pride in their wit, it will be noticed, and no affront will be less easily forgiven than disparagament on that score. Whether both now assume that the other really means the wounding things he or she says, or both know that the other was intentionally meaning to wound, a new turn is giving to the warfare between them. We no longer witness the reflection of an old quarrel but the quick of a new one. There is no reason, however, why the spiral should ever stop since the dynamics of self-defence will ensure that the more they pretend to ignore each other the more they will fail, and the more wounded their self-esteem will become. It is a knot too hard for them to untie, but fortunately there are plotters at hand.

The comic disposition of Messina is thus to be taken in: to dissimulate, or simulate, to be deceived by appearance, or by rumors. The sophisticates go further. They do not believe what they really want to believe, or do believe what they perversely do not want to believe. “I should think this a gull, but that the white-bearded fellow speaks it. Knavery cannot sure hide himself in such reverence” (2.3.118-20). Or, for that matter, they believe what they really do not want to believe, like Leonato, who says in the church scene

> Would the two princes lie, and Claudio lie, Who lov’d her so, that speaking of her foulness, Wash’d it with tears?

(4.1.152-54)

It is, indeed, precisely the last of the logical possibilities that the remedy in this play must bring about, causing both couples, reassured, really to believe what they really want to believe without recourse to defence or counterdefence maskings.

Even the good Dogberry masks his ineptitude with liberal borrowings from the learned languages but—a tertiary irony—when he most desires that Borachio’s aspersion of assdom be recorded, so that the mockery of the law it implies be made public, all that he succeeds in making public is the open and palpable truth of the aspersion. Masking in this play is a fertile generator of dialectical ironies.

Only Don John, who despises “flattering honest men,” cannot hide what he is. He would rather “be disdain’d of all than to fashion a carriage to rob love from any,” and boasts of not wearing a mask—he is a plain-dealing villain, he says. But this is *his* illusion, of course, since in his plot to defame Hero he does precisely “fashion a carriage,” and it is only that sharp lot, the constabulary, who capture the deformed thief Fashion wearing “a key in his ear and a lock hanging by it” (5.1.308-9)—a piece of creatively significant nonsense—that save the day.

The comic device—both eavesdropping tricks—ironically both deception and source of truth, is perfectly adapted to mesh with, exacerbate and finally exorcize this comic disposition. One eavesdropping stratagem is benignly plotted by the well-meaning Duke who aims to bring Signior Benedick and the Lady Beatrice into a mountain of affection “th’ one with th’ other,” the other malignly staged by Don John who aims to cross the marriage his brother has arranged; and both are marvellously counterpointed by the inadvertent overhearings of those stalwart guardians of the law and the city—Dogberry’s watch. It is worth noticing that when the first plot of Don John fails he at once sets about devising another, any marriage his legitimate brother arranges being grist to his mill; and the failed plot at the masked ball deftly gives us advance notice of the play’s modalities of masking and mistaking, of tests and testimonies.
Don Pedro's plot provides the plotters with the opportunity to tease their victims with some home-truths real or imagined. On the men's side:

DON Pedro:
She doth well. If she should make tender of her love, 'tis very possible he'll scorn it, for the
CLAUDIO:
He is a very proper man.
DON Pedro:
He hath indeed a good outward happiness.
CLAUDIO:
Before God, and in my mind, very wise.
DON Pedro:
He doth indeed show some sparks that are like wit.
CLAUDIO:
And I take him to be valiant.
DON Pedro:
As Hector, I assure you, and in the managing of quarrels you may say he is wise, for either he av
(2.3.178-90)

And the women's:

HERO:
But nature never fram'd a woman's heart
Of prouder stuff than that of Beatrice.
Disdain and scorn ride sparkling in her eyes,
Misprising what they look on, and her wit
Values itself so highly that to her
All matter else seems weak. She cannot love,
Nor take no shape nor project of affection,
She is so self-endeared.
(3.1.49-56)
But the cream of the jest in the eavesdropping scenes is that those who speak the truth believe that they are inventing it.

Beatrice and Benedick are thus equivocally provided with apparently "objective" testimony concerning the real state of the other's affections, and the defensive strategy each adopted becomes supererogatory. Benedick, abandoning his armour, contrives to preserve some semblance of a complacent self-image:

Happy are they that hear their detractions, and can put them to mending.... I may chance have some odd quirks and remnants of wit broken on me, because I have rail'd so long against marriage; but doth not the appetite alter? A man loves the meat in his youth that he cannot endure in his age. Shall quips and sentences and these paper bullets of the brain awe a man from the career of his humor? No, the world must be peopled. When I said I would die a bachelor, I did not think I should live till I were married.

(2.3.229-44)

But Beatrice abandons hers with an immediate generous contrition:

Can this be true?
Stand I condemn'd for pride and scorn so much?
Contempt, farewell, and maiden pride, adieu!
No glory lives behind the back of such.
And, Benedick, love on, I will requite thee,
 Taming my wild heart to thy loving hand.

(3.1.107-12)

Whether Beatrice and Benedick were hiding their real selves until reassurances of reciprocity overcame psychological barriers, or whether they were caused to suffer love by the magic of knowing themselves recipients of affection, they both abandon themselves to the fantasy of love. Their status, however, as objects of comic mockery is skillfully preserved by the necessary time lag of the contrivance. When Benedick is convinced that he is loved while Beatrice is still her old self, the folly of rationalization displays itself at large before our very eyes. Benedick's response to Beatrice's as yet untransformed scorn is ingenuity itself, at work upon most unpromising material:

Ha! "Against my will I am sent to bid you come in to dinner"—there's a double meaning in that. "I took no more pains for those thanks than you took pains to thank me"—that's as much as to say, "Any pains that I take for you is as easy as thanks."

(2.3.257-62)

And when each in his or her transformed state—transformed be it noted into the very style of suffering love they originally ridiculed—when each meets his or her friends, each undergoes the teasing equivalent of the scorn they once poured upon lovers, and survives!

The benignly staged eavesdropping releases undissimulated feeling in Beatrice and Benedick by apparently disclosing the feelings of the other. It is paralleled by the malignly staged eavesdropping, which apparently exposes Hero to Claudio by its sham disclosure of her dissimulation, and releases the passion in which Claudio will destroy (temporarily) his own happiness, and a lovely lady, in the church “unmasking.”

The point I wish to emphasize is the consummate realization of the Shakespearean comic therapy which these symmetries produce. Both plottings bring out, in diametrically opposed ways, the implications of the
protagonists' masks; both trigger an acting out of what was hidden and latent: the joyous dream of love proved and requited—a homeopathic *remedia amoris*—in the case of Beatrice and Benedick; a nightmare fantasia of enmity in the case of Claudio and Hero.

Don John, says Anne Barton, “a plot mechanism more than a complex character in his own right, appears in the play as a kind of anticomical force, the official enemy of all happy endings.” It is a striking insight, for it is not by chance that the malign plotter sets off a malign, potentially tragic dialectic of either/or, while the benign plotter releases a benign dialectic of both/and—the comic resolving principle itself. *Much Ado* achieves what the double plot of *The Merchant* fails to achieve: exorcism without a scapegoat, and comic metamorphoses in which the fooled outwit, in their folly, the wisdom of the foolish.

In addition to the admirable ordering of affairs in the higher stratum of society the burlesque eavesdropping of the watch is a tour de force of comic subplot strategy. Unstaged and inadvertent, it discloses counterfeit and exposes truth without the vessels of this providential occurrence having for one moment the dimmest conception of what is afoot. It is therefore ironic foil to the benign fooling of the good plotters and their victims who do know, at least partly, what they are about, and ironic parody of the folly of the malignant plotters and theirs.

Dogberry’s anxiety to be star performer at the enquiry occurs just as Leonato is hurrying off to the wedding and cannot, understandably, take the time clearly required to get to the bottom of Dogberry’s dream.

> A good old man, sir, he will be talking; as they say “When the age is in, the wit is out.” God help us, it is a world to see! Well said, i'faith, neighbor Verges. Well, God's a good man; and two men ride of a horse, one must ride behind. An honest soul, i'faith, sir, by my troth he is, as ever broke bread; but God is to be worshipp'd; all men are not alike, alas, good neighbor!

(3.5.33-40)

This anxiety culminates only in disappointment at not having been written down an ass, but he does succeed in exposing the crafty Borachio and Conrade for the wrongdoers they are.

Dogberry's comic hybris or “delusion of vanity,” his blithe confidence in the “gifts that God gives,” thus mocks that of all his betters. He is the fulcrum upon which the wit-folly dialectic turns, in a riot of ironic misprisions. He is also the cause of the play's double peripeteia: the climactic church scene, which he could have prevented, and the confession of Borachio, which he nearly does prevent. This double peripeteia marks the final exhaustion of the comic device. Both plots, the benign and the malevolent, have succeeded. Beatrice and Benedick have been tricked into love, Claudio and Hero tricked out of it. The apparently deceitful Hero is unmasked, and this precipitates the unmasking to each other of Beatrice and Benedick, each knowing the other indirectly, by hearsay, rumour and opinion, and only presently to know each other through direct confrontation.

When they reveal themselves to each other, Benedick boldly and Beatrice now hesitant, their knowledge is unmediated either by others, or by their own self-induced obliquities. Now they will really believe what they really want to believe, and have in practice already believed “better than reportingly.” But the repudiation of Hero presents them with a further acid test. It is a test of trust, which is as different from belief as knowledge from opinion. “Kill Claudio” is Beatrice’s demand that he trust absolutely her absolute trust in her cousin’s innocence. It is a dangerous moment. Beatrice plays for high stakes—her lover for her cousin. And if he agrees he will wager beloved against friend. It is the moment of incipient disaster for which the fortunes of comedy produce providential remedies—in this case the voice of that sterling citizen, Dogberry, uncovering the thief Fashion—“flat burglary as ever was committed”—in the next scene. Beatrice puts the reluctant Benedick to the oldest of chivalric tests—to kill the monster and rescue the lady, thus proving his valour and his love. It is a
fantasy of knight errantry, and his commitment to this mission, in response to her fierceness, transforms the whole flimsy romance convention into the deadly seriousness of his challenge to Claudio. This is a reversal of all expectations and roundly turns the tables upon the tricksters.

Beatrice's violence is more than passionate loyalty to her cousin. In the war of the sexes with Benedick, Beatrice's combative ness is self-defence, self-assertion, the armour of a vulnerable pride. But when she says “Would it not grieve a woman to be overmaster'd with a piece of valiant dust? to make an account of her life to a cold of wayward marl?” (2.1.60-63); or replies to Pedro's “Will you have me lady?” with “No, my lord, unless I might have another for workingdays. Your Grace is too costly to wear every day” (2.1.327-29), we are invited to perceive an added ingredient. She will not have a husband with a beard, or without one; she will not have a husband at all. St Peter will show her where the bachelors sit in heaven and there “live we as merry as the day is long.” She will be no meek daughter like her cousin: “But yet for all that, cousin, let him be a handsome fellow, or else make another cur'sy, and say, 'Father, as it please me'” (2.1.53-56). She will be won on her own terms or not at all.

It is a grave demand for independence she is making; and it is possible to infer from her mockery of Benedick's soldiership and from the significant touch of envy in the remark, “he hath every month a new sworn brother” (1.1.72-73), that it is at the circumscription of her feminine condition as much as anything that the Lady Beatrice chafes. She suffers, as we are to discover, love. But before she is love's sufferer she is love's suffragette. And when she says with passion

you dare easier be friends with me than fight with mine enemy ... O that I were a man ... O God, that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the market place ... or that I had any friend would be a man for my sake ... I cannot be a man with wishing; therefore I will die a woman with grieving.

(4.1.298-323 passim)

she is far from the acceptance of biological fact. And so Benedick's acceptance of her challenge, in love, and in trust, and in identification with her point of view, proves the very safety valve Beatrice's accumulated truculence requires. In As You Like It there is a reverse, though precisely equivalent moment when Rosalind faints at Oliver's story of Orlando's rescue and wounding, and the episode serves quite clearly as a safety valve for Rosalind's hidden and temporary stifled femininity. There, too, the episode marks the exhaustion of the device (the disguise) and precipitates recognitions.

What Much Ado invites us to understand about its comic remedies is only fully articulated by the end of the dénouement. Act 5 has to do with question of the visible and the invisible, the seen and the unseen, upon which trust ultimately depends. There is no need for trust if all is open and palpable. Since, in human affairs, nothing is ever open and palpable, much ado about nothing or “noting” ensues. By noting of the lady, says the Friar

I have mark'd
A thousand blushing apparitions
To start into her face, a thousand innocent shames
In angel whiteness beat away those blushes,
And in her eye there hath appear'd a fire
To burn the errors that these princes hold
Against her maiden truth

(4.1.158-64)

and his proposal is to allow time and the rehabilitating “study of imagination” to bring
every lovely organ of her life
Shall come apparell'd in more precious habit,
More moving, delicate, and full of life,
Into the eye and prospect of his soul.

(4.1.226-29)

while Hero herself, given out as dead, be concealed from sight.

The theme is plentifully embodied in act 5. First in the further glimpse of the incipient tragic possibilities; the father's grief, which he refuses to hide, the young men's self-righteous callous arrogance. This is followed by the appearance of a Benedick, outwardly unchanged, inwardly transformed, outdaring his friend's baiting concerning “Benedick the married man.” Finally, taking in that Benedick is in “most profound earnest” for, Claudio is sure, the love of Beatrice, Don Pedro's contemptuous dismissal: “What a pretty thing man is when he goes in his doublet and hose and leaves off his wit!” (5.1.199-200). This immediately precedes Dogberry's entrance with the bound Borachio and the revealed truth. Borachio rubs it in: “What your wisdoms could not discover, these shallow fools have brought to light—” (5.1.232-34) but no new pieties about “what men daily do, not knowing what they do,” will bring Hero back. Claudio must clear his moral debt and he must be seen to do so. It is fitting that he do this by placing himself totally in Leonato's hands:

O noble sir!
Your overkindness doth wring tears from me.
I do embrace your offer, and dispose
For henceforth of poor Claudio.

(5.1.292-95)

It is himself that he surrenders to Leonato and to his masked bride. And while Claudio thus places himself in trust with Leonato, Beatrice and Benedick flaunt their hidden trust with an outward show of their old defensive combativeness, and a mock denial, till their own letters give them away, of the love we have heard them confess.

BENEDICK:
Come, I will have thee, but, by this light, I take thee for pity.

BEATRICE:
I would not deny you, but, by this good day, I yield upon great persuasion, and partly to save your life, for I was told you were in a consumption.

(5.4.92-96)

The masked wedding neatly symbolizes the antinomies of seeing and knowing. Benedick's kiss stops not only Beatrice's mouth, but the seesaw of hearsay and double talk, of convention and counterconvention.

The taming of Beatrice has been a more formidable undertaking than that of Katherina because she supplies more varied and imaginative occasions for the comic pleasure wit provides; and with no remedy will we be satisfied that denies us these. If humour and vivacity, individuality, resilience, spontaneity, fantasy and irony are to be the price of wedding bells, no marriage Komos will seem to us a celebration. But the beauty of it is that comedy's double indemnity is triumphantly validated in the final teasing. We are to have our self-assertive witty cake and eat it, too, con amore; the remedy—this imagined possibility of remedy— for that suffering state not being such as to deprive us of the value of Beatrice's and Benedick's wit once its function as protective mask is rendered unnecessary. Head and heart, style and substance, convention and nature, are
for once—man being a giddy thing—in consonance.

But if the battle of the sexes has thus been won to the satisfaction of both parties, as is comically proper, it is still, in *Much Ado*, by means of a heroine only half divested of her traditional feminine garb. Even “Kill Claudio” is a command which reflects the immemorial dependence of lady upon knight, and, as we have seen, the lady Beatrice chafes at it. The next step, however, is presently to be made, in *As You Like It*, which also harks back to an earlier play. And just as the comparison between *Much Ado* and *The Shrew* (or *Love’s Labour’s Lost*) provided a measure not only of the scope and subtlety of Shakespeare’s growing art but of the changes in its nature, so does comparison between the page disguise of the forlorn Julia and that of Rosalind.
**Much Ado about Nothing (Vol. 88)**

Introduction

_Much Ado about Nothing_

See also Much Ado about Nothing Criticism (Volume 78).

One of Shakespeare's most popular romantic comedies, _Much Ado about Nothing_ (c. 1598) features a dual plot of courtship and deception resolved in typical Shakespearean comic fashion—with reconciliation, marriage, and celebration. Set in Messina, the drama centers on the wooing of young, beautiful Hero by the soldier-courtier Claudio, a courtship temporarily halted by the scheming of the play's ostensible villain, Don John. In a parallel plot, the reluctant lovers Beatrice and Benedick engage in a sustained battle of verbal wit before eventually recognizing their affection for one another. Scholars have recognized a strain of melancholy beneath the play's merriment, however, and note that the work functions simultaneously as both a lighthearted comedy and a near-tragic cautionary tale of deceit and miscommunication. Modern audiences tend to identify most with the Beatrice-Benedick subplot, frequently dismissing the boorish Claudio and the docile Hero as immature and less interesting figures. In addition to the play's characters, critics are interested in the relationship between the two plots, as well as the play's themes of deception and social responsibility.

Critical and popular consensus finds Beatrice and Benedick as the two most compelling characters in _Much Ado about Nothing_, despite their relegation to what scholars view as the drama's humorous subplot. While this witty pair continues to elicit a considerable share of study, commentators are also interested in the sources and dynamics of Shakespeare's Hero-Claudio pairing as well as the play's darker, more disturbing characters. Charles T. Prouty (1950) investigates the sixteenth-century literary sources of _Much Ado about Nothing_’s couples, identifying the models for Claudio-Hero and Beatrice-Benedick. Prouty notes that Claudio strongly departs from the conventional romantic lover in his caddish behavior, while Hero reflects a state of near total passivity, extreme even for a romance heroine. Prouty contends that Benedick and Beatrice, by contrast, appear to have no strict parallels in prior romance literature. A. R. Humphreys (1981) surveys _Much Ado_’s romance sources, which include Ariosto's _Orlando Furioso_ (1516), Matteo Bandello's _La Prima Parte de le Novelle_ (1554), and Belleforest's _Le Troisième Tome des Histories Extraítes des œuvres Italiennes de Bandel_ (1569). Like Prouty, Humphreys comments on Shakespeare's adaptation and alteration of these and other texts in crafting Beatrice, Benedick, Claudio, and Hero, as well as Dogberry and his comical Watch. Richard A. Levin (1985) suspects that something disturbing is at work under the surface of the happy romance in _Much Ado about Nothing_ and attempts to uncover the negative aspects of character in the drama. Levin is drawn to the play's principal plotters, Don Pedro and Don John, as well as to Claudio's inexplicably bad behavior and Benedick's moral uncertainty. The critic also comments on Leonato's eagerness to shift all blame in the drama onto Don John, thereby procuring a perfunctory and far from seamless happy ending.

Since its first performance near the end of the sixteenth century, _Much Ado about Nothing_ has enjoyed a nearly uninterrupted reputation as one of Shakespeare's most popular dramas on the stage. The play continues to be staged with relative frequency, and several major productions of _Much Ado about Nothing_ in the early years of the twenty-first century attest to its continuing appeal. Sarah Hemming (2002) reviews Gregory Doran's Royal Shakespeare Company staging of _Much Ado about Nothing_, which evoked a brooding, honor-bound, and masculine world dominated by the ethos of the mafia crime organization. Hemming contends that Doran's interpretation was unable to adequately link the dark and comic aspects of Shakespeare's drama. Patrick Carnegy (2002) offers a more positive review of Doran's dark vision of _Much Ado about Nothing_, suggesting that the director crafted a delicate balance between the drama's urbane comedy and sinister undertones. Also reviewing Doran's production, Russell Jackson (2003) admires the director's handling of the drama's bleaker moments, in which he “staged the unhappiest scenes of the play forcefully but without melodrama.” In the United States, Mark Lamos directed a much different staging of _Much Ado about_...
Nothing for the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, D.C. Gabriella Boston (2002) comments on Lamos's charming fulfillment of Shakespeare's work, here set at the height of the Jazz Age, noting that the production underscored the play's comic rather than its menacing elements. Freddi Lipstein's (2003), however, gives a less favorable review of Lamos's staging, noting that the director relied on low comedy to carry the play. Martha Tuck Rozett (2003) reviews director Daniela Varon's Shakespeare and Company production of Much Ado about Nothing staged at the Founders' Theater in Lenox, Massachusetts. Rozett praises Varon's fine realization of the play's festive qualities and comic virtuosity.

Much Ado about Nothing is an immensely entertaining comedy that confronts a wide range of issues, including themes of deception and social responsibility. In his overview of Much Ado about Nothing, G. K. Hunter (see Further Reading) describes the drama as a tragicomedy concerned with the themes of self-deception, self-dramatization, self-love, and self-awareness. Michael Taylor (see Further Reading) explores the conflict between individualism and social responsibility depicted in Much Ado about Nothing, with particular regard to the figures of Don John, Claudio, Beatrice, and Benedick. In his 1982 study, Philip Traci examines the motif of meddling in the affairs of others, particularly with respect to the romantic relationship between Beatrice and Benedick. Traci suggests that the play can be seen as either Shakespeare's happiest comedy or one of his most cynical, depending on the view one holds of the relative merits of intervention and Providence. Morriss Henry Partee (1992) probes the thematic conflicts of Much Ado about Nothing by exploring the play's structural tensions between comedy and tragedy. In addition, Partee examines the function of the Beatrice-Benedick subplot as a device that steers the story away from its more disturbing concerns—including adultery, illegitimacy, and sexual transgression—in order to highlight the play's themes of reconciliation, joy, and matrimony.

Criticism: Overviews And General Studies

[In the following excerpt, Humphreys surveys the principal literary sources for Shakespeare's Much Ado about Nothing.]

(I) CLAUDIO AND HERO

GENERAL SURVEY

Stories of the lover deceived by a rival or enemy into believing his beloved false are widespread and of great antiquity. An analogue of the Claudio-Hero plot has been traced back to a fifth-century Greek romance by Chariton, Chaereas and Callirhoe. Seventeen Renaissance versions, narrative or dramatic, are recorded before Shakespeare's, in Spanish, Italian, French, German, and English. They include the fifteenth-century Spanish Tirant lo Blanch (Tirant the White) by Juan Martorell, which probably lies behind Ariosto's version in the fifth canto of Orlando Furioso (1516).1 Ariosto's lovers are named Ariodante and Genevra. His story, first translated into English and much elaborated in Peter Beverley's poem, The Historie of Ariodanto and Ieneura (c. 1566),2 was further translated by Sir John Harington as Orlando Furioso in English Heroical Verse (1591). From Ariosto, Spenser derived his own very different version, which ends in disaster instead of the lovers' reunion; it tells how Squire Phedon, deceived by his supposed friend Philemon into thinking his adored Claribell disloyal, falls into the intemperance of killing her (The Faerie Queene, 1590, II.4.xvi-xxxviii.)

Meanwhile Matteo Bandello, the Italian ecclesiastic, diplomat, and man of letters, treated the subject in his own way in the twenty-second story of La Prima Parte de le Novelle (1554), naming his lovers Sir Timbreo and Fenicia. A French translation, morally and rhetorically elaborated, appeared as the eighteenth tale of the third volume of François de Belleforest's Histoires Tragiques (1569).
Versions in English other than those mentioned comprise, possibly, a ‘matter of Panecia’ (i.e. Fenicia?) play performed by the Earl of Leicester's Men at Court on New Year's Day 1575 but no longer extant, and, more evidently, an Ariodante and Genevra (also not extant), done likewise at Court, on 12 February 1583, by Merchant Taylors' schoolboys under their humanist headmaster Richard Mulcaster. Other analogues or sources comprise George Whetstone's story of Rinaldo and Giletta, incorporating elements of Ariosto and Bandello in The Rocke of Regard (1576: see Appendix I.ii), and two plays, one—Victoria—in Latin (c. 1580-3) by Abraham Fraunce, the other—Fedele and Fortunio, The Two Italian Gentlemen—in English (1585) by one M. A. (Anthony Munday?). Both are versions of a highly reputed comedy, Il Fedele, by Luigi Pasaquaglio (1579). In this, the would-be seducer Fedele, unable to win his desired Vittoria (who, though married, is enamoured of his rival, Fortunio), traduces her to her husband Cornelio and arranges that Cornelio shall see a servant (in love with her maid, like Borachio with Margaret in Much Ado) enter the house and court a supposed Vittoria. Cornelio, gullible, plans to poison his wife, but by a trick she mollifies Fedele and escapes her fate. With many variations as to its intrigues the story was widely popular, varying in tone from farce or Plautine comedy to tragedy.

ARIOSTO: ‘ORLANDO FURIOSO’, CANTO V (1516)

Ariosto, translated by Harington in 1591, tells how the brave Renaldo, ‘Of noble chivalrie the verie flowre’ (V. 82), arrives in Scotland and learns that the Scottish princess Genevra must die accused of unchastity unless a champion comes forward to defend her. Resolving to do so he makes for the court at St Andrews and on the way saves a woman from murderous assailants. She is Genevra's maid Dalinda and she tells him that the princess is innocent.

Dalinda has been in love with Polynesso, Duke of Albany, and he has often met her secretly in Genevra's room, ascending by a rope ladder; Polynesso, nevertheless, has aspired to marry Genevra herself. But she loved the noble Ariodante, and was equally loved. Polynesso's desire for Genevra turning to hatred, he plotted to destroy the lovers' hopes. Though posing as Ariodante's friend, he arranged that Dalinda (who had 'no reason, nor no wit, / His shamefull drift (tho' open) to perceave'; V. 26) should dress herself as her mistress and admit him by night; he then placed Ariodante and the latter's brother Lurcanio where they could see him enter Genevra's window. The deception succeeded. Horrorified, Ariodante disappeared, intending to drown himself, though in fact (unknown to anyone) having jumped from a cliff he thought better of it, swam ashore, and remained incognito. Lurcanio accused Genevra of unchastity, and she has been doomed to death.

To remove the unwitting accomplice Dalinda, Polynesso then planned the murder from which Renaldo has saved her. The two travellers reach St Andrews and Renaldo prepares to fight for justice. He finds a strange knight already engaging the deluded but honourable accuser Lurcanio, and he declares that neither contender should lose his life, Genevra's unknown champion because he fights for the right, Lurcanio because he is the victim of deceit. The combat ceases. Renaldo then accuses Polynesso and in the ensuing fight he mortally wounds him. Polynesso dies confessing his guilt; the strange knight reveals himself as Ariodante and is joyfully reunited with Genevra (to protect whom, though still thinking her guilty, he has even opposed his brother); and Dalinda betakes herself to a nunnery.

The similarities to Shakespeare's plot (though they show considerable variation) amount to Polynesso's mortal jealousy (for reasons different from Don John's in the play); his love affair with the maid and the ladder ascent to the disguised girl impersonating her mistress (though the play transfers these operations to the subordinate Borachio); the maid's ignorance of her action's bearing; the court's belief (in the play only temporary) in the heroine's guilt; the defending champion's challenge to the accuser; and the happy outcome after peril.

The most obvious of the differences from Shakespeare's plot are Ariosto's courtly-romance level; his Scottish location and quite different personal names; his sense of tragic danger and murderous violence (far outgoing anything in the play); his villain's motives (foiled jealousy in love) and initiatives in the deception (instead of
through an agent's instigation); his deceived lover's reported suicide and secret reappearance; his accusation urged not by the lover (as a kind of vengeance) but by the lover's brother (as an act of justice); his wholly different handling of Genevra's plight (as compared with Hero's) and of the circumstances of the challenge (in the poem the deluded compassionate Ariodante opposing his brother; in the play the deluded uncompassionate Claudio opposing the erstwhile friend Benedick) and the restoration of love; and the maid retiring to a nunnery (in the play, fully restored in social esteem). Shakespeare's particulars belong to a markedly different conception from Ariosto's.

BANDELLO: ‘LA PRIMA PARTE DE LE NOVELLE’, NOVELLA 22 (1554)

Bandello's version is much racier, and far nearer to Shakespeare's. It tells how the knightly Sir Timbreo di Cardona, one of King Piero of Aragon's courtiers, and a valiant soldier while the King is capturing Sicily, falls in love during the victory celebrations in Messina with Fenicia, daughter of Messer Lionato de' Lionati, ‘a poor gentleman and not his equal’. 6 Fenicia behaves so modestly that Sir Timbreo concludes that he can win her only by marriage (not at all his original plan). Her birth, he reflects, is lower than his but she is of good lineage, and through a friendly nobleman he gains her father's consent. The lovers rejoice and all Messina likewise, Lionato being highly regarded.

A rival, however, Sir Girondo Olerio Valenziano, has also fallen in love with Fenicia. Though basically honourable, and a friend of Sir Timbreo's, he resolves to break the betrothal, and he employs an agent, ‘more pleased with evil than with good’ (II.115), to tell Sir Timbreo that if he will hide in the garden he shall see Fenicia that very night playing him false. Suffering ‘bitter (and as it seemed to him just) anger’ (II.115), and ‘blinded with the veil of jealousy’ (II.116), Sir Timbreo does so, unaccompanied. The bedroom, in a remote part of the house, is entered by Sir Girondo's servant dressed as a gentleman. Sir Timbreo's love turns to 'cruel hate' (II.117), but bound by a vow of silence he leaves the scene without intervening.

Through the nobleman who arranged the betrothal he informs Lionato that Fenicia's misconduct has ended the engagement. Her whole family is shocked; Lionato, attributing the charge to Sir Timbreo's scorn at their reduced circumstances, vows his belief in her innocence and his trust that God will vindicate her. Fenicia herself, swooning, then recovering for a while, delivers a long and touching defence and prays that God will enlighten Sir Timbreo. She then lies apparently dead, but while awaiting burial she revives and her family take this as a sign that truth shall prevail. She is secretly sent to the country house of Lionato's brother and renamed Lucilla. The whole city grieves, obsequies are performed, and a sonnet is carved on her ‘tomb’.

Sir Timbreo now begins to waver. He reflects that the bedroom in question is too remote to be hers, and that the intruder could hardly have been visiting her. More remarkably, Sir Girondo, struck with remorse at Fenicia's fate, offers Sir Timbreo his dagger before her tomb, confesses what his jealousy had driven him to, and begs for death.

Vengeance on him will not restore Fenicia, however, and Sir Timbreo nobly declines it. Valuing friendship before love he announces that had he known of Sir Girondo's passion he would have yielded Fenicia to him, or, he suggests, had they discussed the matter, Sir Girondo might have done likewise. They will, at any rate, publicly vindicate her, and this they do. Lionato exacts a promise that Sir Timbreo will take no other bride than one chosen for him.

Time passes. Fenicia completes her seventeenth year and blooms so beautifully as to be unrecognizable as her former self. She has, moreover, a younger sister Belfiore, almost as lovely. Lionato tells Sir Timbreo that he has a bride for him, and a gay company (including Sir Girondo) makes for the country house, attends Mass, and meets Fenicia-Lucilla and Belfiore. Though Sir Timbreo is reminded of Fenicia, in her enhanced beauty he does not recognize her. They are married, and at the wedding banquet he poignantly expresses his grief for the 'dead' bride, his joy in the living one, and his adoration of both; whereupon Lionato announces that the
two are one. Joyful reunion ensues, Girondo begs for and receives forgiveness and the hand of Belfiore, and King Piero receives the party on its return to Messina with festivities, bestowing dowries on the brides and wealth and honour on Lionato.

This story is much nearer Shakespeare's than is Ariosto's. From it he derives the festive Messina setting, the names of Pedro and Leonato, Claudio's recent war service (different though the war's cause and course), the courtship conducted through a noble intermediary, the deceiver's disguised agent, the lover's seemingly justified public rejection of the supposedly false bride, the religious assurance buoying up the heroine's friends, her swoon, revival, self-defence, and presumed death, the obsequies and epitaph, Claudio's penitence and submission, Leonato's offering of the 'substitute' bride under his brother's auspices, the acceptance and marriage of the veiled and unknown lady, the revelation, and the concluding festivities under princely patronage.

The differences from Shakespeare's plot are, nevertheless, notable enough to testify to Shakespeare's selective and modifying intelligence. First, Bandello's King Piero has no part in the plot save as the victor during whose sojourn in Messina the wooing takes place, with no intervention from him, and as the patron of the eventual marriage. Shakespeare, instead, has Don Pedro presiding throughout and negotiating the betrothal. The story gains a more courtly air. Then, Bandello gives Fenicia a mother, whom Shakespeare discards, though including 'Innogen' as Leonato's wife in the entry directions for I.i and II.i. Since in Bandello the mother figures almost solely when the 'dead' girl is being prepared for burial, and Shakespeare makes no use of this scene, her part doubtless just naturally lapsed. Then again, Sir Timbreo is a sensual youth prepared to seduce Fenicia and turning to marriage only when seduction proves impossible: Claudio, quite on the contrary, rejects Leonato's surmise that he may have 'made defeat of [Hero's] virginity' and vows, convincingly, that he has shown nothing but 'Bashful sincerity and comely love' (IV.i.47, 54). Throughout he is a shy wooer, whose willingness to have Don Pedro negotiate for him seems due as much to social diffidence (so different from his military courage) as to the expected diplomacies of well-bred courtship.

Then again, jealous though Sir Timbreo is on thinking himself deceived, he shows no sign of the jumpiness that the callow Claudio evinces when Don John, almost as his first action, tricks him into thinking that Don Pedro has wooed for himself. True, Claudio is not too blameworthy in this, for Leonato's circle—Leonato, Antonio, even Beatrice and Benedick—all think the same; this Act II minor gulling portends the Act III major one, where Claudio's credulity is again endorsed by the similar error of the experienced Don Pedro. Wanting to give plausibility to the later crisis, Shakespeare differs from Bandello in making Claudio's temperamental instability a strand in the web of deceptions and misunderstandings integral to the play's fabric.

The motives for deception, next, are much changed from Bandello's. Rivalry over Hero, though credible were the events real, would in the world of the play be unfitting to so gentle and sheltered a heroine, so no element of rival love enters: Hero is to be virginal even to the extent of having no other wooer. From the rumbles of the concluded war Shakespeare picks up a different motive for Don John's envy—military jealousy and rancour—and saves Hero from any taint of competition; Don John's animus is against the 'young start-up' whose glory it is to have overthrown him (I.iii.62-3) and against the princely brother who has forgiven his rebellion.

The deceiver, moreover, is not Bandello's brave (though temporarily erring) knight who has loyally fought in King Piero's war but a rebel against his lord and brother; he has the wicked nature of Ariosto's Polinoso embodied in the saturnine, melancholic, minor Machiavel readily recognizable as the source of malice, and dramatically popular on the Elizabethan stage. He is, moreover, a bastard, in conventional corroboration of this evil humour, though on the stage the fact is set down in an entry direction (I.i.87), is not mentioned until Benedick reveals it after the church scandal (IV.i.188). For Bandello's 'friend', treacherous only through love rivalry, Shakespeare substitutes a melodramatic rebel/foxy schemer, polarizes the two sides, sharpens the dramatic effect, and avoids the love-versus-friendship situation which had worked so dubiously in The Two
Gentlemen of Verona and which in Bandello produces a Sir Timbreo and Sir Girondo each ready to hand over Fenicia regardless of her choice. Shakespeare rejects also the unlikely situation in Bandello when Sir Girondo, penitent after his appalling conduct, is again received into Lionato's family and shares in the wedding celebrations.

Among other main differences from Bandello are the equalizing of rank between Claudio and Hero, whose father is Governor of Messina, gracious and generous host of Don Pedro, not merely the head of a reduced though ancient family. This results in social cordiality all round among friends and eliminates any intrusive considerations of status. Of more importance are the different ways in which the accusation and its sequel are managed. In Bandello, Sir Timbreo alone sees the ladder trick. He then engages a friend to break off the betrothal before ever the wedding ceremony is reached. He wholly fails to convince Fenicia's family that she is guilty, and soon he begins to suspect his own judgement. Claudio on the other hand has fellow witnesses, in one of whom he has every confidence, and what they think they see is corroborated by Borachio. Then, though earlier he has had Don Pedro woo for him, Claudio himself takes up in church the role of accuser and performs it with highly dramatic effect; the impact is much stronger than with Bandello's breach negotiated by proxy, effected in Leonato's own household. So clear does the evidence seem, and so authoritative are the witnesses, that Leonato is convinced, and even Benedick is ‘attir'd in wonder’ (IV.i.144) until Beatrice makes his mind up for him. And Claudio, far from coming to suspect his own judgement, has to behave with egregious tactlessness, to be challenged by Benedick (analogously to the situation in Ariosto, though this one is differently handled), and have his error dispelled by Dogberry.

Neither Bandello nor Shakespeare intends the tragic shock to be unbearable; both provide assurance of relief. But this happens in quite different ways. Bandello has Lionato's family confident that God will reveal the truth; Shakespeare has Dogberry's Watch discover it beforehand, and the Friar give spiritual comfort in church. The passions of Claudio and Leonato stretch the nerves in one direction: knowledge that enlightenment will soon dawn relieves them in the other (though Benedick's challenge to Claudio, instigated by the marvellously welcome indignation of Beatrice, maintains the potential of tension). Finally, Dogberry's bumbling produces an enormously enjoyable sense of relaxation.

As for Claudio's conduct, from accusation to clarification, it is far more disturbing than Sir Timbreo's. Whatever psychological reasons may be offered (callowness, shattered idealism, hyperemotional self-justification, the choking intemperateness to which adolescents are liable, and so on), it is difficult to forgive such behaviour. Yet, as The Merchant of Venice had recently shown, Shakespeare was fascinated even in comedy by dramatic intensification whenever tragic potential is present. This kind of comedy is a sunny day over the afternoon of which looms the blackness of storm, to yield to the glow of evening. (Not long before, the end of Love's Labour's Lost had shadowed the sunshine with death delaying the fulfilment of love.)

So—and here Shakespeare differs dramatically from Bandello—the church scene explodes with power. Making the bridegroom central in the denunciation of the bride, springing this theatrical coup amidst the happy expectancies and solemnities of the church scene, Shakespeare achieves a scene so startling that the inmost natures of the participants disclose themselves in a way alien to mere comedy.

As for the dénouement, in the sources either the maid, if there is one, or the repentant deceiver discloses the truth. In Shakespeare, things are quite different. Margaret (one feels if one finds time to reflect, but none is allowed) ought to do so but does not, and Don John certainly will not. So Dogberry steps in, an incomparable deus ex machina, and turns grief and anger into irresistible mirth.

THE INTERLINKING
The main ingredients Shakespeare finds in Ariosto, then, are the following: the intriguier of unredeemed wickedness; the lady's maid involved in an affair with the villain (or his agent), in the ladder trick, and in the impersonation of her mistress, while ignorant of the guile which prompts this; the joint witness, by the lover and his supporter, of the furtive entry; the shared belief in the heroine's guilt; the challenge by a defender; and the villain's punishment.

In Bandello he finds the setting in Messina and its elegant society; names for the visiting prince and his host; the young lover's prowess in his prince's war; the courtship conducted through a noble intermediary; stress on social honour blotted by supposed feminine frailty; the intriguier's scheming subordinate who effects the night entry; the heroine's swoon, revival, self-defence, apparent death, concealment, unrecognized reappearance, and finally revealed identity; the religious context promising the proper outcome; and the final festivities reestablishing the initial gaiety.

Interweaving Bandello's materials with Ariosto's, Shakespeare shows a mind ranging over elements loosely similar but so markedly variant in tone and incidents that only the shrewdest of judgements could co-ordinate them into a theme of such tragicomic force. Of course, his treatment shows one fundamental difference from both Ariosto's and Bandello's: those, though ending with love satisfied, are not comedies. In Much Ado, Beatrice, Benedick, and Dogberry affect the tenor of the serious plot throughout, enriching and brightening it in its happy phases, qualifying its severity in its grave ones, and doing this not merely by concurrent presence but by the most integral of plotrelationships. Much Ado is indeed superbly devised.

BELLEFOREST: ‘LE TROISIÈME TOME DES HISTOIRES TRAGIQUES EXTRAITES DES OEUVRES ITALIENNES DE BANDEL’, HISTOIRE XVIII (1569)

Belleforest's narrative closely follows Bandello's, particularly in its later stages, from the crisis of the broken engagement to the end. The main difference lies in much sentimental and moralizing embellishment; Belleforest is about half as long again as Bandello, a difference for which the embellishment largely accounts. To relate his plot would be virtually to recite Bandello again.

On which version Shakespeare drew can hardly be determined with complete certainty, since the differences between them, in so far as they belong to the story and not to the sentimentalizings of Belleforest, are insignificant; none, anyway, has any bearing on Shakespeare's treatment. The likelihood, though, is in favour of Bandello. Momentarily, Belleforest's 'le Roy Pierre d'Aragon' may look closer than Bandello's 'il re Piero di Ragona', but this detail is too slight to support any deduction.

What seems more significant is that, while in neither version does King Piero/Pierre figure as more than detachedly present at start and finish (at the start as the victor whose entourage is enjoying life in Messina, at the finish as benefactor of Lionato's family), Belleforest's prince enters the story much less favourably than Bandello's, as 'ce roy inhumain Pierre d'Aragon'. This is because Belleforest's French patriotism is outraged by the slaughter suffered by the French at the Sicilian vespers of 1283, which occasioned the King's arrival with his army to take the island over. If this had been how Pierre was brought to Shakespeare's attention, the transformation into the gaily participating, courteous, and kind Don Pedro of the play would be most unexpected. It is true that in Bandello also King Piero occupies Sicily (being induced to do so by the Pope), and then defeats an invasion by the King of Naples with great difficulty and much slaughter on both sides. But nothing is said to his disadvantage, and much is made of the joyful victory celebrations, so he forms a far likelier original for Shakespeare to transform into the noble friend who furthers the young hero's suit.

The odds, then, seem decidedly to favour Bandello as the actual source. For all practical purposes, in any case, he must be so considered, since Belleforest—if against likelihood his was the version Shakespeare had before him—merely transmits, as far as all material points go, what his precursor furnished him with.
Beatrice and Benedick themselves, though not referable to precise sources, owe much to two traditions. These are those of the scorner of love, rejecting suitors, and of the witty courtiers in many Renaissance stories exchanging debate or badinage.

THE SCORNER OF LOVE

This tradition is familiar in romance and popular narrative. The scorner, the love-heretic, often finds his or her hauteur a prelude to conversion and surrender. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, having derided Cupid as ‘lord of thise fooles alle’, Troilus is foreseeably subjected to the anguish and ardour of desire. Shakespeare's own Valentine opens *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* by teasing the amorous Proteus on being ‘yoked’ in a state ‘where scorn is bought with groans, / Coy looks with heart-sore sighs’ (I.i.29-30), only himself soon to be mocked by Speed as being ‘metamorphis'd with a mistress’, Silvia (II.i.16-28). The King and lords of *Love’s Labour's Lost* suffer similarly for their hubris, and admit defeat. An instance very recent at the time when Shakespeare was working on *Much Ado* is that in Spenser's story of the haughty Mirabella, the widely adored but scornful beauty who vows that, born free, she will ever remain so.8 ‘With the onely twinckle of her eye’ (stanza 31) she torments her admirers until Cupid enquires why his servants suffer so, and then condemns her to wander the world until she has saved as many loves as she destroyed. Since in two years she manages to redeem two only as against the scores she has slain, the sentence looks interminable. Her steed is led by the tyrannous Disdain cruelly abusing her, and followed by Scorn with a whip (Beatrice, we may recall, is ‘Lady Disdain’, in whose eyes ‘Disdain and scorn ride sparkling’).

A nearer suggestion of Beatrice, however, occurs in Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* (1528): Shakespeare may well have known it:

I have also seene a most fervent love spring in the heart of a woman, towarde one that seemed at the first not to beare him the least affection in the world [This appears to mean ‘towards one for whom she seemed not to bear the least affection’; Ed.], onely for that she heard say, that the opinion of many was, that they loved together.9

Nothing could better foreshadow Beatrice's self-discovery.

Shakespeare had himself treated the related though different figures of Katherina the beautiful termagant of *The Taming of the Shrew*, the witty ladies of *Love's Labour's Lost* routing the lords who think themselves superior to love, and Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* deriding her flock of suitors as gaily as Beatrice could do. Shortly, in *As You Like It*, Rosalind would mock affected lovers. All these in due course yield, like Beatrice herself, but before they do they all (save for Katherina) deploy the shrewd wisdom and witty malice which are their invincible weapons against male pretension.

PATTERNS OF COURTESY AND WIT

What was needed for wit comedy was a literary genre of intellectual equality between the sexes in a sophisticated spirit of challenge and debate; this is the basic theme of George Meredith's classic essay *The Idea of Comedy*.

The traditions of courtesy literature which came to provide this did not begin with the Italian Renaissance,10 but for the present purpose the seminal inspiration was that of Baldassare Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano*, the outstanding example of Renaissance social doctrine.11 Castiglione (1478-1529) entered the service of the Duke of Urbino in 1504 and proved accomplished in war and the humanities. He recorded the tone of his circle in a work which Dr Johnson was to recommend to Boswell on 2 October 1773, while they were in Skye,
as ‘the best book that ever was written on good breeding’. 12 It celebrates the ducal circle in ‘the lytle Citye of Urbin’, a principal feature of which is the distinction of the women. Among them Lady Emilia Pia, ‘endowed with so lovely a wytt and judgment as you shall knowe, seemed the maistresse and ringe leader of all the companye’. The spirit of the place is one of intelligent happiness—‘pleasaunte communication and merey conceytes, and in every man’s countenaunce … a lovyng jocoundness’.13 The men are brave, honourable, and athletic, the women charming, lively, and intelligent:

For right as it is seemlye for [the man] to showe a certain manlinesse full and steadye, so doeth it well in a woman to have a tendernesse, soft and milde, with a kinde of womanlie sweetnes in every gesture of herres.14

They dance, cultivate music, and enjoy ‘wytty sportes and pastimes’. Accomplishments are achieved ‘rather as nature and trueth leade them, then study and arte’. 15 Their speech is cultured, neither archaic nor affected, their utterances well turned. Debating on love and kindred matters the women distinguish themselves as much as the men, for ‘who woteth not that without women no contentation or delite can be felt in all this lief of ourse?’ 16 In particular the sprightly contentions between Lady Emilia and Lord Gaspare Pallavicino reflect their ideal of mental and temperamental equality. The Tudor Translations edition admirably sums up what the book could offer to Elizabethan playwrights. First, in general terms:

In one notable regard The Courtyer may well have served as a model for the nascent Elizabethan drama. The dramatic form of colloquy in which the book was cast was the most popular of literary forms at the time of the Renaissance. … To escape from the appointed order, the categories, partitions, and theses of scholasticism into a freer air; to redeem the truths of morals and philosophy from their servitude to system, and to set them in motion as they are seen in the live world, … was in itself a kind of humanism, a reaching after the more perfect expressiveness of the drama.

Then, in more specific terms:

The civil retorts, delicate interruptions, and fencing matches of wit that are scattered throughout the book had an even higher value as models for English writing. Where could English courtly comedy learn the trick of its trade better than from this gallant realism? … The best models of courtly dialogue available for Lyly and Shakespeare were to be sought in Italy: not in the Italian drama, which was given over to the classic tradition, but in just such natural sparkling conversations as were reported in the dialogue form of Italian prose.17

The inspiration of The Courtyer was extended by other works. George Pettie translated Stefano Guazzo's La Civile Conversazione (1574) out of Italian as The Civile Conversation of M. Steeven Guazzo (1581, Books 1 to 3; 1586, Book 4, translated by Bartholomew Young). This consists of discussions between Guazzo's brother and the brother's friend, discussions ‘rather familiar and pleasant, than affected and grave, … with carefull diligence and skilful art; mary yet so that … the whole seemeth to be done by chaunce’.18 Particularly notable in Guazzo's cultivation of social courtesies is the comment on the animating spirit of women in society:

If you marke the order of feastes, playes, and merie meetings of friends, you will saye, that all these assemblies are colde and nothing delightfull, if there bee no women at them. For … men in their presence plucke up their spirites, and indeavour by woordes, jestures, and all other wayes to give them to understande howe desirous they are of their favour and good will. … To be shorte, women are they whiche keepe men waking and in continuall exercise. … [And] women do the verie same, who I warrant you woulde not be so fine, so trimmed and tricked up, so amiable every way, but of a desire to please men.19
No very original discovery, perhaps; yet to establish such a code was to set the tone for Shakespeare's world of courtly comedy.

**LYLY**

In comic drama the strongest influence on Shakespeare was that of John Lyly's euphuistic fiction and plays. Their effects on Shakespeare's prose will be suggested [elsewhere]; here what is in question is the technique of comic management. Lyly's is a gay, trim world of (if one took them seriously) affected clevernesses, in an elegantly mannered society which would be speechless were epigrams disallowed. Each phrase must have its point, each utterance its poise and pattern like the figures in a dance; each speaker must, whatever his alleged emotion, be self-possessed.

Lyly's plays develop epigrams and antitheses as their specific mode. The brisk logic-chopping of his pert pages and banterers foreshadows that of Shakespeare's cheerful impertinents like Moth, Costard, Launce, Speed, and Launcelot. His suavely witty exchanges among young elegants are heard again in Shakespeare's courtly comedies. The aim is to achieve, as Silvia remarks in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, 'a fine volley of words, gentlemen, and quickly shot off', except that the ladies are as adept as the gentlemen and often more so, and the volleys, with Shakespeare's development, consist not of words alone but of perceptive analyses and the sparkling rallies of active minds.

**SHAKESPEAREAN PRECEDENTS**

Shakespeare had already brought to a high point of stage effectiveness the sexual rivalry for mastery in *The Taming of the Shrew* (for instance at II.i.179-270) and the wit contest over love and other matters among the lords and ladies of *Love's Labour's Lost*, Berowne and Rosaline in particular (as at II.i.113-27 and 179-92). In Berowne, moreover, he had already drawn a precursor of Benedick, rallying on all but equal terms with the wittiest of the women; 'a merrier man / Within the limit of becoming mirth / I never spent an hour's talk withal,' Rosaline testifies, one whose 'eye begets occasion for his wit' so that his tongue turns to jest whatever it touches. Shakespeare had also shown the self-confident Berowne, suddenly subject to love, breaking out into comically exasperated soliloquies in verse and prose which are hardly distinguishable from the idiom of Benedick:

And I, forsooth, in love; I, that have been love's whip;  
A very beadle to a humorous sigh;  
A domineering pedant o'er the boy,  
Than whom no mortal so magnificent!  
... Go to; it is a plague  
That Cupid will impose for my neglect  
Of his almighty dreadful little might. (22)

The King he is hunting the deer: I am coursing myself. They have pitched a toil: I am toiling in a pitch—pitch that defiles. Defile! a foul word. ... I will not love; if I do, hang me. I'faith, I will not. O, but her eye! By this light, but for her eye, I would not love her—yes, for her two eyes. Well, I do nothing in the world but lie, and lie in my throat. By heaven, I do love; and it hath taught me to rhyme, and to be mallicholy; and here is part of my rhyme, and here my mallicholy. Well, she hath one o' my sonnets already; the clown bore it, the fool sent it, and the lady hath it: sweet clown, sweeter fool, sweetest lady! (23)

Prefiguring Benedick, Berowne boasts himself superior to his fellows:

I am betray'd by keeping company  
With men like you, men of inconstancy.
When shall you see me write a thing in rhyme?
Or groan for Joan? or spend a minute's time
In pruning me? When shall you hear that I
Will praise a hand, a foot, a face, an eye,
A gait, a state, a brow, a breast, a waist,
A leg, a limb?—(24)

this, of course, immediately before proving as vulnerable as they.

If Benedick has his forerunner in Berowne, Beatrice has hers among the witty ladies first of Lylyan and then of Shakespearean comedy. Of them all, only Katherina of The Taming of the Shrew compares with her in combativeness (and she is acrimoniously rather than attractively ‘witty’, greatly outdoing Beatrice in belligerence, though Beatrice shares the impulse to dominate which makes Katherina shrewish, as Beatrice, except in fun, is not): but others like Rosaline, Portia, and Rosalind delight in their intelligent high spirits. When they are satirical they are appreciatively so, enjoying the extravagances they mock but desiring no more in the way of reform than the prevalence of affectionate esteem and good humour. Each is, as Beatrice is for Don Pedro, ‘By my troth, a pleasant-spirited lady’, and each might say, as Beatrice does, ‘There was a star danced, and under that was I born’.

(III) DOGBERRY

John Aubrey (1626-97) collected materials for his Brief Lives from sources more or less connected with Shakespeare, and among them the report that

The Humour of … the Constable in a Midsomernight's Dreame, he happened to take at Grendon [i.e. Grendon Underwood] in Bucks … whiche is in the roade from London to Stratford, and there was living that Constable about 1642 when I first came to Oxon. Mr. Jos. Howe is of that parish and knew him.25

A Midsummer Night's Dream boasting no constable, this may be meant for Bottom the weaver, but since the Grendon notable is specifically constabulary Aubrey probably erred over the play's name rather than the character's function. One cherishes the thought of some actual Dogberry, in his own world anything but mute and inglorious. More ‘sources’ than this cannot be expected, save in the general sense that exuberant mismanagers of the English language, of the logic of evidence, and of the processes of discourse have always been found comic; Shakespeare had shown Dull, the constable of Love's Labour's Lost, ‘reprehending’ the Duke and wishing to ‘see his own person in flesh and blood’ (Dull's part is brief, however), Bottom lording it over his fellows, Launcelot Gobbo and his father bemusing Bassanio by interrupting each other,26 and Mistress Quickly unleashing her dazingly voluble malapropisms.

John Payne Collier, who included a biography of Will Kemp, the original Dogberry, in his Memorials of the Principal Actors in the Plays of Shakespeare (in the Shakespeare Society's publications for 1846), printed in that society's papers for 1844 a letter from Lord Burghley to Secretary Walsingham dated 10 August 1586, at a time when it was pressingly important to arrest conspirators in the Babington plot against the Queen. In his urgency Burghley marked his missive ‘hast hast hast hast Post’, and what he was so agitated about were ludicrous shortcomings he had discovered in the measures to (as Dogberry would have it) comprehend all aspicious persons. No actual connection is suggested between the Watch at Enfield (whence the complaint arose) and that at Messina, but real life may have furnished Shakespeare with inspirations over and above any he found at Grendon. The letter runs as follows:

Sir—As I cam from London homward, in my coche, I sawe at every townes end the number of x or xii, standyng, with long staves, and untill I cam to Enfeld I thought no other of them, but that they had staid for avoyding of the rayne, or to drynk at some alehowse, for so they did.
stand under pentyces [i.e. penthouses—like Borachio!] at ale howses. But at Enfeld fyndyng a
dosen in a plump, when ther was no rayne, I bethought my self that they war appointed as
watchmen, for the apprehendyng of such as are missyng; and there uppon I called some of
them to me apart, and asked them wherfor they stood there? and one of them answered, ‘To
take 3 yong men.’ And demandyng how they should know the persons, one answered with
these wordes: ‘Marry, my Lord, by intelligence of ther favor.’ ‘What meane you by that?’
quoth I. ‘Marry’, sayd they, ‘one of the partyes hath a hooked nose.’ ‘And have you,’
quoth I, ‘no other mark?’—‘No’, sayth they. And then I asked who apoynted them; and they
answered one Bankes, a Head Constable, whom I willed to be sent to me. Surely, sir, who
ever had the chardge from yow hath used the matter negligently for these watchmen stand so
openly in plumps, as no suspected person will come neare them; and if they be no better
instructed but to fynd 3 persons by one of them havyng a hooked nose, they may miss thereof.
And thus I thought good to advertise yow, that the fustyces that had the chardge, as I thynk,
may use the matter more circumspectly.27

The fact that in the play Borachio brings Conrade under the penthouse out of the rain is doubtless sheer
coincidence. But one treasures the light thrown on constabulary practice by Bankes's men, to whom
Dogberry's charge might well have been directed, who seem likelier than not to let ‘vagrom men’ steal out of
their company, and who have merely a hooked nose on which to hang their case. Messina's Watch, conjuring
up the mysterious Deformed, a vile thief this seven year, who wears a key in his ear and hath a lock hanging
by it and borrows money in God's name without repaying it, could hardly surpass the earnest confusions of
Enfield's.28

Dogberry’s ‘source’, if seminally in some worthy of Grendon, lies rather among these anticipations,
combined with certain stage precedents,29 together (it is a major consideration) with the cherished abilities of
Will Kemp, the role's original performer. Kemp, leading comedian of the 1590s, figures in the anonymous
Cambridge satire The Returne from Parnassus, Part 2 (c. 1601) as instructing a student, Philomusus, in stage
delivery, and declaring that his face ‘would be good for a foolish Mayre or a foolish iustice of peace’; 30 he
could presumably have trained him, too, for a foolish constable. Whatever Kemp's skills as a comic actor,
Shakespeare would certainly envisage them in his conception of Dogberry.31

Notes

2. C. T. Prouty discusses and reprints this work, from the sole surviving copy in the Huntington Library,
in The Sources of ‘Much Ado About Nothing’ (1950).
3. A. Feuillerat, Documents Relating to the Office of the Revels in Time of Queen Elizabeth, in Bang's
Materialen, XXI.238. ‘Panecia’ may be an error for ‘Fenicia’, the guiltless heroine of Bandello’s
version.
4. Ibid., XXI.350.
5. Bullough, II.66, 68.
6. Bullough, II.118. Further references in this section are likewise to Bullough.
7. In King John, Philip Faulconbridge, bastard son of Richard Coeur de Lion, is a hero worthy of his
father; bastardy, though conventionally thought synonymous with wickedness, was not necessarily so
considered.
8. The Faerie Queene, VI.vii. The parallel was pointed out by A. F. Potts in ‘Spenserian “Courtesy”
and “Temperance” in Shakespeare's Much Ado About Nothing’, SAB XVII (1942), and developed by
11. See Mary Augusta Scott, ‘The Book of the Courtier: a possible source of Benedick and Beatrice’, *PMLA* XVI (1901), p. 476. The article argues: (i) that Shakespeare could well have known the work, since it had had three editions by 1588; (ii) that prior to *Much Ado* he had done nothing in dialogue comparable to the freedom and ease of the *conversazioni* in *Il Cortegiano* (a dubious point); (iii) that, wishing to brighten the semi-tragedy of Claudio and Hero, he found in *The Courtier* ‘a charming witty pair [Lord Gaspare Pallavicino and the Lady Emilia Pia] in a dramatic dialogue’; (iv) that though in their witty sparrings (like *Much Ado*’s ‘merry war’), Lord Gaspare (like Benedick ‘a professed tyrant to their sex’) takes a lively anti-feminist stance and Lady Emilia counter-attacks, all this happens in a mutually appreciative spirit. ‘It is impossible to speak too highly of the artistic setting of the four evenings’ conversation, sparkling with every variety of graceful interlude, from grave to gay; now a pleasing metaphor, now a jest, a drollery—a skirmish of wit, a dramatic episode’ (op. cit., p. 487). The resemblances noted are, however, merely general parallels, sometimes quite loose, and not specific enough to prove a direct debt owed by Shakespeare to Castiglione.

12. Its influence rapidly spread. In England Thomas Hoby translated it (1552-4) and published the result in 1561 as *The Courtier of Count Baldassar Castilio*; further editions followed in 1577 and 1588, before the date of *Much Ado*. Roger Ascham, in *The Scholemaster* (1570), remarked that it should be more noted in the English court (he died in 1568, before it had had its full effect), since ‘advisedlie read and diligentlie folowed but one yeare at home in England [it] would do a yong gentleman more good then three yeares travell abrode spent in Italie’ (ed. J. E. B. Mayor, 1863, p. 61). John Florio’s *Second Frutes* (1591: dedication) reports that the most commonly studied books for those learning Italian were this, together with Guazzo’s dialogues (see below, p. 18). In John Marston’s first *Satire* (ll. 27-50) the punctilious courtier is ‘the absolute Castilio,—/ He that can all the points of courtship show’. Everard Guilpin’s *Skialethia* (1598) invites the reader to Court, where ‘Balthazer [i.e. Baldassare Castiglione] affords / Fountaines of holy and rose-water words’ (Sig. C4). Gabriel Harvey paid repeated Latin tributes (e.g. *Rhetor*, 1577, prefatory letter, and fol. Lii; also *Gratulatio Valdinensium*, 1578, IV.3, 17, 18). Ben Jonson’s *Timber: or Discoveries* (1641) recommends Castiglione’s book, along with Cicero’s *De Oratore*, as a model for the ‘Life, and Quicknesse, which is the strength and sinnewes of your penning, by pretty Sayings, Similitudes, and Conceits’ (ed. G. B. Harrison, 1923, pp. 86-7).

15. Ibid., p. 59.
16. Ibid., p. 264.
17. Ibid., pp. lxxi-lxxii, lxxxiv.

21. Of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* G. K. Hunter remarks, ‘Shakespeare has written a courtly play, a play which exposes to our admiration the brilliant life of a highly civilised community bent on enjoying itself. … Shakespeare, like Lyly, centres his picture of Cortegiano-like brilliancy on what is also known as courtship—the verbal technique of wooing’ (op. cit., p. 334).

23. Ibid., IV.iii.1-15.
24. Ibid., IV.iii.175-82.
26. *Mer. V.*, II.ii; cf. *Ado III.V*. Muriel Bradbrook sees Dogberry and Verges as ‘clearly incarnations of Gobbo and his father’ (in Leonard F. Dean, ed., *Shakespeare: Modern Essays in Criticism*, 1957, p. 105), but the resemblance is limited to this particular scene. Gobbo and Old Gobbo, Bottom and Quince, Dogberry and Verges, are all comedy duos, the leading comic man and his ‘feed’.

28. Babington and other conspirators were in fact arrested on the day Burghley wrote his letter, though in different circumstances, so some parts of England's law-and-order system worked quite as well as Messina's.

29. For a precedent in Lyly's Endimion see below, III.iii.ii, n.


31. For Kemp's qualities see W. A. Armstrong, 'Actors and theatres', in Shakespeare in his Own Age, Shakespeare Survey 17 (1964), p. 195. This suggests that as Kemp was notorious for upstaging his fellow actors with extemporal witticisms Shakespeare provided him with a part devised to absorb such sallies: 'As for Dogberry, … the bumbling discursiveness of the characterisation seems designed to accommodate … such digressions, by-play, and improvisations as Kempe may have brought to the role. That Shakespeare's clowns were shaped to fit the actors who played them seems beyond question.'

Criticism: Character Studies
Charles T. Prouty (essay date 1950)

[In the following excerpt, Prouty investigates the sixteenth-century literary sources for the characters in Much Ado about Nothing.]

At first glance there seems to be no connection between the two plots [of Much Ado About Nothing] except for the appearance of Hero and Claudio as agents in the tricking of Benedick and Beatrice, and it has been this seeming lack of integration which has been considered a weakness of the play or has led to the suggestion that the quarreling lovers were put in to liven up a rather somber story. If we keep in mind the careful manipulation of plot which has been demonstrated in connection with Dogberry, it should be reasonable to assume that there is some design in the rest of the play. One may object that if there were any such design it should be apparent and should have been noted long ago. As a general premise such an objection is not one to be tossed aside lightly, but in this case there does seem to be an acceptable explanation. Briefly, the reason why the design has not been perceived is that the true nature of Claudio and Hero and their relationship has been misunderstood. Perhaps the truth might be gleaned from a careful reading of the play, but the reader would need to be well versed in the marriage ways of the Elizabethans and well endowed with critical perception. Certainly many who have written about the play have had the requisite knowledge, but they have been misled by their own inclination to identify Hero and Claudio as romantic literary lovers. Such a view is perhaps understandable. Benedick, for example, talks as though Claudio were a conventional lover and endows him with speeches and behavior which the audience never hears or sees. But such tirades are a part of Benedick's humor as an enemy of love and are not necessarily true. A comparison of both Hero and Claudio with their prototypes in the sources will show that these two are not fashioned from the usual literary pattern.

In all those versions wherein the lovers are given any extensive treatment, the hero is a conventionalized lover. [In one source Shakespeare may have used in composing Much Ado About Nothing, Belleforest's Le Troisième Tome des Histories Extraites des œuvres Italiennes de Bandel, Histoire XVIII (1569),] Timbro walks before Fenicia's house to gaze upon her beauty and feed the fire of love. He sends letters and embassies. … Belleforest develops the character still further, describing the inception of love through the familiar figure of beauty's blaze entering the eye and traveling to the heart. We are given the full text of a typical love letter and that of a love poem. The entire subject is argued in wearisome detail by Fénicie and her nurse. With Beverley and Whetstone the lovers become the archetypes of conventional Renaissance lovers. Their love sickness is of a unity with that suffered by numberless victims of Cupid's arrow from the Songes et Sonettes through the poetry and fiction of the century. Their secret messages, their clandestine meetings, their happiness, their sorrows, their reconciliation, their love language, the tropes, which describe them are in themselves echoes and are in turn echoed in countless other tales of romantic love. Orlando is of the same
pattern, even though he does not measure up to Rosalind's high standard of the necessary marks of a lover.

A lean cheek, which you have not; a blue eye and sunken, which you have not; an unquestionable spirit, which you have not; a beard neglected, which you have not. But I pardon you for that, for simply your having in beard is a younger brother's revenue. Then your hose should be ungarter'd, your bonnet unbanded, your sleeve unbutton'd, your shoe untied, and everything about you demonstrating a careless desolation. ¹

Nevertheless Orlando does very well. He mars the bark of trees by scratching out love songs on them; he adorns other trees with manuscripts of very bad poetry; he loves so that "neither rhyme nor reason can express how much," and he has no desire to be cured of his passion. Of a somewhat more mature nature is Orsino, but he too is a lover who lyrically apostrophizes the "Spirit of Love" and sadly puns on Curio's simple phrase, "The hart."

Of such simples was a good Elizabethan literary lover compounded, but Claudio, the favorite of Don Pedro, is made of other stuff. Unlike Ariodant who, overcome by the thought of Genevra's falseness, seeks only solitude and death, Claudio seeks the most cruel vengeance in a public defamation of his bride-to-be before the very altar where they were to be married. Timbreo sought no such vengeance; he sent word by an intermediary telling what he had seen and advising Fenecia to marry her lover, for he (Timbreo) would have no further dealings with her. Ariodant was so faithful a lover that in spite of his belief in Genevra's dishonesty, he returned to fight against his own brother in her behalf. Claudio, on the other hand, refrains from a duel with the aggrieved Leonato because of his soldierly scruples about fighting a less worthy and unequal adversary. The only suggestion of sympathy for the sorrowing family is that briefly expressed by Pedro. This same callousness is intensified when, following the departure of Leonato and his brother, Benedick appears. He is greeted with joy because Claudio and the duke wish to jest with him.

Thus it is easy to understand why there is general critical agreement in regarding Claudio as an unpleasant young man who behaves very badly. According to the standards of romantic love Claudio deserves the title of "cad" or "bounder," but unfortunately for those who wish to hurl opprobrium upon him, the plain fact is that Claudio is not a romantic lover and cannot therefore be judged by the artificial standards of literary convention. For example, how does Claudio fall in love? He tells Pedro

When you went onward on this ended action,  
I looked upon her with a soldier's eye,  
That liked, but had a rougher task in hand  
Than to drive liking to the name of love;  
But now I am returned, and that war-thoughts  
Have left their places vacant, in their rooms  
Come thronging soft and delicate desires,  
All prompting me how fair young Hero is,  
Saying I liked her ere I went to wars.(2)

The verb describing the young man's feeling is significantly "like" not "love." Indeed, in his own words Claudio differentiates between "liking" and "the name of love." Cupid's dart has not struck Claudio, nor has the blaze of beauty ignited the usual furious flames.

The first indication of his interest in Hero is a question to Benedick directly the company have departed and left these two alone in the first scene of the play.

CLAUDIO

Benedick, didst thou note the daughter of Signior Leonato?
BENEDICK

I noted her not, but I looked on her.

CLAUDIO

Is she not a modest young lady?(3)

Benedick, refusing a straight answer, is importuned: “No, I pray thee speak in sober judgment”; and “Thou thinkest I am in sport. I pray thee tell me truly how thou likest her.” Neither Orlando nor Romeo asks other people what they think of Rosalind or Juliet; these lovers know that they have fallen desperately in love. Orlando is struck dumb and cannot even say “I thank you” to “heavenly Rosalind” who has given him the chain from about her neck. Romeo is more loquacious; indeed, his first vision of Juliet is followed almost at once by

O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!
It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night
Like a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear—
Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear!
So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows
As yonder lady o'er her fellows shows.
The measure done, I'll watch her place of stand
And, touching hers, make blessed my rude hand.
Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight!
For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night.(5)

Whatever may be our view of Claudio, it is certain that he is no lover in the sense that these two are. Moreover he is not impetuous. Benedick reveals the secret to Pedro:

BENEDICK

... he is in love. With who? Now that is your Grace's part. Mark how short his answer is: with Hero

CLAUDIO

If this were so, so were it uttered.

BENEDICK

Like the old tale, my lord: “It is not so, nor 'twas not so; but indeed, God forbid it should be

CLAUDIO

If my passion change not shortly, God forbid it should be otherwise.

PEDRO

Amen, if you love her; for the lady is very well worthy.

CLAUDIO

You speak this to fetch me in, my lord.(6)

It is perhaps unnecessary to point out that romantic lovers do not think or speak of being “fetched in,” nor does it ever enter their minds that their passions may change. This cautious streak in Claudio is still evident
when, at the conclusion of his private talk with his patron, he remarks,

But lest my liking might too sudden seem,
I would have salved it with a longer treatise. (?)

Naturally he is cautious. As a young favorite of the duke contemplating matrimony he has many things to think on, if he is to make a proper alliance. As soon as Benedick leaves them, Claudio opens a serious discussion with Pedro. “My liege, your Highness now may do me good.” 8 In other words, he seeks Pedro's assistance in the marriage, but first there is a most important point that needs to be ascertained before Claudio asks the prince to proceed in his behalf. Unlike Romeo or Orlando, Claudio is a careful suitor with an interest in finances; he inquires, “Hath Leonato any son, my lord?” Don Pedro, also a realist, readily understands, as his answer demonstrates, “No child but Hero; she's his only heir.” 9 To this is appended the query, “Dost thou affect her, Claudio?” Pedro does not talk of love, for this is not a love match in the romantic sense. Obviously Claudio likes the girl, as he then proceeds to explain in the lines quoted above and that is all to the good; but what Claudio is really interested in is a good and suitable marriage.

The propriety of the match as Shakespeare presents it is in contrast with the situation in the earlier versions. Shakespeare's Leonato is governor of Messina; not so in [in Matteo Bandello's La Prima Parte de la Novelle (1554) or] Belleforest, where the inferior social position of the heroine is advanced as the real reason for Timbreo's letter of rejection. Claudio's social position is, of course, identical with that of Timbreo but is unlike that of Ariodant who is but a knight aspiring for the daughter of a king. 10 Again Shakespeare has altered, and the changes have a definite part in his scheme of things. The elevation of Leonato from the status of mere gentleman to the governorship of Messina has not, I think, been noted as a fact of any importance or significance, but when a favorite of the prince decides to marry he must not choose beneath his station. Margaret of Fressingfield may by sheer virtue ascend from her rustic dairy to share the eminence of her husband, the earl of Lincoln; but in the real world such marriages were honored more in the breach than the observance.

Although deception is one of the themes of his play, Shakespeare did not try to deceive his audience into thinking that Claudio was a romantic lover. The pattern was clear enough, and if the words of the young man were not enough, the matter was further clarified when the prince offered to act in Claudio's behalf. For a later age, particularly one devoted to the premise that true love conquers all, levels all barriers, leads to joyous matrimony and wedded bliss, the facts that have been adduced have little meaning. But such an age should remember that William Shakespeare himself gave evidence in the legal proceedings instituted by Stephen Belott against his father-in-law, Christopher Mountjoy, who had broken his promise to give a marriage portion of £60 and to make a will leaving £200 to his daughter, Belott's wife. Shakespeare was called upon not only because he had been living in Mountjoy's house at the time when the apprentice married his master's daughter but because he helped to arrange the marriage. Urged on by Mistress Mountjoy, Shakespeare persuaded Belott to the fatal step. 11

Nor should we forget George Chapman's part in the complicated marital affairs of Agnes Howe, the young heiress. Thanks to Professor Sisson's discoveries 12 we now know that this eminent dramatist abandoned his usual vein and turned to the writing of a domestic drama dealing with the machinations of John Howe to arrange for his daughter a marriage that would be profitable to him. Three principal suitors were betrothed to the girl and from them, and a number of others, the father profited as best he could. Professor Sisson's reconstruction of this lost play, The Old Joiner of Aldgate, gives us a realistic account of a most complicated marriage de convenance.

But we should not conclude that the custom was limited to London tradesmen such as Mountjoy and Howe; in all classes of society love was a very minor consideration in arranging marriages. For example, Mr. John Stanhope of Harrington in a letter to Sir Christopher Hatton discusses marriage plans for his daughter:
... after two or three days' rest, I took my daughter with me to my brother's house; where leaving her, I came to Carlisle to finish in some sort or other with my Lord Scrope our former agreement touching the marriage of our children, whom I find, as ever, so still desirous to proceed according to our first intent; and therefore have agreed to meet his Lordship again a month hence, in a progress which he intendeth into Lancashire, where the young couples may see one another, and after a little acquaintance, may resolve accordingly. 13

Here we see two Elizabethan fathers arranging a proper marriage for their children who have not as yet seen one another. Claudio has at least seen Hero, but he has not spoken with her or even written her a letter. A very proper young man, he is proceeding through the proper channels. Obviously he must have the prince’s permission, and if he is fortunate the prince may act in his behalf, or, as he says, “My liege, your Highness now may do me good.” This then explains why Shakespeare has Pedro tell Hero of Claudio's affection and arrange the marriage with Leonato.

In Bandello and Belleforest, Timbreo employs a friend to make the necessary arrangements, as is quite proper; but Shakespeare, by transferring this office to Pedro, puts the marriage on quite another basis. Now the alliance is one blessed by royal authority, and Hero's alleged misconduct becomes a very serious matter of which Don John makes the most that he may. When he appears to make the accusation against Hero, the villain addresses himself to his brother because of the prince's share in arranging the match. Claudio may hear what is to be said since it concerns him, and Don John continues: “You may think I love you not; let that appear hereafter, and aim better at me by that I now will manifest. For my brother (I think he holds you well and in dearness of heart) hath holpe to effect your ensuing marriage: surely suit ill spent and labor ill bestowed.” 14 Offered proof of the charge both Claudio and Pedro are prepared for violent action. The former resolves “in the congregation where I should wed, there will I shame her,” 15 while the prince, recognizing his responsibility, says, “And as I woed for thee to obtain her, I will join with thee to disgrace her.” 16 And later Pedro's bitter words reveal his revulsion and the blow to his own pride:

What should I speak?
I stand dishonored that have gone about
To link my dear friend to a common stale.(17)

Viewed as a mariage de convenance the projected alliance and its breach demand another standard of judgment than that of romantic love. The public denunciation of Hero is an unpleasant affair, but Pedro and Claudio are more than justified, since they accept for truth the evidence which they have seen. Claudio likes Hero in the same way that Mr. Stanhope and Lord Scrope hoped their children would like one another, but Claudio is not madly in love with his bride-to-be. He has hoped for, and the prince has arranged, a suitable match. If Hero has a clandestine lover she has affronted all the proprieties. Unchastity is but one of her sins, the others being a deliberate flaunting of the arrangements of her father and Pedro and an attempt to pass herself off to her proud young husband as undamaged merchandise. In the eyes of the aggrieved she was not only a wanton but an intentional perpetrator of fraud.

Even the most cursory examination of the available evidence emphasizes the businesslike attitude toward marriage in Shakespeare's England. In the proceedings of the Court of Requests, for example, is listed a variety of cases concerning every aspect of marriage arrangements. To cite but a few, these cases comprise a “Reward for bringing about a marriage,” “Gifts promised for negotiating a marriage,” “ Expenses of courting defendant's niece, the engagement being broken off,” “Gifts and benefits’ promised by defendants on plaintiff's marriage with their daughter,” “Lands … comprised in a marriage settlement,” “ Breach of promise of marriage,” and “ Money delivered to second defendant under promise of marrying plaintiff.” 18 While the poets sang of love, the real world went about its business of dealing practically with the divine passion. A rejected suitor with a literary flair bemoaned his loss in appropriate verse; his less talented and more forthright brother hied himself to the courts and sued for the “Recovery of gloves, rings, and other presents, made in
anticipation of a marriage which was broken off.”

The chief thing that could affect contracted marriages, aside from occasional insubordination, was a doubt of legality or any indication of fraud, and there were suits for “Money paid in respect of a marriage which proved illegal.” Since business was business, it was, understandably enough, to the interest of fathers and go-betweens to keep a sharp eye out for “pretended” or secret marriages. A secret marriage, therefore, between the earl of Leicester and Lettice, countess of Essex, most emphatically did not satisfy the bride's father. He knew too well the nature of his new son-in-law to be content with anything save a public ceremony which he could witness, and such a second wedding was celebrated.

Against such a background the businesslike, callous, and even vengeful spirit of both Claudio and Don Pedro becomes understandable. A suitable marriage having been arranged, it now seems to them that Hero would trick them if she could, and so her death is not a matter of regret but an instance of wickedness receiving its just reward. They are, of course, repentant when Hero is exonerated, and Claudio is willing to do any penance which Leonato may impose. Even here the new marriage is presented in the same light as the old, for Leonato asks that Claudio marry his brother's daughter and “give her the right you should have given her cousin.”

The right is, of course, a suitable husband, but there are the usual considerations. The new bride is described by Leonato as “almost the copy of my child that's dead,” and he adds, significantly, “and she alone is heir to both of us.”

Claudio's penance is both light and well paid.

It will be remembered that just such a general tone of Realpolitik was evident in Bandello. Shakespeare does not make Claudio the straightforward sensualist that was Timbreo, nor does he make Leonato a sagacious father trying to assure his daughter of some or any marriage, even though she must hide in the country for a couple of years so as to deceive potential suitors. Rather the realism of the matter is shown by Shakespeare in the essential mariage de convenance situation. Of this there is no hint in Bandello or in any of the other versions. In Bandello Timbreo is a frank sensualist forced into marriage by his desires. Elsewhere the hero is purely conventional, a romantic lover. Actually such alteration does not require any change in the character of the heroine as she appears in Bandello and Belleforest. Here she is the well-brought-up young girl, the dutiful daughter who knows what deceivers men are and how to behave herself. On the other hand, the heroine in the Ariosto descent is quite a different character. She is impetuous, romantic, and wilful, and Hero does represent a great alteration from such a pattern. Since Shakespeare has changed the fundamental relationship from one of convention to a reality, it seems fruitless to attempt any direct explanation of Hero's origins. She is what she is because of the situation in which she plays a principal part.

The influence of this last fact is easily demonstrable. Whereas Fenicia rejects all letters, messages, gifts, and embassies, Hero is not faced with such trials which are necessary temptations for Fenicia whose suitor is the ardent Don Timbreo; but Claudio, the soul of propriety, will make no such furtive assaults on Hero's virtue. Similarly there is no need for Hero to discuss her suitor as does Belleforest's heroine. Fénicie, in tiresome paragraphs, is forced to expound the whole duty of a virtuous daughter, but this she does as a specific reaction to the immoral suggestions of her nurse. Hero, not being wooed by such a lover and fortunately being without the attendance of such a confidante, has no need to orate. She is involved in quite a different situation: a mariage de convenance wherein she is very simply the dutiful daughter. Unlike Juliet who already has a husband and cannot marry Paris, Hero, perfectly content with her father's choice, does not object to the match, with the result that there is no conflict, no action except that which arises from the deception.

This lack of action clarifies many things, chief among them, Hero's taciturnity. She has remarkably few lines except those connected with the Benedick-Beatrice plot. During the whole first act, although she is on stage for a considerable time, she has but one line, a mere tag, “My cousin means Signior Benedick of Padua.”

She is equally reticent during and after her betrothal. Leonato announces the match, but it is Beatrice who speaks and her words are an admonishment: “Speak cousin; or if you cannot, stop his mouth with a kiss and let him not speak neither.” From this we may deduce a bit of stage business involving a maidenly offering
of her lips; but the rest is silence, for no words pass those lips that we can hear, although Hero is supposed to be whispering words of love in Claudio's ear. Perhaps modesty may be the rein upon her tongue, but really there is no need for her to say anything. She has not hitherto talked with Claudio nor has she been wooed by him. As Beatrice remarks, "It is my cousin's duty to make curtsy and say, 'Father, as it please you'; but yet for all that, cousin, let him be a handsome fellow, or else make another curtsy and say, 'Father, as it please me.'" 26 Presumably Claudio is a handsome fellow, and Hero does her duty, but it were the height of folly to imagine her passionately in love as was Juliet. She makes but one reference to her bridegroom on the morning of her wedding when she casually observes, "These gloves the Count sent me, they are an excellent perfume." 27 Maidenly reticence can hardly be offered as an excuse for Hero's failure to talk about her future husband. The conversation which precedes her glove reference is neither maidenly nor modest. No, the plain fact of the matter is that Hero is not emotionally involved; she is an obedient and dutiful daughter, just such a daughter as old Capulet and many another Renaissance father would have wished to have.

Such a character is not too frequent a performer on the stage because, as we have noted, there can arise no action from such passiveness. However, there is an excellent and more loquacious member of the genre in *Eastward Ho*. Mildred, the dutiful daughter of the goldsmith Touchstone, is presented as a contrast to her willful and socially ambitious sister Gertrude who scorns their father's counsel and marries the bankrupt Sir Petronel Flash. Without any warning Touchstone announces to Mildred that she is to marry his apprentice, Golding. In words that certainly warmed the heart of every father in the audience, she replies: "Sir, I am all yours; your body gave me life; your care and love, happiness of life; let your virtue still direct it, for to your wisdom I wholly dispose myself." 28 As is to be expected, happiness and prosperity are the lot of Mildred and Golding; ruin and disaster the just reward of proud Gertrude and her mountebank knight. Very little is said about Mildred, for there is nothing dramatic in her situation; the main action focuses on Gertrude and Petronel.

Similarly there is little or no action implicit in the affairs of Claudio and Hero, and were it not for the deception there could be no play. In the presentation of this one source of action Shakespeare has altered his original. Only in Ariosto and the versions derived from him is there a maid dressed in her mistress's robes, and there we have a very clear explanation of the disguise. There is no such clarity in *Much Ado*. Margaret's part in the plot is never explained. All we ever hear by way of explanation is Leonato's brief reference:

But Margaret was in some fault for this,  
Although against her will, as it appears  
In the true course of all the question.(29)

More than this we do not know, and elsewhere there is the same uncertainty. Borachio, first broaching the scheme, advises Don John to tell the prince and Claudio that he (Borachio) is Hero's lover. In the same scene is found the ambiguous reference: "... hear me call Margaret Hero, hear Margaret term me Claudio ..." 30 In all subsequent accounts of what happened the identity of the lover is unknown and there is no mention of the conversation between the false Hero and her paramour. The prince and Claudio are deceived by their eyes, not their ears, and Borachio's confession gives the same impression: "... how you were brought into the orchard and saw me court Margaret in Hero's garments ..." 31 But it is such contradiction that leads Professor Dover Wilson to posit an earlier play carelessly revised by Shakespeare. Although such an explanation neatly settles the problem by avoiding it, there really seems to be no need to worry the matter too much. There is no logical explanation, as was pointed out by Lewis Carroll in a letter to Ellen Terry:

But even if Hero might be supposed to be so distracted as not to remember where she had slept the night before, or even whether she had slept anywhere, surely Beatrice has her wits about her! And when an arrangement was made, by which she was to lose, for one night, her twelve-months' bedfellow, is it conceivable that she didn't know where Hero passed the night? Why didn't she reply:
"But good my lord sweet Hero slept not there:
She had another chamber for the nonce.
'Twas sure some counterfeit that did present
Her person at the window, aped her voice,
Her mien, her manners, and hath thus deceived
My good Lord Pedro and this company?"

With all these excellent materials for proving an “alibi” it is incomprehensible that no one should think of it. If only there had been a barrister present, to cross-examine Beatrice!

“Now, ma'am, attend to me, please, and speak up so that the jury can hear you. Where did you sleep last night? Where did Hero sleep? Will you swear that she slept in her own room? Will you swear that you do not know where she slept?” I feel inclined to quote old Mr. Weller and to say to Beatrice at the end of the play (only I'm afraid it isn't etiquette to speak across the footlights):

"Oh, Samivel, Samivel, vy vornt there a halibi?" (32)

There can no more be a cross-examination of Beatrice than there can be a confession by Margaret. All that matters is that Claudio and Pedro think the accusation true and behave as they do in the Temple. The deception per se is not important in Shakespeare's play. The significance is the real matter of importance. Shakespeare is not interested in Margaret as a deceived Dalinda; nor is he concerned with the variety of things that happen to Claudio and Hero before they reach the port of matrimony. In other words, those aspects of the story which appealed to Ariosto, Bandello, and the others are not for Shakespeare; his purpose is quite alien to that of other tellers of this tale. From what we have seen of Claudio and Hero, the significance of the deception is apparent. This is not a love match in the conventional sense; it is a proper marriage which is wrecked as easily as it is arranged, when there is a hint of fraud. The reaction of both the prince and Claudio to Hero's death and their behavior to both Leonato and Benedick are explicable on no other grounds. It is as though Shakespeare were saying to us, “Here is the fashion in the real world where marriage is essentially a business arrangement.” The literary ideal and the reality are at variance, or as Rosalind observes: “Men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love.” 33

It may be that, according to modern standards, Shakespeare should have so plotted his play that there could be a ready and easy explanation for Margaret's complicity and her silence, but again I would suggest that neither Shakespeare nor his audience bothered about motivation and logical explanation in the sense that we do. After all, the scene does take place off stage and is reported with a dearth of detail. It is not the subtle trick of a Polynesso; it is merely the source of the only action that can arise in the Hero-Claudio plot. As such it happens, and that is all we need be concerned with. There is no rival; Hero's affections are not engaged; action results from an external event. Viewed as a most necessary cog in the plot the deception should perhaps be acted out and not reported; but aside from the difficulty of representing the disguised Margaret, the reporting is not a fault, for it emphasizes the fact that the scene is external—a mere device which the dramatist uses but does not consider important for its own sake.

Although we have been concerned with the realism of the Hero-Claudio plot, we should not conclude that Much Ado is a satiric or problem comedy. It has been necessary to emphasize the realism of this plot because a failure to do has confused Shakespeare's intent. There is a real difference between the nonserious presentation of a realistic situation and the serious presentation of the same thing, and this play, unlike Measure for Measure or All's Well, is certainly not to be taken as a serious portrayal of unpleasant realism. If we think for a moment of the changes that are rung on the theme of deception, we will realize that the comic spirit has the upper hand. At the end of the opening scene Pedro decides to make use of the night's masking to hide his identity and, pretending to be Claudio, to woo Hero. The next two scenes are concerned with nothing but the overhearing of this. Antonio reports an incorrect version to his brother Leonato, while Borachio has
the correct story for Don John. The first scene of Act II has yet
more deceiving. Benedick, hiding his identity
under a mask, must bear in silence a tongue-lashing from Beatrice. Claudio, pretending to be Benedick,
receives from Don John the unpleasant and false information that the prince intends to marry Hero. No sooner
is this matter set right and the betrothal of Claudio and Hero performed than Pedro plots the deception of
Benedick and Beatrice. Even the Watch are part of the pattern, for they create out of their own
misunderstanding that renowned thief “one Deformed.” All this deceiving springs from but a single cause:
various people are guilty of eavesdropping. Certainly the prince and Claudio are eavesdroppers when they
secretly witness the false assignation, and both Benedick and Beatrice are brought to the altar by their sin of
overhearing, or as Hero says:

\[
\text{Is little Cupid's crafty arrow made}, \\
\text{That only wounds by hearsay. (34)}
\]

Of all this eavesdropping and deceiving there is no hint in the sources; both are original with Shakespeare who
uses the theme to achieve his comic purpose.

Thus has Shakespeare adapted the Hero-Claudio story to suit his nonserious treatment of it; but this plot
cannot stand by itself as comedy nor as a reflection of contemporary attitudes toward marriage. The comedy is
made by Benedick and Beatrice whose love is another aspect of the nonromantic and whose marriage balances
that of Claudio and Hero.

**BENEDICK AND BEATRICE**

As with Claudio and Hero, it is necessary to understand Benedick and Beatrice in contemporary
terms if their place in the structure of the play is to be comprehended as part of an organic unity. Here in a strictly literal
sense we abandon the sources, for no such characters are there to be found. A moment's reflection, however,
may show us that a comparison of Shakespeare with his originals has led us to a point where something like
the Benedick-Beatrice plot is an absolute necessity. With the Hero-Claudio affair a mariage de convenance
whose only action is based on deception, there must be some sort of counterplot wherein deception is
definitely comic. For such a contrast Benedick and Beatrice are admirably suited. But these two have a
relevancy to the ideas of the play as well as to its plot. There is reason behind Shakespeare's creation of them,
and this we may notice if we expand our study of sources to include previous literary appearances of such
characters and the ideas which they propound.

Miss Mary Augusta Scott pointed out certain parallels between Benedick and Beatrice on the one hand and
Lord Gaspare Pallavicino and the Lady Emilia Pia on the other. The principal likenesses which Miss Scott
observes are of a general nature. First, the Italian pair are witty and they speak in dramatic dialogue. Second,
there is antagonism between them because Lord Gaspare is essentially antifeminist and as such is teased by
the Lady Emilia who defends her sex. When it is suggested that the group define “a gentilwoman of the
Palaice so facioned in all perfections, as these Lordes have facioned the perfect Courtier,” 36 Lady Emilia
expresses the pious hope that her adversary have no part in such a discussion, for he will surely fashion “one
that can do nought elles but looke to the kitchin and spinn.” 37 Resemblances of this sort there are between
Castiglione and Shakespeare, but the frequency of the literary appearances of such characters throughout the
century testifies to a widespread convention rather than to direct imitation.

It is likewise something of an oversimplification to regard, as does Mr. D. L. Stevenson, Benedick and
Beatrice as participants in the conventional “sex-duel,” “quarreling over the nature of love.” 38 Thus these
two are viewed as a sort of culmination of “the amorous conflict” which began “in the poetry of Wyatt.” 39
Such constant application of a thesis leads to an erroneous interpretation of the love relationship of Hero and
Claudio and their function in the play, as well as to the questionable generalization that “Shakespeare's
comedies of courtship … resolve a quarrel over the nature of love which had been current in English literature for about four centuries.” It is quite true that Benedick and Beatrice have perfectly obvious relations to the tradition of quarreling lovers, but an examination of what these two actually do and say precludes any attempt to make them sophisticated in the sense that the Lord Gaspare and the Lady Emilia are. Similarly there is a world of difference between Berowne and Rosaline, and Benedick and Beatrice, even though there are certain resemblances. The patterns of Elizabethan love behavior cannot be easily separated and analyzed according to strict definition. Aside from this, the fact is that Benedick and Beatrice are characters in a play and their function within that framework limits and modifies so that they are something more than symbols of a convention.

Traditional elements are, in part, responsible for the dramatic popularity of Benedick and Beatrice, since the audience recognizes with pleasure that which is familiar, and there is exemplified in these two still another convention which has hitherto escaped notice, although a clue was offered when Miss Potts noted parallels between the persons of Much Ado and characters in The Faerie Queene. Of these parallels, the late Professor Tucker Brooke remarked with characteristic irony, “Only a very clever person could have noted them, or could have left it, as Miss Potts does, to some strangely gifted reader to decide what they imply.” With an acute awareness of both possible and probable foolhardiness, I venture to suggest that at least one of the likenesses may be said to have apparent significance. There is a definite affinity between Beatrice and Mirabella, who is doomed by Cupid to a penance of two years’ duration. She is mounted on “a mangy iade” led by “a lewd foole” and followed by another,

... who hauing in his hand a whip,
Her therewith yirks, and still when she complaines,
The more he laughs, and does her closely quip,
To see her sore lament, and bite her tender lip.(44)

The purpose of this unhappy wandering through the world is to afford Mirabella the opportunity to redeem herself by saving “so many loues, as she did lose.” For Mirabella the quest was difficult, since she had “through her dispiteous pride, whilstl loue lackt place” destroyed some “two and twenty.” Though of mean parentage, the lady had “wondrous giftes of nature’s grace”; such beauty was hers that

The beames whereof did kindle louely fire
In th' harts of many a knight, and many a gentle squire.(48)

But to all her suitors Mirabella was indifferent, and the more she was praised “the more she did all loue despize,” saying,

She was borne free, not bound to any wight,
And so would euer liue, and loue her owne delight.(49)

Arrogant in the power which her beauty gave her, she

Did boast her beautie had such soueraine might,
That with the onely twinkle of her eye,
She could or saue, or spill, whom she would hight.
What could the Gods doe more, but doe it more aright?(50)

Naturally such effrontery led to heavenly displeasure with the result that Mirabella was brought a captive unto the bar of Cupid’s Court where she was examined and sentenced. Her guards on the journey are “Disdaine” who leads the horse and “Scorne” who scourges her.

These same two abstractions are used by Hero in describing her cousin:
But Nature never framed a woman's heart
Of prouder stuff than that of Beatrice.
Disdain and Scorn ride sparkling in her eyes,
Misprising what they look on, and her wit
Values itself so highly that to her
All matter else seems weak. She cannot love,
Nor take no shape nor project of affection,
She is so self-endeared. (51)

Hero's description seems to suit Mirabella quite as well as Beatrice; both misprise and both are self-endeared. Other comments on Beatrice confirm the resemblance. Benedick addresses her as “Lady Disdain.” 52 When Pedro observes, “She cannot endure to hear tell of a husband,” Leonato replies, “O, by no means. She mocks all her wooers out of suit.” 53 This same theme of obduracy is mentioned again in the scene gulling Benedick; the prince feigns amazement at the news of Beatrice's love: “I would have thought her spirit had been invincible against all assaults of affection.” 54

There can be little doubt that these two ladies have a great deal in common, although there are equally obvious differences between them. But should we conclude that Shakespeare is imitating directly from Spenser or that both are imitating a common, nonextant source? The simple answer seems to be that both are writing about the same object—the conventional “Disdainful Woman.” Such a personage appears as a constant in the literature of the period. When, for example, Giletta wished to hide her love from Frizaldo, she adopted just such a conventional attitude. When Rinaldo, quite unaware of her dissembling, “saluted her by the name of his mystresse, very disdainfully and scornfully, or not at all she aunsweared him: On him shee frowned with a curst countenaunce.” 55 Not only do the terms “disdain and scorn” appear, there is as well the adjective “curst” which Antonio applies with exactly the same significance. When Leonato advises Beatrice, “By my troth, niece, thou wilt never get thee a husband, if thou be so shrewd of thy tongue,” Antonio adds, “In faith, she's too curt.” 56 Here again there is no question of direct influence: both Whetstone and Shakespeare are using the well-established clichés in connection with a stereotype. 57 The pattern appears again and again. Colin Clout, like many another, loved a maiden who scorned him, and Rosalind, the widow's daughter of the glen, like Beatrice, Mirabella, and many another, fed her suitor with disdain. The Elizabethan Miscellanies abound with harsh descriptions of disdainful ladies, and the verses of such poets as Turbervile, Gascoigne, and Whetstone frequently upbraid the stony hearts which scorn them.

Although Beatrice may be reasonably classified as a “Disdainful Dame,” she is not identical with Mirabella or any other woman we have noted, and if we are to avoid the dangers of generalization, we must realize her composite nature. In point of fact Benedick's behavior is in some ways closer to that of Mirabella. Whereas we have only the one slight reference to Beatrice's mocking her suitors, Benedick himself boasts of his cruelty to the sex: “But it is certain I am loved of all ladies, only you excepted; and I would I could find in my heart that I had not a hard heart, for truly I love none.” 58 When Claudio asks his opinion of Hero, our masculine Disdainer reveals the same attitude. “Do you question me as an honest man should do, for my simple true judgment? or would you have me speak after my custom, as being a professed tyrant to their sex?” 59 This avowed custom of cruelty to women, while talked of, is never demonstrated, for none of the many who love Benedick appears in this play. Benedick, too, is really a composite of several conventions brought to life by Shakespeare's genius. Generically he is a disdainer and a quarreling lover, but certainly he is not to be equated with Berowne, that eloquent defender of “the right Promethean fire,” simply because he engages in jesting with a woman for whom he finally admits love. The diversity of the character is pointed further by Miss Potts's notation of parallels between him and Spenser's Braggadocio. 60 Beatrice, in the opening scene, jests at his martial exploits; later Pedro observes, “… in the managing of quarrels you may say he is wise, for either he avoids them with great discretion, or undertakes them with a most Christianlike fear.” 61 Braggadocio exhibits the same characteristics, but again there is no question of direct indebtedness; instead, Spenser and Shakespeare are both using a familiar stereotype and in describing it they both use familiar tropes.
Another familiar idea which appears in *The Faerie Queene*, *The Shepheardes Calendar*, and in other poetry and prose works helps to explain the dramatic popularity of Benedick and Beatrice, as well as to emphasize Shakespeare's use of ideas current in his own age which would have an easy and definite appeal for his audience. Here again it is necessary to abandon sources in any strict sense, in favor of study which will reveal something of the background of ideas and behavior patterns familiar to the dramatist and his audience. After the rescue of St. George from the dungeons of Orgoglio, there is a brief interlude when, at Una's request, Prince Arthur tells of his loves and lineage. In youth, the usual time for love to burgeon, Prince Arthur avoided the infection because of the good advice given him by old Timon.

That idle name of loue, and louers life,
   As losse of time, and virtues enimy
I euer scornd, and ioyd to stirre vp strife,
   In middest of their mournful Tragedy,
Ay wont to laugh, when them I heard to cry,
   And blow the fire, which them to ashes brent ...(62)

Such arrant defiance of Cupid can have but one result as the prince ruefully admits:

Nothing is sure, that growes on earthly ground:
   And who most trustes in arme of fleshly might,
And boasts, in beauties chaine not to be bound,
   Doth soonest fall in disauentrous fight,
And yeeldes his caytiue neck to victours most despight.(63)

The blind god has triumphed over the rebel

Whose prouder vaunt that proud auenging boy
Did soone pluck downe, and curbd my libertie.(64)

Equally defiant is Benedick as we are told by Beatrice who, learning that he has returned safely from the wars, defines him as rebel against Cupid. “He set up his bills here in Messina and challenged Cupid at the flight; and my uncle’s fool, reading the challenge subscribed for Cupid and challenged him at the burbolt.” 65 Later in the play when both Beatrice and Benedick have been deceived, Pedro refers to Benedick’s opposition to the god of Love. “He hath twice or thrice cut Cupid’s bowstring, and the little hangman dare not shoot at him.” 66 The prince is here speaking in ironic vein because he and Claudio feel certain that they have succeeded in their deception, but the irony and humor are perfectly obvious to the audience for whom this aspect of Benedick’s character has already been well established. The parallels with Prince Arthur may, however, be observed in further details. Benedick, like the prince, scorns “that idle name of love.” When Claudio first asks an opinion on Hero, Benedick must at once attack conventional love language. “But speak you this with a sad brow? or do you play the floating jack, to tell us Cupid is a good hare-finder, and Vulcan a rare carpenter?” 67 Similarly Benedick joys “to stirre up strife” for lovers. It is with evident pleasure that he teases Claudio with the quip, “the Prince hath got your Hero.” 68 Using the willow, the conventional symbol of the forsaken lover, the disdainer exploits the situation to the full.

It is this use by Benedick of conventional literary love jargon in speaking with or about Claudio that has led to misunderstanding of this particular character. As we have observed, Claudio does not qualify as a romantic, even though Benedick talks as if he were, practically putting the clichés in his mouth. As Cupid’s foe and a scorn of “the idle name of love,” Benedick is always ready to ridicule the subject whether he has just cause or no. All he needs is the suggestion of fashionable love talk to send him into a tirade wherein he attacks such jargon. Claudio mentions his liking for Hero, and Benedick is off; Pedro observes that someday he will see Benedick look pale with love and the accused replies as we know he will. In just such a vein is Benedick’s soliloquy which immediately precedes his deception. Ranting on at a great rate against love and Claudio as a lover, Benedick’s words are wondrously ironic in view of what is to happen. Like Prince Arthur’s, “his
prouder vaunt that proud avenging boy [will] soone plucke downe." This is the stuff of comedy and should be understood in this as well as in its conventional sense.

It may, I think, be demonstrated that an Elizabethan audience would, early in the course of the play, realize what is going to happen to Benedick and Beatrice. As rebels against love their fate is sure and certain; they are destined to meet before the altar at the conclusion of the play. Whereas Mirabella is forced by Cupid to do penance, the usual rebel was treated as was Prince Arthur. Mirabella is punished because of her discourtesy and her story is therefore part of Book VI. The more usual pattern is exemplified by Arthur's fate. That Cupid's vengeance on the prince was in the familiar vein may be ascertained by reference to practically any of the poets of the time. In the March eclogue of The Shepheardes Calendar, Thomalin boasts how he discovered Cupid hiding in a bush and shot him with a burbolt. In revenge the god has shot him in the heel and now his wound festers sore. The preface to the eclogue makes it clear, though Thomalin's words are plain enough, that "... in the person of Thomalin is meant some secrete freend, who scorned Loue and his knights so long, till at length him self was entangled, and vnwares wounded with the dart of some beautiful regard, which is Cupides arrowe." Such is also the explanation advanced by Dan Bartholmew of Bathe for his unhappy love affair:

I thinke the goddesse of revenge devysde,
So to be wreackt on my rebelling will,
Bycause I had in youthfull yeares dispysde,
To taste the baytes, which tyste my fancie still.(70)

There are constant references to this stereotype in practically all poets of the period. George Whetstone, for example, thus prefaces one set of his poems: "The contemptuous louer finding no grace where hee faithfully fauoreth, acknowledgeth his former scorne, vsed toward loue, to be the onely cause of his miseries." Elsewhere Whetstone tells the sad story of "The hap, and hard fortune of a careless louer" who summoned by Cupid to yield to Beauty refused and was subsequently brought a captive to "Beauties barre." A long and horrendous sentence is pronounced whereby the prisoner is forced to endure unrequited love.

Although Benedick has been "an obstinate heretic in the despite of Beauty," he is not condemned to suffer the pangs of unrequited love. Instead he is matched with another offender against the laws of love. A sentimental view may incline us to envision the married state of these two as one of unalloyed bliss, since "they really did love one another all the time." Be that as it may, the conclusion of the play shows the lovers, even in the midst of capitulation, still struggling to maintain the dignity of their former positions, and points, at the least, to a lively union. Benedick agrees to matrimony and seeks to gain the last word. "Come, I will have thee, but, by this hand, I take thee for pity." Beatrice accepts, caustic as ever, "I would not deny you; but by this good day, I yield upon great persuasion, and partly to save your life, for I was told you were in a consumption," and gets, momentarily, the last word. An Elizabethan audience would not, I think, have taken the sentimental view. Aware of the conventions and delighting in their perception of the situation and its inevitable result, they would take it for the wondrous comedy that it is.

The comedy, of course, arises from many elements, but always there is Shakespeare's hand at work blending conventions and creating character. Benedick and Beatrice are not merely rebels against love and its language; they are, as well, juxtaposed; so that their rebellion may find a tangible enemy in each other. Each represents to the other that which each scorns, and therein lie the complexity of their characters and the source of humor. Actually their rebellion is not to be taken too seriously. As we have seen, Benedick refers to his "custom, as being a professed tyrant to their sex," but at once he contrasts an opinion delivered on this basis with "my simple true judgment." The assumed pose of this is consonant with Beatrice's "I was born to speak all mirth and no matter," or, "then there was a star danced, and under that was I born." They both have light hearts and are determined to keep "on the windy side of Care," but neither will ever be a conventional literary lover, for in these two Shakespeare presents an attitude and a behavior pattern as real as that shown by
Claudio and Hero.

In the well-known sonnet, “Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,” Sir Philip Sidney expresses seriously a critical view of conventional jargon which is similar to the nonserious objections of Benedick and Beatrice to the same thing. Fine inventions sought out in the works of other men are not the means whereby he may express his love for Stella. Benedick, attempting a poem in praise of Beatrice, is equally unable to employ the trite; but whereas Sidney concludes with, “Fool, said my muse to me, look in thy heart and write,” Benedick concludes with the acceptance of fact, “I cannot woo in festival terms.” Sidney seeks a genuine expression of emotion and of course achieves it; Benedick is best described as a realist, or, as he says, “I do much wonder that one man, seeing how much another man is a fool when he dedicates his behaviors to love, will, after he hath laughed at such shallow follies in others, become the argument of his own scorn by falling in love. …”

Both Sidney and Shakespeare reacted to the spate of love poetry utterly removed from reality, and such reaction was a perfectly normal development in the closing years of the century. A point of satiety, particularly in the imagery of amorous verse had been reached, so that new developments took the form of Donne's metaphysical style or Jonson's classicism. If we are to judge by Shakespeare's creation of Benedick and Beatrice, a new attitude came into being along with a new manner of expression. Exactly as Claudio and Hero are examples of the usual type of marriage as contrasted with the literary, so Benedick and Beatrice are another pair of realists sick to death of the jargon and extravagant behavior demanded by the fashionable code and so exhaustively exemplified, as we have seen, by such lovers as Beverley's Ariodant and Genevra. In Benedick and Beatrice, Shakespeare's tone is close to Raleigh's

If all the world and love were young,  
And truth in every shepherd's tongue,  
These pretty pleasures might me move  
To live with thee and be thy love.(82)

Like the nymph who observes quite sagely that “flowers do fade” and that “Time drives the flocks from field to fold,” Beatrice is a realistic commentator:

… wooing, wedding, and repenting is as a Scotch jig, a measure, and a cinque-pace: the first suit is hot and hasty like a Scotch jig (and full as fantastical); the wedding mannerly modest (as a measure), full of state and ancientry; and then comes Repentance and with his bad legs falls into the cinque-pace faster and faster, till he sink into his grave.83

That Beatrice is not merely a shrew hating all men but is wise and observant is proved by Leonato's comment on the foregoing speech: “Cousin, you apprehend passing shrewdly,” or, as Beatrice says in reply, “I have a good eye, uncle; I can see a church by daylight.”85

Benedick likewise “sees” quite clearly that love is not what it is in books. When Claudio says that Hero is the sweetest lady he ever looked on, Benedick replies, “I can see yet without spectacles and I see no such matter …”86 Later, reflecting on the folly of love, he again uses the same figure: “May I be so converted and see with these eyes? I cannot tell; I think not. I will not be sworn but love may transform me to an oyster, but I'll take my oath on it, till he have made an oyster of me he shall never make me such a fool.”87 Like Beatrice, Benedick wishes to avoid the folly which they both see in the trite and conventional.

Notes

1. As You Like It, III, ii, 392-403.
observed that it was “as pleasing an image of the entrance of love into a youthful bosom as can well be imagined.” Similar differentiation between “love” and “like” is found in Sidney's sonnet, “Not at the first sight, nor with a dribbled shot” (Hebel and Hudson, Poetry of the English Renaissance [New York, 1938], p. 106), where is found the line, “I saw and liked; I liked but loved not.”

3. Much Ado, I, i, 164-166.
4. Ibid., I, i, 171, 180.
5. Romeo and Juliet, I, v, 46-55. Compare this with Claudio's use of a jewel figure, Much Ado, I, i, 181-182.
7. Ibid., I, i, 316-317.
8. Ibid., I, i, 292.
9. Ibid., I, i, 296-299. In describing his feigned niece to the repentant Claudio, Leonato (V, i, 297-299) stresses this same point as a recommendation for this new bride:

   My brother hath a daughter,
   Almost the copy of my child that's dead,
   And she alone is heir to both of us.

10. Whereas Beverley has both lovers reflect on the disparity of their social positions as a possible impediment, Sir John Harington finds a “good morall observation” in “the choise of Geneura, who being a great Ladie by birth, yet chose rather a gallant faire conditioned gentleman then a great Duke” (Orlando Furioso, p. 39). To an Elizabethan the question of social position was a very real consideration in marriage.


15. Ibid., III, ii, 127-129.
17. Ibid., IV, i, 64-66.
18. In the order given the relevant cases are Court of Requests: XXX/43; XCVII/5; CIX/38; LXXVIII/104; XLIV/19; XXXI/37; CXV/3.
19. Requests, LXV/55.
20. Requests, XCIV/23.
22. Much Ado, V, i, 300.
23. Ibid., V, i, 297-298.
24. Ibid., I, i, 36.
25. Ibid., II, i, 321-323.
26. Ibid., II, i, 55-59.
27. Ibid., III, iv, 62-63.
29. V, iv, 4-6.
30. Ibid., II, ii, 44-45.
31. Ibid., V, i, 243-245.
33. As You Like It, IV, i, 106-108.

41. Not only the work of Mr. C. S. Lewis on the various aspects of love in *The Faerie Queene* (*The Allegory of Love*), but the encyclopedic knowledge of the subject found in T. F. Crane’s *Italian Social Customs of the Sixteenth Century* testify to the impossibility of any simple generalizations as to the nature of love behavior patterns. The whole subject is one needing thorough study.

43. *The Year’s Work in English Studies*, XXIII (1942), 110.
44. *The Poetical Works of Edmund Spenser*, p. 369. Hereafter references will be given to *The Faerie Queene* by Book, Canto, and stanza. The present citation is from VI, 7, 44.

55. *The Rocke of Regard*, p. 43.
57. Parallels between Beatrice and Katherine are of course obvious, but it is worth pointing out that the adjective “curst” is applied at least ten times to Katherine.
58. *Much Ado*, I, i, 125-129.
64. *Ibid.*, I, 9, 12.
70. George Gascoigne’s *A Hundreth Sundrie Flowres*, ll. 49-52, p. 203.
73. This is a rather crude adaptation of one of Gascoigne’s better poems, “Gascoignes araignement,” which concludes,

“Thus am I Beauties bounden thrall,
At hir commaunde when she doth call.”
Richard A. Levin (essay date 1985)


*[In the following essay, originally published in 1985, Levin analyzes character interaction in Much Ado about Nothing, considering the unseemly behavior of Don Pedro and Claudio, the developing relationship between Beatrice and Benedick, the scapegoating of Don John, and Leonato's attempt to provide the drama with a happy ending.]*

Is *Much Ado about Nothing* a disturbing comedy? The strongest evidence that it is comes in act 4, when Claudio denounces his bride-to-be at the altar for unchastity. Claudio's conduct on this occasion leaves much to be desired, and other characters also behave poorly, including Don Pedro, Claudio's friend and patron, and Leonato, father of the prospective bride. Though critics often extenuate what they regard as the momentary transgression of Leonato and Don Pedro, Claudio has not escaped so easily. Though the wedding scene exhibits him at his worst, Claudio's overall performance has attracted, as one critic remarks, “a whole thesaurus of abuse.” When *Much Ado* is reckoned a disturbing play, Claudio is generally the reason.

Yet many critics accept the judgment, offered within the play, that Don John is “the author of all” the mischief that occurs and the other characters are essentially good, though of course not without minor faults or occasional departures from the path of virtue. For example, in describing the opposition between Don John and the others, one critic writes: “The theme of anti-love [is] stitched in dark contrast … upon the bright fabric of love, the theme of sullen negation matched against a society of love and courtesy.” Another critic, however, exemplifies the recent tendency to distribute blame more evenly: “In Messina … we find a dark underside to human behavior, partly because we meet here … conscious human villainy … but partly also because the impulses of the villain sometimes find expression in the behavior of well-intentioned characters as well.” Whether or not Messina's “well-intentioned” citizens have dubious motives depends to a great degree on the extent to which one believes dramatic conventions function to limit the search for plausible psychological motivation. For example, Don John's self-proclaimed dedication to evil perhaps marks him as a stage villain whose raison d'être is to plot against virtue. If he lacks roundedness as a character, he is less likely to be seen as a product of society and a reflection of its faults. Other dramatic conventions function directly to protect the “good” characters. Thus, when Claudio and the others readily lend credence to Don John's accusations against Hero, the play reveals not the weakness of particular characters but the devastating results of slander. Similarly, the ceremonial aspects of Claudio's dirge scene can be taken as symbolic indication that his repentance for Hero's death is more than perfunctory.
I myself am convinced that Shakespeare does allow for a reading guided by such conventions, but I think he also permits a far more rigorous assessment of the characters. That—with the exception of Claudio—Messina has commonly escaped harsh criticism reflects, I think, Much Ado's dependence on social nuances—nuances that, though present in The Merchant of Venice, exist in that play side-by-side with starker effects.

Much Ado consists largely of upper-class conversation among friends and relatives who are at leisure to enjoy one another's company. It has often been noted that their drawing-room conversation anticipates Restoration and eighteenth-century English drama, as well as the novel as practiced, for example, by Jane Austen. It is less often noted that, like the best of his successors, in depicting such conversation, Shakespeare implies a complex set of social attitudes and social pressures. To appreciate the drama that unfolds, the audience must often respond to “impressions” gathered from the conversation, or to small gestures that suggest underlying stresses. At other times, the placid tone of conversation is broken by the more acerbic voice of Beatrice, who, in her role as eiron, punctures the illusions that others live by. I have already discussed [elsewhere] Beatrice's response to the announcement of her cousin's betrothal, beginning, “Good Lord, for alliance! Thus goes everyone to the world but I.” Beatrice identifies the social pressure exerted on all the characters who are single and of marriageable age. She thereby helps to identify the temptations they are exposed to in the course of the play. A disruption such as that which takes place at the wedding represents, in my opinion, not the intrusion of an alien force, but tensions that have gradually come to a head. One is ultimately led to question whether Messina has a right to rejoice at the end of the play. As soon as attention shifts from Don John's malevolence to the subtler social forces in Messina, everyone shares a measure of responsibility for all that happens.

When Much Ado opens, Leonato's invited guest, Don Pedro, prince of Arragon, is approaching Messina, and he has sent a messenger ahead with a letter:

LEONATO:

How many gentlemen have you lost in this action?

MESSENGER:

But few of any sort, and none of name.

LEONATO:

A victory is twice itself when the achiever brings home full numbers. I find here that Don Pedro hath bestow'd much honor on a young Florentine call'd Claudio.

(1.1.5-11)

This brief interchange illustrates the kind of interpretive problem Much Ado often poses. In these first few lines, at least, the audience strongly inclines towards taking at face value the report of a great victory. However, so little is said about the battle that no one can be sure what did happen, and a few of the details leave open other possibilities. Few men were killed, one assumes, because the soldiers fought well—not because they engaged in a negligible skirmish. And presumably “none of name” died because the nobility fought valiantly—not because the nobility avoided its responsibility to lead troops into battle. No explanation of the military action preceding the opening of the play is ever forthcoming, and perhaps Leonato's unconcern should be ours; yet Beatrice seems to comment on his omission when she raises sceptical questions about the battle.

In paraphrasing the messenger, Leonato makes an outright error when he speaks of a victory with “full numbers” (overlooking the losses among the lower sort), or else his words are supposed to be taken as gnomic wisdom—but even then application of his proverbial saying would mean that he counts the losses of the lower sort as insignificant. Leonato's attention then turns to news of Claudio. The written text does not
make clear why Claudio is significant to him, but in view of the flirtation that has already gone on between Claudio and Hero (1.1.296-300), it may be that Leonato reads with a wink for his daughter; he has marriage in mind for her. Why is Don Pedro writing that he has “bestow’d much honor” on Claudio? In thus honoring Claudio, has Don Pedro sought to please Leonato? Leonato asks for no explanations. (The Elizabethans might have thought of what Lawrence Stone calls “the inflation of honors,” the military knighthoods Essex conferred, for example.) The messenger (in a passage not quoted) starts to elaborate, but his language is so flowery that nothing can be gathered from it; he even seems to mock Leonato’s lack of curiosity by concluding that Claudio “hath indeed better bett’red expectation than you must expect of me to tell you how” (ll. 15-17). Leonato does not pursue the subject and he soon makes a remark that helps to expose him as a complacent man, not eager to make more than superficial judgments. Upon hearing from the messenger that Claudio’s uncle wept upon getting news of his nephew’s safe return, Leonato comments: “There are no faces truer than those that are … wash’d” with tears (ll. 26-27). Leonato’s trust in tears is a detail Shakespeare will draw on later (4.1.154).

Beatrice now interjects herself, as if dissatisfied with the desultory pace of the conversation. Her uncle has taken care to note Claudio’s survival; she wants to know whether Benedick, the man who interests her, has returned. Her manner of questioning sets her apart from her uncle, however; she asks the messenger penetrating questions, probes him about what Benedick has achieved—and not achieved—in battle. She is openly dubious about his accomplishments. She concludes, for example, that his “good service … in these wars” consists of his having helped to eat “musty victual.” Nor is Beatrice merely a gadfly; her questions, she implies, arise from her own uncomfortable experiences with Benedick; she questions not only his bravery and his intelligence, but his capacity for friendship: “He wears his faith but as the fashion of his hat: it ever changes with the next block” (ll. 75-77). Beatrice has well-developed suspicions about Benedick’s nature and implies that she will take no husband who does not meet high standards. Nevertheless, in bringing Benedick into the conversation, Beatrice perhaps wishes to indicate that she, like her cousin, may marry some day. She is certainly put under pressure to conform. Leonato quickly disparages her independence. Benedick will “be meet with you,” he reminds her, and then he chides her about her professed imperviousness to love: “You will never run mad, niece.” “No, not till a hot January,” is Beatrice’s robust reply, but later she may compromise her standards.

Though just a few lines into the play, currents beneath the surface of conversation are becoming evident. Ostensibly Leonato and his family have merely undertaken to entertain guests. Actually, everyone waits expectantly for the arrival of bachelors and for the beginning of a time for courtship.

Upon entering, Don Pedro greets his host: “Good Signior Leonato, are you come to meet your trouble? The fashion of the world is to avoid cost, and you encounter it” (ll. 96-98). Is Don Pedro grateful for Leonato’s “trouble,” or is he observing Leonato’s excessive hospitality, the care haute bourgeoisie takes with aristocracy? Later Don Pedro calls himself a “charge,” and he responds to Leonato’s wish that his stay will be a long one by saying, “I dare swear [Leonato] is no hypocrite” (l. 151)—insisting a little too much, so it seems, that Leonato has no ulterior motive. Don Pedro apparently mistrusts Leonato’s courtesy.

A few details suggest that Don Pedro’s discomfort has something to do with the expectation that courting will follow his arrival. Although he has visited frequently, he seems not to recognize Leonato’s daughter, and he recovers himself only to offer an awkward compliment, likening Hero’s appearance to her father’s (ll. 104, 111-12). Don Pedro’s subsequent response suggests a stage direction; his attention is on Claudio, whose eyes are on Hero. As Don Pedro exits with Leonato, he still watches Claudio and notices him staying behind and beckoning Benedick to join him. As quickly as Don Pedro can, he extricates himself and goes to seek Claudio and to inquire after his “secret” (1.1.202-4). Evidently he guesses that Claudio is inclined to marry.

I believe we gradually come to entertain a hypothesis about Don Pedro. Born and bred a prince, elegant in dress and manner, he seems to embody the social values held dear in Messina. Yet he has never married,
though he is possibly somewhat beyond the age at which most men do. Knowing that he will never court and knowing, nevertheless, that all thoughts in Messina will turn to marriage, he brings with him, as a well-trained guest, valuable presents—two eminently eligible bachelors, on one of whom, a count, he has newly bestowed “honor.” Don Pedro seems eager to adapt himself to conventional life—indeed, is eager to promote conventional values. Nevertheless, no man is selfless; in exchange he will ask that his efforts to help others be appreciated. Leonato’s overeager reception already disturbs him. Don Pedro's affection for Claudio will pose another challenge.

Before Don Pedro reenters, Claudio discloses his interest in Hero to Benedick. Claudio is sensitive to the expectations of the society around him. He has learned that when a soldier is home from the war, it is time to fall in love. He also knows that Hero is the right kind of girl for him—well-born, pretty, and wealthy. Only one more question needs to be answered, and he asks it of Benedick immediately: “Is she not a modest young lady?” (l. 165). Claudio wants to make certain that his marriage will be an asset and not a hindrance. His reasons for wanting to marry, and the promptness of his decision, show him as a rather conventional young man, without any special depth or complication of character.

Though Don Pedro anticipated a time of courtship, he is overtaken by the speed of events. He enters to discover that not only has Claudio already confessed his love, but he has chosen Benedick, not the prince, as his confidant. When Don Pedro asks to hear Claudio’s “secret,” Benedick, taunting Claudio, quickly discloses it. Claudio equivocates: he loves Hero “if [his] passion change not shortly” (l. 219). Don Pedro immediately senses Claudio’s timidity and reassures him; “The lady is very well worthy.” “You speak this to fetch me in,” Claudio responds, but Don Pedro reaffirms his opinion. In supporting Claudio, Don Pedro fulfills the role he set for himself. On the other hand, Don Pedro has acquired information that at some point could be used destructively: Claudio mistrusts his own judgment, and is very much concerned to find a wife highly regarded by others.

Don Pedro wants to be alone with Claudio. However, Benedick will not leave; quite the contrary, he makes peacock display of himself, boasting that he will “live a bachelor.” Don Pedro, quickly irritated, tells Benedick that he will soon “look pale with love” (l. 247). The prince implies that Benedick is only posing as a “tyrant” to the female sex; behind the mask lies a man almost as ready for marriage as Claudio. Whether Don Pedro is right or not is still unknown. However, his own resentment suggests that for him bachelorhood is painful in a way it is not for Benedick. Don Pedro’s greater vulnerability—as courting gets underway—soon becomes more apparent. After trying politely to draw the conversation to a halt, he invents an errand for Claudio. Irritated, Benedick leaves with a parting retort. Using a metaphor from dressmaking, he says that Don Pedro’s discourse is ornamented with loosely attached trimmings that may come off to reveal his real concerns (ll. 285-89). Benedick hints at the deceptiveness of Don Pedro’s elegant surface.

As soon as Don Pedro and Claudio are alone, the latter turns for help, as Don Pedro apparently hoped he would:

CLAUDIO:

My liege, your Highness now may do me good.

DON Pedro:

My love is thine; teach it but how,
And thou shalt see how apt it is to learn
Any hard lesson that may do thee good.
While Claudio addresses Don Pedro as a prince who is in a position to do him a favor, Don Pedro answers affectionately. He says that his “love” stands ready to learn any “hard lesson” Claudio asks of him. As the nature of Claudio's request is already obvious, Don Pedro comes very close to saying that he will find it distressful to help Claudio to a wife. Don Pedro's words are rarely, if ever, regarded as intimate, and it is true that the word love is common between male friends in the Renaissance. In context, however, “love” at least hints at an unusually strong emotion that Claudio does not reciprocate. In Elizabethan English, “apt” sometimes means “apt for love” and not simply “ready” or “prepared”; Don Pedro rather than expressing his passion directly, will sublimate it in an act of sacrifice for Claudio.

Don Pedro is still very much a mystery at this point in the play because, unlike Claudio, his relationship to established social patterns is undefined. His deliberate disclosure of affection for Claudio, which he could easily have avoided making, invites speculation about his motives. If he is not simply candid, he may be manipulative, either attempting to discourage Claudio from marrying, or, far more likely, thinking to strengthen their attachment so that Claudio's subsequent marriage will impose less of a separation. I am suggesting a possible parallel with The Merchant of Venice. When Bassanio asks his older friend, Antonio, for the money that will allow him to woo Portia, Antonio expresses his “love” for Bassanio and promises to do his “uttermost” to raise the money. Later, in Bassanio's presence, he readily agrees to the ominous terms of Shylock's loan. Both older men cannot resist accommodating their younger friends in the hope that gratitude will help strengthen the relationship.

Claudio not only fails to reciprocate; he disingenuously avoids acknowledging anything of what Don Pedro has implied. He wants nothing to divert him from the matter at hand: “Hath Leonato any son, my lord?” Critics have debated whether Claudio's inquiry into the financial side of marriage is appropriate. Shakespeare seems to me to go to some lengths to show Claudio's interest as excessive. He wants to learn about more than Hero's dowry; what will she inherit? he asks. Like Claudio's earlier inquiry concerning Hero's “modesty,” he reveals here the desire for a socially advantageous marriage. A little voice speaks to Claudio, “prompting” him, telling him that when war ends, it is time for love: “war-thoughts” are gone, he says, and “in their rooms / Come thronging soft and delicate desires” (1.1.302-3). Claudio's is not the language of authentic passion—he is not “apt,” to use Don Pedro's word. The voice Claudio hears is society's, encouraging him to fall in love and marry.

Another way to judge Claudio is through Don Pedro's eyes. Don Pedro sees that Claudio prepares to gather for himself all that society can offer. Don Pedro knows what voice Claudio listens to, and finally says to him: “Thou wilt be like a lover presently, / And tire the hearer with a book of words” (ll. 306-7). The words flow too freely to be Claudio's; he has been reading from the “book” left open for young men when they return from war (cf. l. 311). Don Pedro has a right to be irritated, and therefore his offer is all the more commendable: he will speak to Leonato on Claudio's behalf.

Claudio, however, resumes the “treatise” he had begun to tell. “How sweetly you do minister to love,” he tells Don Pedro, imagining him as the idealized older patron of romance. At this point, Don Pedro's mood shifts. He breaks in with: “What need the bridge much broader than the flood?”—that is, Claudio's is a familiar human need that does not warrant excessive fuss. Then Don Pedro, without explanation, substitutes a new and far less straightforward scheme for helping Claudio to his bride.

At a masked dance that evening, Don Pedro will disguise himself as Claudio and woo Hero for him. The change in plan invites close scrutiny. Don Pedro is perhaps conscious of three motives. He will help his young friend. He will encourage in him a feeling of gratitude. And third, he will find for himself a role on an occasion when his own failure to woo would otherwise be noticeable. But does the plot also show Don Pedro unconsciously finding a channel for destructive emotion, were he to wish to release it? He goes so far as to
imply that were he not wooing for Claudio, he might have an interest of his own in her: in Hero’s “bosom I'll unclasp my heart, / And take her hearing prisoner with the force / And strong encounter of my amorous tale” (ll. 323-25). He could make Claudio jealous, if he chose. The scheme will also keep Claudio and Hero apart, thus preventing a firm relationship from growing up between them.

I have argued that to understand all the action seen so far one needs to recognize that the time to marry has arrived in Messina. Claudio responds to the pressure very directly; Benedick less directly; Don Pedro most indirectly of all. So far, only slight signs have appeared that the strain will overwhelm anyone.

Having watched how social forces influence others, we are prepared to see them at work in Don John, who is now introduced. He announces at once: “I cannot hide what I am” (1.3.13); then he declares himself “a plain-dealing villain” (l. 32). For some critics, a self-revelation this emphatic settles the matter: Don John is a pure figure of evil, “a thing of darkness out of step with his society,” who “hates the children of light simply because they generate radiance in a world he prefers to see dark.” If this description is correct, then *Much Ado* approaches melodrama by artificially dividing the good from the bad characters. I believe, on the other hand, that Don John should not divert us from the evil within society, and to make this point, Shakespeare shows that Don John is shaped by the same social forces that mould others.

When he announces himself a villain, he is not alone—he speaks to Conrade—and by this time in the play one looks beneath the surface of drawing-room chatter. Even Don John's handling of language shows him to be as conscious of himself as a social being as anyone in the play. He makes elegant use of balance and antithesis—in the following sentence, for example: “I am trusted with a muzzle, and enfranchis'd with a clog, therefore I have decreed not to sing in my cage” (ll. 32-34). Certain inferences may be drawn from the things Don John does tell Conrade, and more information is forthcoming.

Conrade opened the scene by asking Don John, “Why are you thus out of measure sad?” Don John answers evasively by referring only to “the occasion.” Context, however, defines the “occasion” as the same one that distresses Don Pedro—Leonato's preparations for an evening of dance and courtship. This explanation is soon confirmed. When Borachio, another member of Don John's retinue, enters, he tells Don John that he comes with news “of an intended marriage.” Don John replies: “What is he for a fool that betroths himself to unquietness?” Here is a statement with strong feeling behind it!

Although the play terms them “brothers” and both enjoy the rank of prince, Don John is apparently a bastard and he and Don Pedro half brothers. Each surrounds himself with two male followers: Don John with Conrade and Borachio, and Don Pedro with Claudio and Benedick. Alliteration, syllabication, and accentuation connect the two groups of names. Like Don Pedro, Don John is distinguished from his retinue by his lack of interest in courting a woman. While Benedick and Claudio woo, Borachio resumes a liaison with Margaret. When Beatrice remarks that Don Pedro does not make himself available to women, she links the two brothers: “Your father got excellent husbands, if a maid could come by them” (2.1.324-25).

In analogues and sources for *Much Ado*, two friends are in love with the same woman, and the Don John figure plots to separate his friend from the lady and so obtain her for himself. Don John, of course, has no such motive. He offers as many motives as Iago does, and it is probably as treacherous to choose among them; about all we can say for sure is that he lives in a world of men and focuses his resentment on them. To speculate a little further, however, Don John and Don Pedro both focus their attentions on Claudio, though Don John's emotions are hostile while his brother's are not. Don John initially welcomes the opportunity to contrive against “that young start-up [who] hath all the glory of [his] overthrow” (1.3.66-67). Later, Don John works to drive a wedge between Claudio and his royal patron. At the end of the dance, Don John, recognizing the masked Claudio, informs him that Don Pedro has wooed for himself (2.1.164). Later, when Don John enters to report Hero's “disloyalty,” he contrasts his brother's effort to effect the marriage with his own effort to protect Claudio (3.2.95-100). Whether Don John is a bidder for Claudio's affections or simply
the young man's enemy is not easy to say.

In many accounts of *Much Ado*, Don Pedro and Don John are held to be of opposing natures, even if they superficially share certain traits, such as a love of intrigue. G. K. Hunter, for example, contrasts the "blind self-interest of Don John" with the "social expertise of Don Pedro." Robert G. Hunter says bluntly: "Don Pedro's function is to create love. Don John's is to destroy it." I am suggesting instead that the "melodramatic" distinction between the brothers becomes blurred, so that we are prepared to see some of Don John's ill will in his brother. One villain is not merely substituted for another, however, because Don Pedro, unlike his brother, is woven into a complex social pattern; his complicity makes the problem of guilt in the play far subtler than it seemed when Don John first announced his villainy.

Act 2 opens after the dinner with Beatrice holding forth about marriage. Her society, of course, believes strongly in marriage; she asserts contrary views:

**BEATRICE:**

I will even take sixpence in earnest of the berrord [bearward, animal keeper], and lead his apes into hell.

**LEONATO:**

Well then, go you into hell.

**BEATRICE:**

No, but to the gate, and there will the devil meet me like an old cuckold with horns on his head,

(2.1.39-46)

Proverbially, old maids lead apes to hell, while mothers, led by their children, go to heaven. Beatrice, however, places the married folk in hell, presumably because of their misery and because they sin, not only in taking lovers, but in marrying when they ought not to. Beatrice, who never talks idly, is wondering about her own predicament and Hero's, and she raises a question for the audience to keep in mind: are the marriages in *Much Ado* well-advised?

Beatrice's feelings about marriage are more complicated than she admits. After all, she is very much a part of Leonato's household, which she amuses with her clever remarks. Also, it soon becomes apparent that she has introduced Benedick and marriage into the conversation because Hero's prospects are already a subject of discussion. Beatrice, as at the opening of the play, asserts her own romantic interest, albeit in an indirect manner. She evidently feels the same pressure to marry that the other single people feel.

It is greatly to Beatrice's credit that she does not try to discourage her cousin, though Hero seems destined to go to the altar first. Overheard conversation has led Leonato to conclude that Don Pedro plans to woo Hero in the evening, and Leonato instructs his daughter to be ready. With a generosity Benedick has not shown Claudio in comparable circumstances, Beatrice simply cautions Hero against undue haste (ll. 69-80). In these and other circumstances, Beatrice emerges as a person of stature.

The dance and its aftermath prefigure later events, although the potential for trouble is not yet realized. At the dance, others conclude that Don Pedro courts on his own behalf, and the few overheard words make us wonder whether he encourages the misapprehension. When he begins to dance with Hero, he alludes to his real identity, beneath the mask: "Within the house is Jove" (2.1.97), then he whispers: "Speak low if you speak love." While Claudio apparently suspects Don Pedro because of what Don John tells him, Benedick forms suspicions on his own. When he alludes to them, Don Pedro studiously avoids understanding him, and
then denies the allegations and throws Benedick on the defensive about another matter, his insulting behaviour to Beatrice. Shortly afterwards, Don Pedro carefully vindicates himself before the assembled household: “Here, Claudio, I have woo’d in thy name, and fair Hero is won” (ll. 298-99). He seems relieved to prove himself loyal to Claudio, as if the doubts others form about his motives make him doubt them too.

Claudio, for his part, acts inexcusably. Unlike Benedick, Claudio knew beforehand that Don Pedro danced with Hero so that he could woo her for him. Yet Claudio quickly succumbs to Don John's ploy and loses faith in his friend. Claudio replaces one romantic story with another; now “beauty is a witch / Against whose charms faith melteth into blood” (2.1.179-80). Claudio's real feelings are revealed when he says, “let every eye negotiate for itself, / And trust no agent” (ll. 178-79). As one critic remarks, Claudio feels “duped in a bargain.” He appreciates neither Don Pedro nor Hero, whose loss disturbs him only as it affects his self-respect.

When Beatrice and Benedick begin to dance with one another, she may well be ready to be courted, but instead, Benedick insults her. Benedick is masked; Beatrice, possibly, is not. Benedick, believing himself undetected, takes advantage of the opportunity to trim Beatrice's sails, telling her that he has heard that she “was disdainful” and “had [her] good wit out of the ‘Hundred Merry Tales’” (2.1.129-30). Beatrice's intelligence and humor are too much for Benedick's male pride, and she takes offense, as well she should. Beatrice, who does recognize Benedick beneath his mask, describes him as “the Prince's jester, a very dull fool,” and says that his only “gift is in devising impossible slanders.” This criticism of Benedick is especially telling because it describes Benedick as he behaves with her at this moment.

Because a question has arisen about Benedick's merit, special importance is to be attached to the following interchange between Benedick and Beatrice as the music resumes and they begin to dance:

BEATRICE:

We must follow the leaders.

BENEDICK:

In every good thing.

BEATRICE:

Nay, if they lead to any ill, I will leave them at the next turning.

(2.1.150-54)

This dialogue is symbolic. Both Beatrice and Benedick set themselves up as superior to the others around them—they will make independent moral judgments and not simply “follow the leaders.” Only time can determine whether they are as good as their word.

After the dance, both have an opportunity to take out their hurt on others. Benedick does so. Believing that Don Pedro has wooed for himself, Benedick seeks out Claudio and taunts him. Ironically, he sees Claudio's vulnerability but not his own: “Alas, poor hurt fowl, now will [Claudio] creep into sedges. But that my Lady Beatrice should know me, and not know me!” (2.1.202-4). Nor is Benedick through. When Don Pedro enters looking for Claudio, Benedick admonishes the prince for betraying his friend. Then, rebuked for insulting Beatrice, he can only see how she has “misus'd [him] past the endurance of a block.” When she enters, he pretends not to notice her, and calls her a “harpy” (l. 271).
Beatrice acquits herself better. Speaking privately with Don Pedro, she is remarkably candid. She admits that she had once given Benedick her heart, but he betrayed her (2.1.278-82). Then she indicates that she has come to a decision; she will not be “the mother of fools” (l. 286)—that is, she no longer wants to marry Benedick. Realizing that her feelings have been hurt, the viewer does not know whether to believe her, but her judgment may be sound—she might be wise to sit out this dance and wait for another suitor.

Beatrice acts even more commendably when Claudio enters and, in the presence of everyone, Don Pedro announces that “fair Hero is won.” Claudio is silent, and Beatrice prompts him: “Speak, Count, ‘tis your cue” (l. 305). She understands that although Claudio has chosen to take part in a play, his moment has come and he has nothing to say. Like Claudio, Hero also lacks words—each lacks sufficient knowledge of the other. Beatrice wittily but generously gives Hero her part: “Speak, cousin, or (if you cannot) stop his mouth with a kiss.” Beatrice tries to live through the happiness of Claudio and Hero.

Only when Claudio greets Beatrice as his “cousin” does she reveal her real feelings. Though she is witty, her exclamation, “Good Lord, for alliance!” is heartfelt. She knows that society exerts pressure from which she is not immune. Therefore her resolve not to marry Benedick may weaken.

Beatrice is not the only observer deeply affected by the engagement of Hero and Claudio. Don Pedro has been silent. He watches Beatrice admiringly and sympathizes with her—up to a point. Suddenly he responds to her wish for “alliance” by saying, “Lady Beatrice, I will get you one [a husband].” His impulse is in part a generous one, but his tone is complex. With the verb “get,” which is crude, and the impersonal “one,” Don Pedro indicates that Beatrice's need is a common one and may be met readily. He hints that despite her pretensions, Beatrice is willing to conform.

Beatrice replies to Don Pedro with intelligence as well as wit:

I would rather have one [a husband] of your father's getting. Hath your Grace ne'er a brother like you? Your father got excellent husbands, if a maid come by them.

(2.1.322-25)

Beatrice pays Don Pedro a compliment that she knows he will value. She says that he is attractive to women, and but for his high birth, she herself would aspire to marriage with him. On the other hand, by repeating Don Pedro's equivocal words, “get” and “one,” Beatrice calls attention to them and to his enigmatic role as a matchmaker. Then she raises an implicit question; why is Don Pedro never available to women, never a suitor in his own right?

Don Pedro escapes with exceptionally clever repartee. He offers himself in marriage: “Will you have me, lady?” I do not think this proposal sincere. Beatrice and Don Pedro are engaged in witty dialogue. Don Pedro well knows that the others present regard Beatrice and Benedick as a likely match, and he would not again invite the suspicion that he lets his own interests intrude. He expects his audience to see that he has set himself before the finicky Beatrice, inviting her to refuse in a clever fashion. Of course, Don Pedro also wants his proposal to suggest to others that were he not so generous, he might well seek Beatrice's hand for himself.

As is her custom, Beatrice refuses to be merely clever in her reply:

No [she declines the prince], unless I might have another [husband] for working-days. Your Grace is too costly to wear every day. But I beseech your Grace pardon me, I was born to speak all mirth and no matter.

(2.1.327-30)
Interpreted in one way, the remark is complimentary. Beatrice pictures the prince as he likes to see himself, set apart by his special elegance, “too costly to wear every day.” But Beatrice's words also suggest that Don Pedro is permanently excluded from the “alliance” of marriage. She describes herself and the prince as well-matched for Sundays—both superior souls, both alone—but not as suitable life companions, because an invisible but seemingly uncrossable line separates them. This line may be the one that separates the heterosexually inclined from the homosexually, but such terminology is too coarse for Shakespeare's delicate and perhaps evasive portrayal.

The moment is a poignant one. Beatrice and Don Pedro had seemed for a moment to enjoy an intimacy; then decisive differences emerge. After their interchange, each is again left alone to deal with relentless social pressures.

Beatrice, realizing that she has been indiscreet, hastily apologizes. Though the prince graciously reassures her, his reaction is soon seen to be complicated. When Leonato saves Beatrice further embarrassment by sending her on an errand, Don Pedro alludes to a new scheme, designed to bring Beatrice and Benedick together. Both schemes divert attention from Don Pedro's own failure to woo. But are in part the product of generous impulses, the first towards Claudio, the second towards Beatrice, who will be helped to the happiness denied Don Pedro himself. However, Don Pedro's introduction of both schemes comes accompanied by language denigrating romance; if Beatrice and Benedick can be brought into a “mountain of affection,” then, Don Pedro assures his listeners, “Cupid is no longer an archer; his glory shall be ours, for we are the only love-gods” (ll. 385-86). Don Pedro's wit should not conceal that “love-gods” have dangerous powers. Don Pedro's scheme will create a precarious situation. Beatrice will be led to think Benedick loves her, and Benedick to think Beatrice loves him. The product of a lie, their courtship may easily be disturbed. Even as the scheme gets put into motion, it will create another danger. Like the earlier scheme, it keeps Claudio and Hero apart (Beatrice will overhear the women, and Benedick the men). Claudio, therefore, will be at Don Pedro's side when the prince demonstrates that love is only an illusion.

Having considered Don Pedro's motives for proposing the scheme, we can return to the question of why it is received so enthusiastically by his audience. Leonato does not seem to understand that “melancholy” lies beneath Beatrice's “merry” surface (ll. 341-46), so his participation in the scheme is not entirely to be explained by his interest in her well-being. Indeed, he delights to think how soon Beatrice and Benedick would be bickering: “If they were but a week married, they would talk themselves mad” (ll. 353-54). It is Don Pedro's satiric description of Benedick and Beatrice brought into a “mountain of affection” that brings Leonato to life: “My lord, I am for you, though it costs me ten nights' watchings.” Claudio quickly provides an echo: “And I, my lord.” Hero chimes in: “I will do any modest office, my lord, to help my cousin to a good husband.” Her earnestness betrays the real motive of the three of them. Beatrice and Benedick are aloof and superior; the conventional world wants to bring them within its orbit.

The prosecution of the scheme helps confirm this inference. When Benedick overhears their conversation, the men take advantage of the opportunity to deflate his pretensions. Hero's remarks, overheard by Beatrice, are even more illuminating. Hero criticizes Beatrice, who is “odd, and from all fashions” (3.1.72), and “turns … every man the wrong side out, / and never gives to truth and virtue that / Which simpleness and merit purchaseth” (ll. 68-70). Shakespeare wittily gives Hero a chance to praise “simpleness.” Though in her father's own household, she has been eclipsed by her cousin and she does not like it. Beatrice is far more generous with her than she is with Beatrice.

In quick succession, Beatrice and Benedick overhear that they are loved and declare in soliloquy not only their love for one another but their desire to marry. Beatrice and Benedick are therefore not indifferent to what others say about them and to the pressure to conform—the contrast between Beatrice and Benedick on the one hand and Hero and Claudio on the other gradually comes to seem less sharp. Many critics nevertheless do tend to maintain the distinction, arguing that while Hero and Claudio become engaged only because to do so...
is expected of them, Beatrice and Benedick are well matched and merely need a slight push toward marriage. By giving them names that alliterate, Shakespeare has certainly invited us to think of Beatrice and Benedick as a pair. They also have certain traits in common. Both, for example, hold themselves aloof from society and by means of verbal wit display a sense of superiority. Beatrice and Benedick are also undoubtedly attracted to one another, and they spar together in order to disguise affection, as Leonato implies: “There is a kind of merry war betwixt Signior Benedick and [Beatrice]; they never meet but there’s a skirmish of wit between them” (1.1.61-64). Leonato nevertheless underestimates the importance of the tension in their relationship.

The distance Beatrice and Benedick maintain allows each of them to examine what he or she finds disturbing in the other. Beatrice’s doubts arise from questions about Benedick’s moral character. I have already mentioned one among several somewhat obscure allusions to a past incident or incidents; Benedick apparently betrayed the intimacy that had grown up between Beatrice and himself (in addition to 2.1.278-82, see 1.1.39-42, 120-23, and 144-45). Such suspicions about Benedick are supported by his reputation as a ladies’ man (see, e.g., 1.1.109-10). This trait, on which Benedick prides himself, helps to explain the reservations he has about Beatrice: she withholds admiration. Benedick complains to her: “It is certain I am lov’d of all ladies, only you excepted” (1.1.124-25). At the dance, he criticizes her “wit”; Benedick would like a wife as intelligent and as attractive as Beatrice, but he would like her to defer to him.

The problems in their relationship point to important differences between their characters. Only Beatrice is a genuine critic of society—Benedick’s satirical remarks are often made to get attention; only Beatrice has self-knowledge—Benedick denies his susceptibility to social pressure; and only Beatrice is generous—Benedick resents the successes of others, as when he taunts Claudio after Claudio discloses his interest in Hero. Beatrice’s greater worth is subtly caught in the contrast between their soliloquies after they are trapped.

When Claudio and Hero became engaged, Beatrice frankly admitted her loneliness. After she eavesdrops and learns how others criticize her and how Benedick loves her, her response is put in ten succinct lines (of verse). She rebukes herself sharply: “Contempt, farewell, and maiden pride, adieu!” (3.1.109). And she promises to turn over a new leaf—she will “tam[e her] wild heart to [Benedick’s] loving hand” (l. 112). Were Beatrice not so desirous of marrying, she might be less inclined to accept hearsay evidence and she might hesitate to subordinate herself to Benedick. Though her new humility has its attractive side, she is perhaps too eager to sacrifice the moral independence she has held dear; Shakespeare, we note, has Beatrice express herself in rhyme of rather pedestrian character, not up to her usual standards.

Benedick soliloquizes both before and after eavesdropping. The first speech shows that, unlike Beatrice, he has not admitted to himself his desire for marriage. He portrays himself as a satisfied bachelor who will not stir himself until he finds the perfect woman (2.3.26-35). Benedick protests too strongly. Ever since Claudio disclosed his desire to marry and Benedick responded by claiming that Hero’s beauty was exceeded by Beatrice’s (1.1.190-92), Benedick has been keeping a careful eye on his friend’s advance to the altar. Benedick describes him as “Monsieur Love” (2.3.36) and criticizes his clothes and affected speech (ll. 15-21). “May I be so converted?” he wonders (l. 22), inadvertently revealing his wish to imitate Claudio.

Benedick’s second soliloquy is an important guide to the man who emerges in the latter part of the play. Unlike Beatrice, he has no suspicions whatever, though he has more reason than Beatrice to suspect treachery, for Don Pedro has promised to see him “look pale with love.” Benedick believes what he hears because he wants to marry. He quickly concludes that if she loves him, her love “must be requited” (2.3.224). In other words, he has a moral obligation to her. As the speech develops, Benedick elaborates on the righteousness of his change of course. His need to justify himself is explained by his fear—“they say I will bear myself proudly” (2.3.225). And he does bear himself proudly; quite unlike Beatrice, Benedick is brimming with pride when he learns he is loved. Benedick also worries because he has loudly vaunted his independence. He begins to work out his defense: “Happy are they that hear their detractions, and can put them to mending.”
This has the desired moral ring, but is not quite splendid enough. “Doth not the appetite alter,” he now suggests, as if he were a philosopher of human nature. Finally, he reaches for the grand: “The world must be peopled.” Critics have occasionally quoted these lines out of context and made them the moral of the play. But Benedick has really trailed off into banal sophistry—“When I said I would die a bachelor, I did not think I should live till I were married.”

Having wrapped himself in a moral cloak, he is ready to adopt the utterly conventional role of the lover. At least one earlier critic likened him to Malvolio, for in his next appearance, he cuts a ridiculous figure, newly shaven, absurdly dressed, and perfumed. Like Malvolio, he fails to appreciate the joke on himself. In spite of Benedick’s pretensions, he is proving himself an ordinary young man.

So far I have discussed social pressures in Messina and the urge characters have to conform and make others conform. On the other hand, no decisive test has yet arisen. One may entertain doubts about a character, but one cannot clearly fault anybody. Don Pedro, the most vulnerable character, also happens to be critically placed to influence events, for he is respected by everyone. Until a day before the marriage, the good in him prevails, a situation symbolized by the control he imposes over Don John. Now, with Claudio’s marriage imminent, Don Pedro begins to break.

When Don Pedro arrived in Messina, he promised a stay of “at the least a month” (1.1.149). Act 3, scene 2 opens with Don Pedro announcing a change in plans:

**DON Pedro:**

I do but stay till your marriage be consummate, and then go I toward Arragon.

**CLAUDIO:**

I'll bring you thither, my lord, if you'll vouchsafe me.

**DON Pedro:**

Nay, that would be as great a soil in the new gloss of your marriage as to show a child his new coat and forbid him to wear it.

The desire to leave Messina merely testifies to Don Pedro’s growing discomfort. However, his decision to communicate his plans to Claudio represents an important weakening of his resolve to do well by Claudio. A first inclination may be to say that Don Pedro merely wishes to remind Claudio, in the words of a famous sonnet, “to love that well, which thou must leave ere long.” While this is presumably Don Pedro’s only conscious purpose, his apparently simple statement probes for the answer to two questions. By indicating that he will leave on Claudio’s marriage day, Don Pedro asks whether his friend realizes that marriage alters all of a man’s previous relationships, even his relationship to a patron. In choosing the verb “consummate,” Don Pedro asks whether Claudio keenly anticipates the joys of the marriage bed. Claudio’s disingenuous offer to accompany Don Pedro after the wedding ceremony answers both of the prince’s questions—Claudio does fear losing a patron and the sexual allusion makes him uneasy.

Don Pedro thinks to respond with harmless and traditional kidding of the prospective groom. Actually, he addresses not only Claudio’s sexual embarrassment, but his fears about the future. Don Pedro says that to the betrothed, marriage wears a “gloss.” By leaving Messina, Claudio would “soil” this gloss. In advising him against leaving, Don Pedro implies that marriage loses its “gloss” soon enough anyway. There is a comparable implication in Don Pedro’s words when he goes on to compare Claudio’s anticipation of marriage and its sexual pleasures with the anticipation a child has for a new coat that gains more than its intrinsic value by being withheld. Simply to compare Claudio’s emotions to a child’s is to undermine his sense that marriage is a mark of maturity. To compare Claudio to a child awaiting a new coat that will soon become an old coat is...
to make him wonder whether his judgment is sound. In due course, Don Pedro implies, Claudio will discover the “soil” on his marriage—but by then, he may have lost what he once he had for a certainty, Don Pedro's patronage.

Applying G. L. Alexander's analysis to the Claudio-Don Pedro-Benedick triangle, Don Pedro suddenly breaks off in the middle of his argument. He decides to tease Benedick, who has swallowed the bait laid for him and now stands before them dressed in the latest fashion and an image of vanity. Inevitably—because Don Pedro has a score to settle with Benedick—his teasing soon comes very close to taunting. Benedick, he says, looks ridiculous, outfitted as he is not in one smart style but in a mixture of all the modish foreign styles of dress. Nevertheless, this attack on Benedick is more dangerous because it inadvertently allows Don Pedro to send Claudio a destructive message. Claudio himself is newly concerned with “carving the fashion of a new doublet,” as Benedick said earlier (2.3.17-18)—he must be almost as absurdly dressed as his friend. By teasing Benedick and inviting Claudio to join him, Don Pedro in effect asks Claudio whether he wants to be a foolish young lover or the companion of an urbane and elegant prince.

The belief that young lovers are as foolish as their fashionable clothes represents Don Pedro's last line of defense, and Benedick now deprives him of his consoling thought. When Don Pedro and Claudio slyly argue over whether Benedick is in love, it is no accident that Don Pedro puts the negative case, asserting that there is “no true drop of blood” in Benedick (3.1.18-19). Benedick delivers a stunning refutation of Don Pedro's allegation. He proudly says to Leonato: “Walk aside with me, I have studied eight or nine wise words … which these hobby-horses must not hear” (ll. 71-73). That Benedick remains unperturbed testifies to the emotional strength the mere illusion of love gives the lover; Don Pedro registers shock: “For my life, to break with him about Beatrice.” Suddenly, Don John enters as the tempter and says with grim irony, “My lord and brother, God save you!”

Like many great temptations in Renaissance literature, the success of this one depends on the predisposition of those tempted. Claudio, in his desire for a marriage that will bring him honor, has long been concerned to know that Hero is “modest.” He has now been made to feel that for an uncertain future he may forego Don Pedro's assured patronage. The prince has gradually succumbed to his own fear of the isolation that will follow the loss of Claudio to marriage. Finally, the temptation has been prepared for by showing that Don Pedro takes pride in the support he has given Claudio and society in general; he will not consciously be false to his ideals, but he may be easily convinced that he should protect Claudio from a marriage that will disgrace him.

When Don John announces that he has news showing the marriage to be ill-advised, Don Pedro puts himself forward as Claudio's protector. Then, when Don John accuses Hero of being “disloyal” (3.2.104), the prince waits until Claudio inquires of him: “May this be so?” “I will not think it,” Don Pedro replies. Even to the modern ear, his words imply that only his magnanimous mind stands against a sea of evidence. In Elizabethan English, the verb think distinguishes mental process from external reality, as in Hamlet's observation, “There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so” (2.2.249-50). Claudio catches Don Pedro's insinuation and quickly promises to watch at Hero's window. Then Don Pedro concludes, “O day untowardly turn'd!” and Claudio echoes him, “O mischief strangely thwarting!” (ll. 131-32). At this point, Claudio clearly contemplates shaming Hero in the church, and Don Pedro indicates a willingness to back him (ll. 125-27). Thus it is not surprising that later they both believe not only Don John's flimsy visual evidence, but the totally unsubstantiated charges about how Hero has already met her lover “a thousand times in secret” (4.1.94).

In the Bandello novella that is a probable source for Much Ado, Sir Timbreo (Claudio's equivalent), though hardly an admirable person at this point in the story, quietly repudiates Hero in a private communication sent to her father. By moving the scene into the church, Shakespeare not only creates effective theater; he puts Claudio and Don Pedro into a far worse light. Claudio allows Hero and her family to anticipate the marriage and then he suddenly insults her, in the harshest terms: “Give not this rotten orange to your friend,” he tells
the shocked father (4.1.32). Pouring forth a torrent of abuse, Claudio depicts himself as a pathetic and larmoyant victim of woman’s “savage sensuality” (l. 61). If he can be seriously thought of as a rounded human character (as I think it likely), this catalogue of stereotypical abuse is an index of a lava of desires that as a proper young suitor he has been forced to repress; towards Hero he has shown only “bashful sincerity and comely love” such as “a brother to his sister” shows (ll. 53-54). “You are dishonorable, not me,” he seems to insist in the church.

Don Pedro justifies his role by claiming that he acts reluctantly and only because his protégé has been wronged. Yet he, no less than Claudio, tries to inflict maximum pain. He waits until a critical moment, then instructs Claudio to “render [Hero] again” to her father. “Sweet Prince, you learn me noble thankfulness,” is Claudio’s deeply ironic response (l. 30). That Don Pedro has become the teacher confirms his failure to master the “hard lesson” Claudio once asked of him. Don Pedro also speaks with devastating effect when Leonato, innocently trustful, turns to him: “Sweet Prince, why speak not you?” Then Don Pedro does speak: “I stand dishonor’d, that have gone about / To link my dear friend to a common stale” (ll. 64-65). The audience knows the prince is wrong and perhaps even senses complacency.

As Hero faints, and is perhaps thought to be dying, the three parties leave, in a final gesture of contempt: Don John, followed by Don Pedro and Claudio. Those who remain at Hero’s side—Leonato, Beatrice, Benedick, and the friar who was to have performed the wedding ceremony—now have their moral fiber tested. They are concerned for Hero’s life, outraged at the treatment she has received, and doubt (at least) that the charges against her are true. The friar—a figure partially detached from the society—provides exemplary faith in Hero’s innocence, having noticed her “thousand” innocent blushes when her crimes were named. Beatrice also behaves admirably. She cries out in alarm when Hero falls, gives her comfort when she begins to stir, and testifies, to her innocence: “Oh, on my soul, my cousin is belied!” (l. 146).

Leonato, on the other hand, at once takes the accusations to be true: “Would the two princes lie, and Claudio lie?” he asks (l. 152), showing his limitations: he is a superficial man, unable to imagine that a contradiction might exist between exalted rank and inner worth. But while his credulity is forgivable, his vanity and self-absorption are more serious faults, since they lead him to heinous behavior. When Hero begins to stir, he tells her: “Do not live” (l. 123). Better she had been a changeling, he says, so that now, “smirched … and mired in infamy” as she is, he would not need to acknowledge her as his own daughter. Of course the harshness is intended to be an index of the severity of the charge and the importance of the code presumed violated. And yet as Leonato strings up what seems like a declension of first person personal and possessive pronouns, a note of self-centeredness is very clear in his lament: “Mine I lov’d, and mine I prais’d, / And mine that I was proud on, mine so much / That I myself was to myself not mine, / Valuing of her” (ll. 136-39).

Leonato had “valued” his daughter as a flattering possession; the marriage he desired for her—to a count with royal connections—was to redound to the credit of his family, indeed, to his credit. Once Hero suffers “shame,” he wants “no part” of her. Leonato’s words are among the harshest any father in Shakespeare speaks to his child, and the harshest in all the comedies. Leonato is not an evil man, but his values are questionable.

Though Leonato and Hero respond to the crisis in almost opposite ways, both declare themselves unambiguously; on the other hand, Benedick’s reaction puzzles. At first it seems that his remaining in the church reflects a moral decision to dissociate himself from his former friends and commit himself to the wronged family. But though Benedick is sympathetic, he continues to describe Don Pedro and Claudio as possessing his “inwardness and love” (l. 245), and he is noncommittal about the allegations against Hero: “I am so attir’d in wonder, / I know not what to say” (ll. 144-45). A satisfactory explanation for Benedick’s presence has yet to emerge.

When Leonato, Hero, and the friar leave the church, Beatrice and Benedick remain. Shakespeare has cunningly planted a temptation for them. Having not been alone together since falling in love, they now have
an opportunity to court, but under circumstances when their primary obligation should certainly be to Hero and not to themselves.

Benedick begins by comforting Beatrice, trying (for the first time) to sound convinced of Hero's innocence: “Surely I do believe your fair cousin is wrong’d” (ll. 259-60). Beatrice rightly sees that Benedick is making a tentative approach to her, and she wants to encourage him, at the same time that she contrives to prevent their “alliance” from conflicting with her loyalty to Hero. Beatrice shrewdly answers Benedick by remarking: “Ah, how much might the man deserve of me that would right” Hero (ll. 261-62). Then when Benedick volunteers to be that man, Beatrice tells him: “It is a man's office, but not yours.” She goads Benedick to prove his valor, while also implying that he must choose whether he is committed to his friends or to her family. Benedick promptly takes Beatrice's hint and renounces one allegiance by declaring another: “I do love nothing in the world so well as you.” They quickly drop mention of Hero and talk of love.

Eventually the conversation does return to Hero, but only because Benedick moves out of his depth. Though Beatrice has asked him to avenge her family, Benedick cannot conceive how disturbed Beatrice is both by the wrong done her cousin and her own present neglect of Hero's cause. Benedick's ignorance and his penchant for the grand gesture lead him to present himself as a knight errant ready to prove his worth to his ladylove: “Come, bid me do any thing for thee” (l. 288). Though initially cautious when they spoke of love, Beatrice had gradually been swept along on a tide of enthusiasm; hearing these words, however, she remembers the Benedick of old, a man of many words but little faith. Instinctively, she challenges him to meet her highest expectations: “Kill Claudio.” Taken completely by surprise, Benedick exclaims: “Ha, not for the wide world.”

Beatrice now must make a choice. She can accept Benedick as he is, or repudiate him, or attempt to have him see with her eyes. She seems to end the interview, but her witty reply betrays her: “You kill me to deny it [i.e., the request]. Farewell.” Benedick detains her, and she stays, but not without confronting him with the reasons for her anger:

Is [Claudio] not approv'd in the height a villain, that hath slander'd, scorn'd, dishonor'd my kinswoman? O that I were a man! What, bear her in hand [deceive with false hopes] until they come to take hands, and then with public accusation, uncover'd slanders, unmitigated rancor—O God, that I were a man! … Princes and counties! Surely a princely testimony, a goodly count, Count Comfect, a sweet gallant surely! O that I were a man for his sake! or that I had any friend would be a man for my sake! But manhood is melted into cur'sies, valor into compliment, and men are only turn'd into tongue, and trim ones too. He is now as valiant as Hercules that only tells a lie, and swears it.

(4.1.301-6, 315-22)

Of interest is the fact that Beatrice focuses her indictment of Claudio not on his decision to break the engagement, but on his way of disrupting the wedding ceremony. It would seem that she has detected beneath his mincing manner a sadistic urge that led him to calculate Hero's humiliation. Beatrice has measured the man; she realizes, as Leonato does not, that titles may mislead. Claudio is nothing more than a “sweet gallant,” a spoiled young aristocrat. Beatrice widens her view to encompass Don Pedro and Don John—they have provided “princely testimony,” she remarks bitterly—and then broadens her scope still further to take in all of “manhood” as she has observed it in her society. She sees that an ostentatious display of courtesy hides the absence of real courtesy; honor comes at a risk; better to guard one's social position and simply appear honorable.

Beatrice speaks with the authority she has gradually accumulated since the opening scene, in which she sought to discover the reality everyone else was busy to ignore. She interprets the repudiation of Hero as more
than an isolated event; she sees it as confirming doubts she has long entertained—not necessarily specific
doubts about specific people, but a general suspicion that extrinsic and intrinsic honor have become confused
in her society. Though Beatrice's tirade is delivered in the heat of passion, it nevertheless contains, I believe, a
core of truth.

The church scene tests and exposes a society in miniature. In Don Pedro, Claudio, and Leonato grievous flaws
are uncovered, and in Beatrice and Benedick, potentially significant weaknesses. At the bitterest moments
during the scene, one might complain with Berowne in Love's Labour's Lost that Jack hath not Jill and the
play nothing resembles a comedy. Yet this scene has several hints that Jack will have Jill, and the following
scene contains more. The friar, making an attempt to comfort Leonato, suggests a ruse: the family should
pretend that Hero is dead; he hints at a miraculously happy outcome and goes so far as to say, “this
wedding-day / Perhaps is but prolong'd” (ll. 253-54).

The interview between Beatrice and Benedick also gives strong indications that this match will go forward.
Then in the second scene of act 4, Dogberry enters with the nightwatchmen and their prisoners, Borachio and
Conrade. The audience already knows that the nightwatchmen overheard a drunken Borachio confess the
details of Don John's plot to Conrade. Disclosure of the plot was delayed only because Leonato was in haste
to join the wedding party and because he and Dogberry, equally self-important personages, spoke at
cross-purposes. However, the sexton proves an efficient investigator. Already informed that Don John has fled
the city, he quickly ascertains the nature of his crimes. It seems likely that at least a considerable portion of
the blame will light on Don John; if it does, Don Pedro and Claudio may be reconciled to Leonato and the
planned marriage may yet go forward. By the end of act 4, therefore, Shakespeare has not left great doubt
about the externals of the plot.

Act 4 has, however, raised questions about the “inward changes” which will be the focus of the last act. The
characters all have another test to confront. They have a chance to redeem themselves and prove worthy of the
celebration that lies in the offing. Or they can merely resume the rush to the altar, once their knowledge of
Don John's crime permits him to serve as their scapegoat.

Specific questions about individual characters have emerged during act 4. In suggesting his ruse to Leonato,
the friar predicts that “slander” will change to “remorse” when the princes and Claudio receive news of
Hero's death (l. 211). Of Claudio, in particular, the friar says that “if ever love had interest in his liver,” and
regardless of whether Claudio continues to believe Hero guilty, knowledge of her death will make him regret
her loss and contemplate the beauties in her life (ll. 222-33). If the friar is right, Claudio will gain an
appreciation for Hero that he has never had, and Don Pedro will recommit himself to true courtesy.

The friar also helps to establish the test facing Leonato. Shocked by Leonato's loss of faith in Hero, the friar
urges on him belief in his daughter's innocence. Although Leonato at first rejects the suggestion, he eventually
admits the possibility. He is still more concerned with his own dignity than with Hero's plight, however.
When he promises revenge against the princes and Claudio if they are guilty, he seems eager to impress others
that he is not a man to be trifled with (ll. 190-200). He lacks all conviction about who is at fault, and he
eventually agrees to follow the friar's plan by saying: “Being that I flow in grief, / The smallest twine may
lead me” (ll. 249-50). About all that can be said in favor of Leonato is that for the moment he accepts the
advice of well-intentioned people: he remains susceptible to beneficent influences.

Beatrice and Benedick also have yet to prove themselves. That they will eventually marry there is little doubt.
But will they, as a couple, exert moral authority? If others do not, will they at least call Don Pedro and
Claudio to account? From their relationship thus far, an answer to this question probably depends on the
answer to another: Will Benedick defer to Beatrice's greater wisdom, or will she gratify Benedick by
accepting the subordinate role?
In the course of act 5, the anticipated justification for a celebration develops: major blame for the slander of Hero is attributed to Don John. Whether the audience accepts this interpretation of events depends in part upon the judgments it made in the earlier acts; if viewers were critical, they will find ample reason for remaining so. The sequence of the act itself invites suspicions. The first three scenes immediately follow the interrupted wedding; the last scene takes place the next morning. In other words, in a trice of time, the march to the altar resumes. Has an adequate investigation taken place, or has Messina chosen Don John as a scapegoat in order to remove an impediment to marriage?

Doubts about Leonato's character are kept alive by his conversation with his brother, Antonio, at the beginning of act 5. Leonato takes no comfort in Hero's survival; nor does he once regret the harsh words he spoke to her. His concern is still not his daughter's suffering, but his own, which, however, he expresses in hyperbolical language that cannot possibly represent true passion. No father has grieved as he grieves, and no father “so lov'd his child” (5.1.8)—a preposterous claim, one might think. In everything Leonato says, he implies a subtext: “I'm an important person who has been affronted.” Leonato acts the lordly paterfamilias who feels sorrows inaccessible to his brother. When Don Pedro and Claudio enter, the two brothers foolishly compete to show greater concern for the insult the family has suffered. A. P. Rossiter describes them as “two old men lashing themselves back into a youthful fury.” First Leonato, then Antonio, challenges Claudio, as if each is trying to outdo the other. The challenges bring to the fore a question about Leonato's motives. By maintaining the fiction of Hero's death, Leonato leaves open the friar's suggestion, that Don Pedro and Claudio will seek a rapprochement with him. For all Leonato's bluster, he does not break decisively with the men who slandered his daughter.

As soon as Leonato learns from the sexton of Don John's flight, he confronts Don Pedro and Claudio, ironically calling them “a pair of honorable men” (l. 266) who should include Hero's death among their “high and worthy deeds” (l. 269). Leonato seems stern, but he has a ruse in mind. Responding to the offers of Don Pedro and Claudio to do penance, Leonato turns to the latter and asks him to go to Hero's grave that evening, where he should hang an epitaph on her tomb and sing a dirge (ll. 284-85). Then, as if requesting further restitution, Leonato instructs the men to return to his home the next morning, at which time Claudio should marry his niece.

Leonato's easily accomplished penance may merely reflect the dramatist's desire for a quick and happy denouement. Shakespeare has added one detail, however, that raises a question about Leonato's motives. Leonato states very carefully that his “niece” is sole heir to both himself and his brother (l. 290). As Claudio is a man interested in inheritances, Leonato's purpose seems clear: he has long ago decided that Count Claudio, with his royal connections, would make a good son-in-law, and he now wishes to consummate the union between the young man and his daughter.

The behavior of Claudio and Don Pedro in act 5 makes it difficult to believe that they undergo the reformation Leonato fails to require. The friar had expected Don Pedro and Claudio to repent upon hearing of Hero's death; instead they enter to taunt the father and uncle of the woman presumed killed. Don Pedro needles Leonato by curtly walking by him with the comment: “We have some haste” (5.1.47). Claudio puts his hand on his sword, then denies he would give Leonato's “age such cause of fear” (l. 56). Claudio and Don Pedro have continued their downward spiral. Don Pedro had been a model of courtesy until the church scene, during which he struck out at society, at the hated institution of marriage. When Don Pedro finds that no punishment is forthcoming and that he even retains Claudio's companionship, his habitual control partially breaks down, and he exercises a kind of drunken freedom. Of course, as royalty, Don Pedro knows how to hint antagonism and suggest a course for Claudio to follow, while he himself avoids an open, irreconcilable break with Leonato. Claudio, for his part, is no longer the well-behaved young man who arrived in Messina. He throws off the constraints he accepted when he sought Leonato's favor and becomes the snob Beatrice thought she detected in the church.
It is not until Leonato and his brother leave that Don Pedro and Claudio have a chance to express their full contempt for their host. As soon as Benedick enters, they tell him that, “We had lik’d to have had our two noses snapp’d off with two old men without teeth” (ll. 115-16). This remark earns a rebuke from Benedick, who then delivers his challenge to Claudio. At this point, Claudio and Don Pedro join in uncontrollable jesting at Benedick’s haughty manner. Even after Benedick discloses in a parting comment news of Don John's flight, Claudio and Don Pedro continue to laugh at Benedick's pretensions, though Don Pedro, at least, knows it is time for him to be serious (ll. 203-5). When Dogberry enters with his prisoners, Borachio and Conrade, the prince amuses Claudio by parodying the foolish constable's speech. Only Borachio's somber confession gives Don Pedro pause:

DON Pedro:

Runs not this speech like iron through your blood?

CLAUDIO:

I have drunk poison whiles he utter'd it.

(5.1.244-46)

These lines suggest that residual levity may remain in both men, for Don Pedro describes how the news affects him by using a figure of speech that Claudio, as if amused, develops in his reply. Don Pedro's remark shows him distancing himself from the crime in still another way, as Horace Furness noticed: “How gracefully and adroitly the Prince evades all responsibility by the use of this ‘your’ instead of our!” Don Pedro makes another deft move. Guilt is still too close to him if he leaves it with Claudio, since the two have been constant companions. Therefore the prince gets Borachio to confirm that Don John instigated the plot, then emphatically describes his brother as “compos'd and fram'd of treachery” (l. 249). Don Pedro anticipates the use others will make of his brother; yet the prince, as well as anyone, knows Don John's evil nature. Rather than making a new discovery, Don Pedro merely finds a way to extenuate his guilt.

When an apparently angry Leonato accuses Don Pedro and Claudio, they say they are contrite; they are undoubtedly shaken by the discovery of Hero's innocence, yet they do not fully confront the wrong they have done. After offering to do penance, Claudio adds, “yet sinn'd I not, / But in mistaking” and Don Pedro (content on this occasion to be Claudio's echo) adds, “By my soul, nor I” (5.1.274-75). Their wrongdoing hardly seems merely a matter of having trusted the treacherous Don John. Nor is it only their reluctance to accept guilt that is disturbing. Don Pedro appears to patronize Leonato: “To satisfy this good old man, / I would bend under any heavy weight / That he'll enjoin me to” (ll. 276-77). And although Claudio with tears embraces Leonato's offer of his niece in marriage, he does so immediately following mention of the double dowry; is he partly moved by the sudden opportunity to restore himself to good social standing?

The dirge scene resolves none of the doubts that have arisen about the “inner changes” the two men have experienced. Shakespeare might easily have created the impression of protracted mourning by beginning the scene in medias res. Instead, the scene opens with the arrival in the churchyard of the two men and several musicians and singers. Claudio reads the epitaph and asks the singers to render a “solemn hymn” (5.3.11). Claudio fulfills Leonato's directions, doing no less—and no more—than was asked of him. Alexander Leggatt notices that Claudio's grief is expressed only through “external forms,” never in personal terms, but argues that “formal expressions of feeling have their own kind of value.” The scene remains ambiguous, however, because the reality that lies behind Claudio's willingness to conform to social rituals is questionable. The few words that Don Pedro and Claudio exchange between themselves lack a convincing indication of sorrow.

Even in the final scene Don Pedro and Claudio seem curiously detached from the suffering they think they
have caused. When the men arrive at Leonato's, Don Pedro smartly teases Benedick, recalling to him his boast that he would die a bachelor. Claudio, still taking his cues from Don Pedro, elaborates upon the joke (5.4.40-47). Claudio has been accused of “flippancy,” and rightly, I think. Asked whether he is prepared to fulfill his promise to marry Antonio's daughter, he replies, “I'll hold my mind were she an Ethiope” (l. 38). Then, when the masked women approach, he turns from Benedick, saying, “Here comes other reck'nings. / Which is the lady I must seize upon?” (ll. 52-53). The remark is not very gracious, to say the least. Claudio acts as if he feels compelled to go through with the wedding, but regards the situation as disagreeably beneath his dignity.

Beatrice and Benedick display in act 5 the willingness to compromise moral principle anticipated in their church interview. Benedick has already challenged Claudio in a pompous manner that makes it hard to take at face value the moral earnestness he alleges. His lack of gravity is amply illustrated when he searches for Beatrice to report having made the challenge. He has been writing sonnets—poor stuff, he admits—while insisting that in other ways, he is a “deserving” lover (5.2.29-41). Beatrice enters to ask: “What hath pass'd between you and Claudio?” “Only foul words—and thereupon I will kiss thee.” Benedick's answer shows him unwilling to be serious and eager to divert Beatrice. As in the church interview, Beatrice feigns a departure, then engages in love talk.

Only a chance comment from Benedick brings to the surface Beatrice's underlying reservations. When Benedick casually remarks upon the extension of their accustomed repartee into the period of their courtship by saying, “Thou and I are too wise to woo peaceably” (l. 72), Beatrice's reply introduces unexpected caution: “It appears not in this confession; there's not one wise man among twenty that will praise himself.” Benedick will not be gainsaid, however; he answers that in the present day and age, a man with a free conscience should be “the trumpet of his own virtues” (ll. 85-86). Promptly taking his own advice, Benedick testifies that he himself is “praiseworthy.” Beatrice answers never a word, for she has learned her uncle's lesson at last: “Niece, thou wilt never get thee a husband, if thou be so shrewd of thy tongue” (2.1.18-19).

A servant suddenly brings Beatrice and Benedick news:

It is prov'd my Lady Hero hath been falsely accus'd, the Prince and Claudio mightily abus'd, and Don John is the author of all, who is fled and gone.

(5.2.96-99)

Once, in an outraged voice, Beatrice had shown Benedick that, regardless of whether Don Pedro and Claudio thought Hero guilty, they treated her abominably. Neither Beatrice nor Benedick wish to remember the resolve they made then. Their one desire is to rush off and join Hero and Claudio in a double wedding.

By now properly investigating the crime that took place and by accepting perfunctory repentances, the family is able to celebrate two marriages, as it has long desired to do. Audience response to the celebration is shaped by the decision arrived at about the real nature of the crime. I have yet to consider the light shed on this event by one possible accomplice, Margaret, Hero's “waiting gentlewoman.”

Margaret and Borachio are apparently lovers (2.2.12-14). In suggesting a plot to Don John, Borachio confidently assumes Margaret's willingness to disguise herself as Hero in order to decoy Claudio into thinking his fiancée is unfaithful (2.2.41-50). Subsequent evidence suggests that Borachio may have judged Margaret correctly. The night before the planned wedding, the nightwatch overhears Borachio describe the incident that just took place. He says that he called Margaret Hero and that Margaret answered to that name from her chamber-window and bid him “a thousand times good night” (3.3.147-48). Later Margaret is said to have dressed in Hero's garments (5.1.238). When Leonato finally gets the information gathered by the nightwatch, he questions Borachio about Margaret. Borachio, however, testifies that she “knew not what she did when she
spoke to” him (5.1.301). Still suspicious, Leonato interrogates Margaret; at the opening of 5.4, in Margaret's presence, Leonato settles upon a somewhat different account from the one Borachio offered—she acted not unwittingly, but “against her will” (5.1.5). Leonato exonerates her and she is included in the celebration.

The critics have been satisfied with Leonato's verdict. They dismiss the evidence against Margaret, arguing either that it is too trivial to notice in performance or that it represents something other than Shakespeare's final intention, the survival from a source for the play, perhaps, or an earlier version of Much Ado itself. One wonders, however, whether the strength of the evidence is sometimes overlooked because it raises a question about the adequacy of Leonato's entire investigation and thus about the conventionally happy close of the comedy.

Margaret has a motive for the crime: resentment against her social betters. Margaret shows her character most fully when she helps Hero dress for her wedding (3.4). Margaret treats Hero as a spoiled rich girl. As Hero fusses over her clothes and seeks the attention she feels is her right on this occasion, Margaret first makes her uncomfortable about the choice of a ruff, and then obliquely deprecates Hero's gown by comparing its simplicity with the duchess of Milan's more lavish garment (ll. 14-23). Finally, Margaret shows up the prim and proper Hero by making a coarse allusion to marital sex. Hero rebukes her:

**HERO:**

Fie upon thee, art not asham'd?

**MARGARET:**


This excerpt perhaps makes a difficult passage more difficult; yet the drift of Margaret's remark is clear. She alludes to Heb. 13.4 (a passage incorporated in the Anglican marriage service), where marriage is declared “honorable in all.” Margaret implies a contrast between the equality enjoined on man in the Bible and the inequality introduced by social distinctions: Hero's lord is “honorable without marriage”—he is the honorable Count Claudio. In the social world in which Margaret and Hero live, honor is achieved not by making any marriage but by a “good” marriage. Later, in a bawdy exchange with Benedick, Margaret expresses the desire for a marriage that will not leave her “below stairs” (5.2.10). Margaret has no such marriage in prospect, and she resentfully watches Hero's nuptial approach.

Margaret behaves, in fact, as if she might indeed have participated in the plot the previous evening and now sought to justify in her own mind the damage about to ensue. Whether or not Margaret did indeed conspire with Don John and Borachio the play does not demonstrate. Instead, Shakespeare uses Margaret to help develop the dark background against which Messina moves toward marriage. Margaret makes it harder to think of Don John's evil as singular; he emerges more clearly as part of a social context that includes characters in the mainstream of society.

It is difficult to maintain a sharp distinction between “good” and “evil” characters in the play. Don Pedro's destructive urge does not originate in Don John. The bastard prince succeeds because he is, in part, the destructive side of Don Pedro and the side that comes to prevail. In like manner, it is also possible that even without both princes, Claudio might have denounced Hero as he did. By putting his question to Benedick about Hero's chastity in the negative, he reveals that doubt already has a place in his mind: “Is she not a modest young lady?” Finally, Leonato's tirade against his daughter results from emotions elicited, but surely not caused, by the particular set of circumstances brought about by Don John's plot.
The enemy is within the gates of Messina. Beneath a thin veneer of civility, Messina is an anxious and insecure world where the men “hold their honors in a wary distance” (Othello 2.3.56). Uneasy about their social position, anxious to advance their fortunes, the characters keep a watchful eye, and as soon as they perceive danger, push cordiality aside. A quarrel almost develops after the dance, then flares out at the wedding. If the characters felt strong affection for one another, once the heat of the moment passed they would begin to seek a reconciliation; instead, acrimonious exchanges and challenges open act 5. The characters quarrel until Don John's flight makes it possible to think of marriage again; then they hastily conclude peace. Yet the celebration cannot wholly obliterate the tensions that surfaced. Benedick and Claudio exchange verbal blows with their old gusto until Benedick remembers that he must leave Claudio “unbruised” because through marriage they are about to become “kinsmen” (5.4.111).

Don Pedro is of course not part of the “alliance” concluded at Leonato's home, and the limits of kindness in Messina can be measured by the treatment accorded him. He is a foreign prince who had once been extended every courtesy. When he does not marry and fails as a matchmaker, he is no longer necessary to the household, though he is too important and too closely tied to Claudio to exclude or even treat with outright rudeness. The text of the play nevertheless provides hints (which can be developed in performance) that he is made subtly uncomfortable. When Don Pedro and Claudio offer to make restitution, Leonato gives instructions only to Claudio, although he does invite both men back to his home. When the men return, Don Pedro interjects himself into the conversation two or three times, but is not otherwise noticed until the last lines of the play. By this time, Benedick, pleased that he is marrying (as he thinks) despite social pressures, usurp's Leonato's role as master of ceremonies, even countermands Leonato's order that the wedding should precede the festivities; then he addresses Don Pedro, now neglected and silent:

\begin{quote}
*Prince, thou art sad, get thee a wife, get thee a wife.*
There is no staff more reverend than one tipp'd with horn.
\end{quote}

(5.4.121-23)

This is the taunt of an insecure man. Even as Benedick goes to the altar, he needs to reassure himself by making Don Pedro feel left out. Benedick exhibits the hostility that has been part of Messina throughout the play and that helps to explain—though it does not excuse—the destructive acts of Don Pedro and the conspirators who malign Hero.

David Weil Baker (essay date 1998)

*[In the following essay, Baker argues that the absence of Leonato's wife Innogen in Much Ado about Nothing necessitates a reevaluation of the play's characters, especially the immediate members of Leonato's family.]*

“Reade him, therefore; and againe, and againe,” enjoined Henry Condell and John Heminge, the supervisors of the publication of the First Folio, and this injunction to the “great Variety of Readers” contrasts with their depiction of a Shakespeare who never blotted a line and was thus presumably free from the need to reread his own work. Yet rereaders of Shakespeare's plays may find themselves in the position of the plotting Prospero as he watches Miranda and Ferdinand confirm their love according to a script that he has largely devised: “So glad of this as they I cannot be, / Who are surpris’d with all; but my rejoicing / At nothing can be more” (The Tempest, 3.1.93). That is, rereaders of a Shakespeare play may discover nuances and layers of meaning that delight them as nothing else, but some of the surprise is gone after their first experience of the play. Attacking what he terms the “new histrionicism,” Harry Berger describes this dilemma as the conflict between “wide-eyed” playgoing and the “slit-eyed” analysis of the armchair Shakespearean, but we do not have to
confine the scope of the problem to the page-stage controversy. It is possible, of course, to attend performances of the same play again and again. In return for a better critical perspective on either performance or text, the “rereader” of a play would seem to lose the capacity to approach the world of the play as a completely new one and to behold it with Miranda-like innocence and wonder.

The notorious instability of Shakespearean plays, however, provides some relief from the apparent dichotomy between the freshness of a first reading and the more jaded stance of the rereader. For paradoxically a rereading of a Shakespeare play is often a first reading, too—at least, of some parts of the play. Restoration adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays reveal this paradox at its crudest. Modern readers typically experience surprise and even outrage when they compare Tate’s adaptation (1681) of King Lear to the Folio text of the play or Shakespeare’s Tempest to the Dryden-Davenant version (1667). (Davenant’s The Law against Lovers (1662) amalgamated elements from the plots of Much Ado and Measure for Measure, but the title of the adaptation does not identify it with either Shakespearean source.) However, the more recent project of “unediting” Shakespeare has shown that, such outrage notwithstanding, we are still reading adaptations of his plays. Thus, the practice, originating in the eighteenth century, of conflating the quarto and Folio texts of King Lear is now the object of considerable skepticism, and this kind of skepticism has led to reexaminations of the texts of other Shakespearean plays and poems, too. The more carefully we reread Shakespeare, the more we seem to discover that we have yet to read him.

Character is no exception to this difficulty of fully distinguishing between Shakespeare reread and Shakespeare read for the first time. The Davenant-Dryden Tempest, for instance, introduces a number of new characters, and thus to move from this adaptation to the list of characters in the Folio Tempest is to experience a jolt. The dramatis personae, on the other hand, that accompany modern editions of Shakespeare’s plays suggest that the identity of his characters is immutably fixed. They will stay the same no matter how many times they are read. Yet, as Randall McLeod has argued, Shakespeare’s characters are “Popped” in most modern editions of the plays (“The Very Names of Persons” 88-96). Textual editors have imposed eighteenth-century notions of individuality and identity on these characters and rendered them more coherent than they are in seventeenth-century editions of the plays. Reread in the texts in which they first appeared, the characters of the Shakespearean quartos and the First Folio have a capacity to surprise that their counterparts in modern editions of the plays possess only faintly.

I want to examine one such potentially surprising character and her capacity to affect our rereading of Much Ado about Nothing, a play that, like The Tempest, concerns nuptials largely scripted by others besides the bride and bridegroom. Innogen, the wife of Leonato, appears in two stage directions to the Quarto of Much Adoe about Nothing (1600) as well as the Folio version of the play, but editors, beginning with Theobald, have excised her role and relegated her to a textual note. Innogen is a “ghost” character—one who is alluded to in stage directions but given no speaking part—and, as a consequence of her disappearance from the play, she has received scant attention from its critics. Michael Friedman has made a good case for the performability of Innogen’s role (49-50), but to most critics of the play Innogen has represented little more than an “abandoned intention” (Wells 3-4) or at best a character who “possibly should be seen but is certainly not heard” (Smidt 399). Both of these dismissals, however, exclude the possibility of her silence being an “open” and interpretable one. As Philip McGuire and Christina Luckyj have shown, the silence of women in Renaissance plays is often meant to be heard (McGuire 1-18; Luckyj 42-48). Nor is this silence necessarily tantamount to acquiescence. Albeit a “ghost” character, Innogen may haunt the play.

Innogen, however, is “ghostly” in another way; for she has the potential to make a play that has been read again and again seem strange and unfamiliar. Indeed, Theobald’s suppression of Innogen renders her appearance in the Quarto and the Folio all the more dramatic:

I have ventured to expunge [this name]; there being no mention of her through the play, no one speech addressed to her, nor one syllable spoken to her. … It seems as if the poet had in
his first plan designed such a character; which, on a survey of it, he found would be
superfluous, and therefore left it out.

(Variorum Much Ado 7)

Theobald's completion of what he saw as Shakespeare's intended revisions makes an implicit argument about
the incompleteness of Shakespeare's own rereading of Much Ado. That is, Shakespeare reread the play
carefully enough to know that he wanted to expunge Innogen—i.e., blot some of his own lines—but then did
not check to see whether he had remembered to do this. More important, however, Theobald's elimination of
Innogen has the potential to highlight Innogen for the modern rereader of the play, who may find the presence
of Innogen in the Quarto and Folio doubly intriguing precisely because Theobald deemed it superfluous.
Reading backwards is, of course, a prominent feature of rereading in general: for instance, one detects an echo
of an earlier scene in the fifth act of a play, and this echo leads to a rereading of the earlier scene. Yet
problems of textual editing force the rereader to reverse course in a broader sense. We reread the Quarto of
Much adoe in a historically “preposterous” manner. 7 After becoming dissatisfied or intrigued with later
emendations and adaptations, rereaders return to the texts of the play that historically came first.

The opening stage direction of the play provides a key opportunity for such retrogressive rereading. In the
Arden edition, this stage direction reads:

Enter Leonato Governor of Messina, Hero his daughter, and Beatrice his niece, with a
Messenger.

On the other hand, the Quarto reads:

Enter Leonato governour of Messina, Innogen his wife, Hero his daughter, and Beatrice his
neece, with a messenger.

In both cases, this opening direction presents Leonato as the center of a number of family relations and as the
source of political power in Messina, but these relations change when one rereads the play in the Quarto.
Preserved in a textual note to the Arden Much Ado, Innogen, however, prompts this rereading of the Quarto.
Thus, as an example of how the play appears in modern editions, the Arden Much Ado shows the
contradictory effect of Theobald's emendation. Innogen is not so much thoroughly expunged from the play as
made into a silent provocation. She invites a historically preposterous rereading of the play in the first textual
form that we have of it.

What difference, however, does Innogen's presence make to Much Ado? How does she enable the rereader to
experience surprise? Most obviously, she necessitates a reappraisal of Leonato's family. As Claire McEachern
has argued, Much Ado may concern the relations between fathers and daughters as much as King Lear
(274-87), and it seems to depict a father-daughter bond as intense as those in plays such as The Tempest and
Lear, which isolate the fathers and daughters from mothers. Leonato's lack of a wife intensifies the
father-daughter bond of the play. On the other hand, the presence of Innogen, who in the Quarto stage
direction is neatly situated between Leonato and Hero, makes the “family romance” of the play more
triangular. This is not to deny the importance of the bond between Leonato and Hero but only to suggest that
this bond is mediated by another character. At the very least, Innogen's appearance in the stage direction raises
the possibility of evaluating Leonato as a husband and a father.

Reread in the light of Innogen's appearance in the Quarto of Much adoe, other relationships and exchanges
between two characters become more triangular, as well. Thus, upon arriving at Messina, Don Pedro
immediately identifies Hero as Leonato's daughter: Leonato's reply jokingly suggests suspicion (lines 100-05;
all quotations are from the Shakespeare Quarto Facsimiles edition of the play):
[DON] Pedro[:]

You embrace your charge too willingly: I thincke this is your daughter.

LEONATO[:]

Her mother hath many times tolde me so.

BENED. [Benedick:]

Were you in doubt sir that you askt her?

LEONATO[:]

Signior Benedicke, no, for then were you a child.

As far as the stage directions are concerned, Innogen is present during this male banter, where Leonato, by his very denial, conjures up the possibility of an adult Benedick impregnating Innogen. In *The Tempest* Prospero asserts in an equally dubious manner Miranda's legitimacy: “Thy mother was a piece of virtue, and / She said thou wast my daughter.” But, although Prospero's wife is, as Stephen Orgel has argued, an “absent presence” in *The Tempest*, she never materializes to the point of having a stage direction devoted to her (50-51). On the other hand, the scene as we have it in the Quarto *Much adoe* contains Innogen as a silent hearer of her husband's jocular aspersions.

When included in the play rather than consigned to a textual note, Innogen instigates a rereading of other characters and their relationships. Leonato's reference to the mother of Hero is a fleeting one, but since in the Quarto she is on stage, we are more entitled to wonder about the degree to which Leonato's marriage provides the model for his treatment of Hero and vice versa. Is Leonato's joking suspicion of his own wife the reason he is so ready to believe Claudio's accusation of Hero later in the play? On the other hand, Innogen's silence offers a way of explaining Hero's submissiveness. This silence certainly reveals the effect of marriage on the only female character of the play who is a wife. Indeed, a kind of preposterous rereading obtains here, too. To be sure, one could read Innogen's silence as proleptic of Hero's actions and predicament, but a more likely model is that of returning to the opening stage direction after having read the rest of the play. It is only in the light of what comes later that this opening stage direction and Innogen's presence in the scene become significant.

A play as reread as *Much Ado* would not seem to have too many secrets left. In particular, *Much Ado* would also seem to have been sufficiently mined for literary allusions in the names of its characters. But the name Innogen offers the rereader another surprise in the form of its provenance, which is legendary British history. For Innogen was the wife of Brutus, the supposedly Trojan founder of Britain, and the daughter of a Greek king, Pandrasus, whom Brutus defeated in battle. The marriage of Brutus and Innogen was of dynastic importance because its progeny were a race of kings and queens, but this marriage also constituted a sign of revenge and conquest. As *Holinshed's Chronicles* puts it, the first article of peace between Brutus and Pandrasus was that “Pandrasus should give his daughter Innogen unto Brute in marriage, with a competent summe of gold and silver for her dowrie” (439). Like Katherine in *Henry V*, Innogen was one of the concessions yielded by her father to the young man who had overpowered him militarily. (Indeed, even before coming to Greece, Brutus had already killed his own father in a hunting accident, and this accident was the reason for his exile.) Although Brutus and his band ultimately settled in England, not Greece, Innogen still signified an older generation's transferral of its power and authority to Brutus.

As a mother—the other aspect of her role that *Holinshed's Chronicles* emphasizes—Innogen also enabled Brutus to provide for the continuation of his newfound power and rule:
When Brutus had builded this citie, and brought the Iland fullie under his subjection, he by the advise of his nobles commanded this Ile ... to be called Britaine; and the inhabitants Britons after his name, for a perpetuall memorie that he was the first bringer of them into the land. In the meanwhile also he had by his wife iii sonnes, the first named Locrinus or Locrine, the second Cambris.

This passage is replete with names and naming, and these names all perpetuate Brutus. The name of the Britons serves as an abiding reminder of Brutus's leadership just as his son Locrinus constitutes the means of extending that leadership into the distant future. Significantly, the only unnamed figure in the passage is Innogen, who appears as “his wife.” This anonymity again indicates her identity as a link between two generations of men—here, Brutus and his sons rather than Brutus and his surrogate father. Yet this anonymity is arguably only apparent when we reread Holinshed in the wake of the Quarto of Much adoe. That is, the Quarto renders Innogen's ghostly presence in Holinshed noticeable.

The Quarto of Much adoe displaces Holinshed's Innogen and provides the opportunity to reread Holinshed in the context of a Sicilian comic setting. As Northrop Frye long ago pointed out, Sicily could function in Renaissance plays and poetry as a kind of surrogate Britain, and in Cymbeline virtually the same set of names, Imogen and Posthumus Leonatus, reappear during a somewhat later era of British history. But reread in the comic context of Much adoe, Holinshed's dynastic history plot acquires new emphases. Shakespeare, of course, could have named one of the characters of Much adoe Brutus if he had wanted to allude to Holinshed's plot in a way that retained Holinshed's emphasis on male succession. But since the name Innogen conjures up Holinshed in Much adoe, the focus of the male dynastic plot also shifts to the effect of this plot on wives and would-be wives. This shift is, to some degree, generic: comedy may promote patriarchy, but it does require some interaction between the sexes. Yet, the point is not only that the Innogen story reads differently in the Quarto of Much adoe but that it may reread differently in Holinshed after one has detected the allusion to this story in the Quarto. Indeed, there is not much of an Innogen story in Holinshed until Much adoe underscores her significance. Holinshed's Innogen is available preposterously, i.e., to a rereader.

The name Innogen is evocative in Much adoe, and it impinges upon Much adoe in the same allusive way that the name Claudius affects the meaning of Hamlet. We are, of course, so used to reading again and again the identification of Hamlet's uncle as Claudius in both editions and criticism of the play that the paucity of textual evidence for this identification may seem surprising. Yet as Harold Jenkins points out, the name Claudius appears in only one speech heading and one stage direction of Hamlet (432-33). Elsewhere Hamlet's uncle is the king. Nevertheless, the identification of Hamlet's uncle as Claudius has become an entrenched part of criticism of the play, and interpreters have proved willing to reread Hamlet in relation to parallels from Roman history and vice versa.

But the evocativeness of Innogen's name provides a model for rereading other parts of Holinshed, too, and in particular the character of another wife from legendary British history. For even among Britain's first monarchs, a wife could be provoked to abandon, for a time, the role defined by Innogen. Thus, as Holinshed's Chronicles goes on to relate, Locrine, Innogen's son and Brutus's heir, and Guendolene, the daughter of one of Brutus's most valued allies, were married, and he aroused her ire by loving and having a child by another woman (444). Guendolene promptly defeated her husband in battle, imprisoned him, and, as Spenser puts it in The Faerie Queene, “first taught men a woman to obey” (2.10.20). Nevertheless, when her son came of age, Guendolene did consign her power to him. Albeit something of a Semiramis figure, Guendolene finally restored the male dynastic line from which she had briefly deviated.

The Quarto of Much adoe provides analogues to both the Innogen and Guendolene plots. On the one hand, Don Pedro and his band of uprooted soldiers (they are all from different places; Claudio from Florence,
Benedick from Padua, and Don Pedro from Aragon) are the young warriors who have established themselves in battle and now must ratify their positions through marriage. Leonato and his brother are the older men whose daughter(s) initially provoke enmity but must finally signify the peace between the two generations. This intergenerational strife is implicit in Leonato’s remark that Hero must be his daughter because Benedick was a child when she was conceived. Leonato, we may infer, is considerably older than Benedick. But intergenerational strife becomes explicit when Leonato and his brother challenge Claudio to a duel after the pretended death of Hero. Thus, the Prince and Claudio joke about these threats from “two old men without teeth” (ln. 2,207).

Innogen and Guendolene are not necessarily meant to be contrasted in Holinshed, but the Quarto of *Much Ado* indicates a possible rereading of Holinshed that underscores the divide between these two figures. For the Guendolene plot is also a part of *Much Ado* in the form of the merry warriors, Beatrice and Benedick, who do provide the play with a certain amount of contrast. Indeed, a “jades tricke” of inconstancy (ln. 140) may have been the initial provocation of their merry war just as Locrine’s unfaithfulness led to his battle with his wife. But, whatever its ultimate cause, the continual “skirmish of wit” (lns. 60-61) between Beatrice and Benedick rivals and at times replaces the skirmishes confined to men only. Beatrice inaugurates her first skirmish of wit with Benedick as an interruption of the male banter over Hero: “I wonder that you will still be talking, signor Benedicke, no body markes you” (lns. 112-13). This remark effectively highlights herself and Benedick as combattants.

Reread in the context of Shakespeare’s Sicily, the distinction between the two female types—Innogen and Guendolyne—becomes more pronounced. Benedick makes this distinction most explicit by dubbing Beatrice “my Ladie Tongue” (ln. 676), and, appropriately enough, the next and final appearance of Innogen in the play occurs during a scene that Beatrice dominates. Thus, subsequent Quarto stage directions read as follows: “Enter Leonato, his brother, his wife, Hero his daughter, and Beatrice his neece, and a kinsman” (lns. 415-16). On the other hand, modern editions of the play generally retain the “kinsman”—who is, as Stanley Wells writes, the “shade of a shade”—and remove Leonato’s wife, whose lack of a name here suggests that she is beginning to fade from the play.

Despite such fading, however, the silence of Leonato’s wife should provoke a rereading of those parts of the scene whose focus is speech. For if Innogen is on stage when Leonato blames Beatrice’s lack of a husband on her shrewdness of “tongue” (ln. 433), their exchange becomes yet another triangular one. Innogen’s silence both exemplifies Leonato’s ideal of a wife and at the same time provides a vantage point from which Leonato’s admonitions concerning the silence of wives can be reread and critiqued. Beatrice, at least, claims to be able to see a “church by day-light” (ln. 489), a formulation that suggests both the necessity and difficulty of perceiving the obvious. So, too, Innogen’s silent presence as “wife” is both hard to avoid yet at the same time something to which we must return again and again to get. Significantly, Beatrice’s reference to her own ability to see the institution of marriage for what it is gives the cue for the maskers to enter, and this sequence of events suggests that disguise is a recourse of both playwrights and social groups when awkward silences become too apparent. Nevertheless, at the same time, the attempt to hide what is there invites renewed scrutiny. Like Theobald’s suppression of Innogen, the onslaught of the maskers has the potential to provoke a rereading of what their arrival obscures.

Innogen’s silence, however, is doubly awkward. For it invites a rereading of the relations among the male characters of the play, too. Such rereading reveals that, despite the apparent fixity of the dramatis personae in modern editions of *Much Ado*, even the identities of some of the play’s primary characters are tenuous and “ghostly.” Thus, the preposterousness of rereading *Much Ado* from the perspective of a marginal character indicates the instability of the play’s center, too. Leonato, in particular, offers some surprises to the rereader of the play, since dramatis personae of modern editions of the play regularly echo the opening stage direction and identify him as “governor” of Messina. This identification then contributes to the apparent solidity of Leonato’s authority.
The play's villain, however, provides a rather surprising bridge from Innogen to Leonato. The bastard John, dubbed “dumb John” in one stage direction of the Quarto of *Much adoe* (In. 494), is the character whose silence provides the most explicit parallel to that of Innogen. “I am not of many wordes,” John tells Leonato in the first scene of the play (In. 152), and this self-description (his first line) is often taken as a declaration of moroseness, or, as Hero puts it, “melancholy” (In. 421). But John's lack of words should serve as a reminder that he, like Innogen, has been silently present during the banter over Hero's possible bastardy. Such banter does not directly allude to him, but it does highlight the stigma that sets him apart. As Jean Howard notes, women and bastards are the “natural and inevitable source of evil” in the play (175). Indeed, as a rebel who “of late stoode out” (Ins. 362-63) against his brother, John is “trusted with a mussle” (In. 372).

Given the dumbness of John, the silence of Leonato at crucial parts of the play is startling, for, unlike John, Leonato is a figure of supposedly legitimate authority. Yet a close rereading of the Quarto of *Much adoe* indicates a relative scarcity of references to Leonato's government. The opening stage direction of the play is in fact the only explicit textual basis for the designation of Leonato as governor of Messina. Neither in subsequent stage directions nor speech headings does Leonato ever reappear as “governor” of Messina. He is always Leonato. On the other hand, as the editor of the Arden *Much Ado*, A. R. Humphreys, has pointed out, other characters in the play are often identified in speech headings “by social function (Prince, Constable, Headborough) or morality trait (Bastard)” (78). Thus, for instance, one Quarto entrance reads “Enter Leonato, and the Constable, and the Headborough” (In. 1,595), and the following entrance positions Leonato in a similar way amidst a different group of characters: “Enter Prince, Bastard, Leonato, Frier, Claudio, Benedicke, Hero, and Beatrice” (In. 1,657). As far as textual evidence is concerned, both Dogberry's authority as constable and Don Pedro's as prince are more solid than Leonato's government of Messina.

Like the character of Innogen, Leonato's government of Messina is prominently introduced in the opening stage direction, only to be muted at crucial points of the play. As with Innogen, such muting then provides a kind of rereading of the opening stage directions. The Quarto of *Much adoe*, at least, does not so much solidly establish Leonato's government of Messina as make it a question to be asked again and again in the light of subsequent events. Thus, on the one hand, Dogberry and his cohorts do address Leonato as “your worship” (In. 1,614), and Leonato does discharge the Watch of its prisoners, Borachio and Conrade. But this discharge occurs after the Watch and Sexton have done all the work—that of apprehending and examining the prisoners.

Borachio and Conrade, moreover, make their confession not to Leonato but to the prince. The two henchmen of Don John are under constabulary escort when Claudio asks Don Pedro to “Hearken after their offence” (In. 2,296), and even Borachio requests that Don Pedro attend to what he has to say: “Sweete prince, … do you heare me” (Ins. 2,312-13). As a hearer of Borachio's confession, Don Pedro presides over the crucial and long deferred revelation of the play while Leonato is offstage. When Leonato, accompanied by the Sexton, returns to the stage, he does so more in the capacity of an aggrieved father than the governor of Messina: “Art thou the slave that with thy breath hast killd / Mine innocent child?” (Ins. 2,346-47). Only after Leonato has given ample vent to his paternal outrage does he officially claim the prisoners.

Who does govern Messina? This uncertainty is particularly acute in a play where power often manifests itself as the ability to hear what one wants to hear and silence everything else by remaining deaf to it. In particular, after the slandering of Hero, Leonato finds himself in the position of a suitor who cannot get an audience. “Heare you my Lords?” (In. 2,128) Leonato asks as the prince and Claudio make haste to avoid him. An exchange follows in which Leonato and his brother challenge the two younger men to a duel but are not taken seriously. Finally, the combattants part on a note of willfull deafness:

LEONATO[:]

My Lord, my Lord.
The Prince effectively silences Leonato by refusing to hear what he has to say. The speech headings further reinforce the disparity between the two men. Don Pedro is speaking as prince and Leonato as subject rather than governor. Even after the deception of Conrade and Borachio is revealed, Leonato does not quite regain his governing authority as far as the prince is concerned. Thus, in his apology to Leonato, the prince claims that “to satisfy this good old man” (ln. 2,361), he will “bend under any heavy weight, / That heele enioyne me to” (lns. 2,362-63). Leonato may be able to enjoin the Prince to make amends, but such injunctions will come from “a good old man” rather than governor.

The apparent fixity of Leonato’s identity as governor of Messina in modern editions of Much Ado, however, makes the instability of Leonato’s authority in the Quarto of Much adoe all the more interesting and surprising. That is, just as Theobald’s excision of Innogen contributes to the impact of her presence in the Quarto, so the play’s undermining of Leonato’s position acquires at least some of its significance preposterously—after that position has been established not only in the text of the play but its editing and reproduction as well. I am not, therefore, postulating a seventeenth-century first reading of Leonato’s character that would be the same as my own rereading of it. Yet, as Margreta de Grazia puts it, once scholars begin to critique the eighteenth-century editorial assumptions about textual authenticity that mediate our understanding of Shakespeare “[i]t becomes possible to look for phenomena that have been minimized, transformed, or excluded by its preparation or ‘speaking beforehand’” (13). Nevertheless, such speaking beforehand is the necessary prologue to the retrieval of excluded or minimized phenomena such as the identities of Innogen and Leonato. Innogen’s exclusion from later editions of the play spotlights, for the rereader, at least, her appearance in the Quarto.

More broadly, Shakespeare cannot be “unedited”—a form of rereading—until he has been thoroughly read, digested, and reconfigured in the adaptations of textual editors. Thus, despite its critique of eighteenth-century precursors, the project of “unediting” Shakespeare can be located squarely in an eighteenth-century tradition of textual editing. As Samuel Johnson put it, the first move of any textual editor is to “demolish the fabricks which are standing”—i.e., the work of preceding editors (“Preface to Shakespeare, 1765” 99). Yet such acts of demolition are never complete, as Johnson knew only too well. To reread the Quarto of Much adoe is to regain the lost element of surprise, but we must acknowledge the degree to which this surprise is combined with and even a function of Prospero-like jadedness rather than a rediscovery of the role of Miranda. For the perspective of a rereader is necessarily skewed. After centuries of editing and reading, the smallest details of the play loom large to us as they may not have to a seventeenth-century audience or readership. This does not mean that seventeenth-century first reactions to the play can never be hypothesized or, to some degree, recovered. Rather, we must be wary of making the goal of unediting Shakespeare that of approaching him “free of prior interpretation,” as McLeod puts it, and thus of denying our own status as rereaders. 12 For this goal is not historicism but rather the desire to recapture innocence.13

Notes

1. See Berger’s Imaginary Audition 1-42. Berger is responding to Richard Levin’s explicit critique of rereading Renaissance plays in New Readings vs. Old Plays. See Levin 1-10 and 194-207, where he links endless rereadings of Shakespeare and other Renaissance dramatists to both the New Criticism and the professionalization of literary studies as well as its attendant requirement to “publish or perish.” Berger engages Levin and his followers at the level of the stage/page debate, which he implicitly evokes. Thus, Levin supports an attitude of “humility” toward the “critical tradition that
has been formed by generations of viewers and readers” (201). In other words, Levin argues that the significance of Renaissance plays was relatively stable for spectators and readers until the advent of the professional journal and the New Critical “reading,” which dissolved the harmony of page and stage. Another great vulnerability of Levin's attack, however, is the historical fact that the texts of Renaissance plays have never been stable and thus neither have performances of the plays. It should be noted, for instance, that my “with all” is taken from the notes to the *Tempest* in the Riverside Shakespeare, which show that the Folio reading is “with all,” a reading subsequently emended by Theobald (1637).

I will be using “rereading” to include both the activities of a viewer who sees the play more than once and the armchair Shakespearean. It is also worth noting that the two are not mutually exclusive. Thus, for instance, like numerous Shakespearean quartos, the Quarto of *Much adoe about Nothing* is advertised on its title page as the text of what “hath been sundrie times publikely acted”—a formulation that suggests the possibility of spectators buying the text of a play that they had seen on stage and liked. Despite such links, however, the play as book is undoubtedly more easily reread than the play as performance. Thus, one can see an entire performance again and again, but only a book allows for the rereading of particular scenes and lines. Even the VCR is not the technological match of the book as far as rereading goes. On the VCR it is possible to return to a particular scene or line, but the reviewer is not equidistant from all parts of the play as is the rereader of a book. With its need of being rewound, the VCR is more at the level of the scroll or *volumen* rather than the codex, much less the printed book.

2. See Desmet 8-9 for a discussion of “reading” Shakespeare that includes the plays in performance.
3. Of course, problems of textual instability accompany the editing and criticism of virtually every writer. Nevertheless, Shakespearean texts display such instability to an unusually high degree.
4. Whether Restoration audiences experienced this kind of shock, however, is debatable.
5. I take the phrase “unediting Shakespeare” from Randall McLeod’s “UNEditing Shak-Speare,” but, for other examples of this kind of important work, see also McLeod's “Unemending Shakespeare's Sonnet 111,” and “The Marriage of Good and Bad Quartos.” On the editing of *King Lear* see the essays in *The Division of Kingdoms: Shakespeare's Two Versions of King Lear*, ed. Gary Taylor and Michael Warren, eds., *The Division of Kingdoms: Shakespeare's Two Versions of King Lear* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983). See also Peter Stallybrass and Margreta de Grazia, “The Materiality of the Shakespearean Text,” as well as de Grazia's *Shakespeare Verbatim: The Reproduction of Authenticity and the 1790 Apparatus*.
6. For discussion of Innogen, see the Variorum *Much Ado* 7: In a long textual note, the editors of the New Folger Shakespeare suggest that Innogen should constitute a “silent presence” in the play (Mowat and Werstine 199). But the text of their edition and that of all other contemporary editions that I have seen follows Theobald. The Variorum edition of the play does include Innogen, but it contains a good deal of editorial skepticism about her. My own argument is based upon the Quarto *Much adoe*, not because I think that the Quarto is necessarily more authoritative or authorial than the Folio *Much adoe about Nothing*, but, in part, because the Quarto has traditionally served as the foundation of later editions of the play. It is worth noting, however, that Innogen was not expunged from the Folio but appears in the same places there as in the Quarto (*First Folio* 101 and 104). On the dangers of making unwarranted assumptions about the relative authority of the Folio and Quarto editions of Shakespeare's plays, see Werstine, “McKerrow's Suggestion,” 157-59 and 166-68. For work on stage directions, including speech headings, see Linda McJannet's “Elizabethan Speech Prefixes: Page Design, Typography, and Mimesis” as well as Anthony Hammond's “Encounters of the Third Kind in Stage-Direcions in Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama.” The source for Innogen may be Messer Lionato's unnamed wife in “La Prima Parte de le Nouvelle del Bandello.” See Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* 112-34. Messer Lionato's wife is more a part of the plot than Shakespeare's Innogen. Shakespeare seems to have been more interested in Innogen as a name and a silent presence.
7. See Patricia Parker's “Preposterous Events” for more on the “Shakespearean preposterous.” For the most part Parker is discussing events within the plays, but she does give some indication of how preposterousness might be extended to the editing of the plays when she critiques the “critical construction of Shakespeare as an object of study, which … still reads back into the plays assumptions of stability, that straighten out the scandal of their ‘deformity,’ lost earlier versions, reassigned speeches, missing characters, or the logic of narrative or chronological lines” (212). For more on reading Shakespeare's plays “backwards,” see Berger, Imaginary Audition 35-37.

8. Frye makes the point about Sicily and the repetition of names in Cymbeline as part of a larger argument about the relation of Shakespearean comedy to romance (65). Interestingly, the issue of Imogen's name in Cymbeline also depends upon the page/stage debate. Simon Foreman's account of a contemporary performance of the play lists Imogen as Innogen, and thus Roger Warren has recently argued that the name Imogen in the Folio Cymbeline is a mistake (viii). Imogen, however, is a richly suggestive name—a cross, perhaps, between Innogen and “image.” In Cymbeline Imogen at times both thwarts and encourages the implication of her name that she will be a silent image. Thus, rejecting Cloten's advances, Imogen claims to be an unwilling speaker: “But that you shall not say, I yield being silent, / I would not speak.” She also apologizes for forgetting a “Ladies manners” and being “so verball” (First Folio 377). Here, she claims to speak only out of necessity, but, unlike her namesake in Much adoe, she does speak.

9. See Jonathon Goldberg, Voice Terminal Echo 68-101. Goldberg's analysis of all that is in a Shakespearean name is one model for what I am trying to do with the name Innogen.


11. See Harry Berger's “Against the Sink-a-Pace: Sexual and Family Politics in Much Ado about Nothing” for more on hearing and its lapses in the play.

12. See “Unemending Shakespeare's Sonnet 111” 96.

13. My thanks to David Galef and Marcia Worth-Baker for rereading this essay many times and giving me a number of valuable suggestions.

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Much Ado About Nothing: The Unsociable Comedy

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Social workers sometimes speak of people 'falling through the net'. That's what it can seem that Much Ado About Nothing has done, critically speaking. Audiences and readers rarely like it quite as much as the two comedies by Shakespeare which follow it, As You Like It and Twelfth Night: they feel that by comparison it lacks some sort of magic. Professional critics can take this vague disappointment much further, almost echoing the nineteenth-century charge that the heroine Beatrice is an 'odious woman'. In case it appears that we have changed all that, it may be worth mentioning that what is probably still the only full-length handbook on the play describes Beatrice (at least in her earlier unreformed phase) as 'self-centred', 'the embodiment of pride', a person who 'cannot love', 'a crippled personality, the very antithesis of the outgoing, self-giving character [Shakespeare] values most highly'. Nor is this study by J. R. Mulryne exceptional. A leading paperback edition cites it approvingly and itself describes both Benedick and Beatrice as 'posing', 'showing themselves off as a preparation for mating'; and it regrets that this pair of lovers fails to 'arouse in an audience the warmth of feeling' evoked by a Portia or a Rosalind. The writer of this Introduction, R. A. Foakes, can only conclude that 'The contrast between [Claudio and Hero] and Beatrice and Benedick was surely designed in part to expose the limitations of both couples.'

'This lookes not like a nuptiall', Benedick murmurs helpfully as the catastrophic Wedding Scene of Much Ado gets under way: and the reader of the play's criticism can often feel the same. Particularly given that we are considering a love-comedy by Shakespeare, the remarks I have quoted all seem to me to be startling judgements. For opinions to differ so much can provoke useful thought. Perhaps Shakespeare's mature comedies, once recommended literary fodder for school-children on the grounds of their charming pure-minded simplicity, are—whatever their other characteristics—not so simple after all. When Shakespeare first staged Much Ado, fairly certainly in 1598 or '99, he was coming to the end of a decade of extraordinary achievement and invention. The first Tragedies, the earlier Histories and Comedies lay behind him, The Merchant of Venice immediately preceded Much Ado, and Shakespeare had probably written most of both parts of Henry IV. The dramatist of The Merchant of Venice and Henry IV was in no way unsophisticated or unambitious. If he gave the three comedies we now choose to call 'mature' his most throwaway titles, they aren't throwaway plays. Possessed as they are of a profound sense and vitality which suggest the popular audience they were written for, their lightness nonetheless recalls that 'negligent grace' (sprezzatura) which the aristocratic culture of the Renaissance aspired to. The very unpretension of Much Ado About Nothing, its affectionate straightforward transparency have been invented to deal with human experience dense enough and real enough to produce notably different reactions from given human beings.

These comedies have become so familiar that it can be hard to think of them freshly. I want therefore to begin by approaching Much Ado from a slightly unexpected angle—because sometimes, when we are surprised, we see things more clearly. I'm going to start by thinking about one of the comedy's textual cruces, involving a few words spoken by Leonato in the first scene of Act 5. An interestingly shaped play, whose structural rhythm the dramatist was to use again in Othello (a fact which alone may say something about the work's seriousness), Much Ado has its main plot's climax, which turns out to be a pseudo- or anti-climax, in Act 4: in the big, bustling, peopled and very social Wedding Scene, which sees the gentle Hero, unjustly shamed by the machinations of the villains, publicly humiliated and jilted by her courtely fiancé Claudio—though the fidelity to her of her witty though here grieving cousin, Beatrice, brings to Beatrice's side her own lover, the humorous Benedick.

In marked contrast, Act 5 opens with a quiet scene between two suddenly aged men, Hero's father Leonato and his brother Antonio. Critics have often thought it the most feeling moment in a drama they otherwise find cool. Leonato rebuffs his brother's philosophical comfort; he will be stoical, Leonato says bitterly, only if so
advised by one who has suffered precisely as, and as much as, himself:

If such a one will smile and stroke his beard …
Patch grieue with proverbs, make misfortune drunke
With candle-wasters: bring him yet to me,
And I of him will gather patience.

I have edited this, cutting out a line which both the early texts, the 1600 Quarto and the 1623 Folio, are agreed on, but which the great late-Victorian New Variorum edition fills two and a half of its large minutely printed pages of Notes discussing: and which all modern editors emend, in various slightly unconvincing ways. In the authentic texts, Leonato says that his despised comforter would be one to

stroke his beard,
And sorrow, wagge, crie hem, when he should
grone,
Patch grieue with proverbs

—and so on.

I want to talk for a few moments about what I think Leonato really said (which is not quite what modern editors make him say). It's necessary to add that, as the New Variorum records in its textual apparatus, fortunately or unfortunately an excellent American scholar named Grant White printed in his edition of 1854 the emendation I'm going to propose: but, since he dropped the emendation in his second edition, and didn't explain or gloss it in the first place, the field remains reasonably clear. He thought, and I too had thought independently, that Leonato describes his would-be comforter angrily as 'sorrow's wagge'—'And, sorrow's wagge, crie hem, when he should grone': a compositorial mistake very easy to account for; for, in the old Secretary hand which Shakespeare had learned to write in, the terminal letter 's' to a word was written as a kind of scrawled loop very like a topped comma. Let the comma lose its top because of a shortage of ink and the text reads just as in the Quarto and Folio.

It's an interesting fact that the editor of the New Variorum, the scholar Furness, urges us to find these early texts 'irredeemably corrupt'—not even to try, that is, to emend their version of the line. And he does so because the line shocks him as it stands. No editor, however authoritative (he says) 'can ever persuade me that Shakespeare put such words, at this passionate moment, into Leonato's mouth. There is a smack of comicality about "wag" which is ineffaceable.'

There is indeed. But perhaps Shakespeare put it there. The seriousness, even the genius of Much Ado may be to bring in precisely that 'smack of comicality' where we least expect it—just as its dramatist invents peculiarly English constables for his Sicilian play, to stumble fatheadedly into arresting the villains and bringing about the play's happy ending. A 'wag' is a word and a social phenomenon that is nearly obsolete now, though I can remember my own mother using it drily, with something of Furness's rebuke. A wag is or was a person who habitually, even desperately, tries to be funny. But in Shakespeare's time the word hadn't progressed to this degraded condition—it had not, so to speak, grown up: it remained the 'little tine boy' of Feste's song. For the most familiar colloquial usage of 'wag' in the poet's own day was in the tender phrase, 'Mother's wag'. The word denoted a mischievous small prankster, amusingly naughty as little boys often are. Only a few years before Much Ado, Greene in his Menaphon has, 'Mothers wagge, prettie boy'—and Falstaff calls Hal his 'sweet Wagge' in Part I of Henry IV.

Leonato says that the father who, having lost a child, could still find or accept words of comfort would be 'Sorrow's wagge': he means the man would be himself a child, immature. And the phrase has an element of oxymoron that defines his shock and outrage. Like Furness after him, this decently conventional, hierarchical,
even conservative old man thinks that certain conjunctions of what they would have called the grave and the gay, of grief and humour, are 'irredeemably corrupt'.

Before we agree with them both, we ought perhaps to pause and ask whether Shakespeare has not shaped this encounter of the two old men so as to prevent us doing just that. The 'passionate moment' which the Victorian editor points to is surely something odder than passionate—and is odd in a way that is relevant. For (and this is my chief topic here) *Much Ado About Nothing's* real achievement may be to make us think very hard indeed about this quality of the 'passionate' in human beings.

In this scene, Leonato and Antonio wear something that is easy to call, at sight, the dignity of the bereaved; and they wear it consciously. But this is odd because, though Hero may be disgraced, she is certainly not dead. And both Leonato and Antonio know it. Moreover, we in the audience know that even Hero's disgrace is rapidly melting into air: for the grieving scene is linked to the Church Scene by, and is immediately preceded by, the comic bridge-scene in which the ludicrous constables—the more senior proclaiming, with something of Leonato's own self-important fury, that he 'hath had losses'—have apprehended the villains and are at this moment hotfoot bringing a full disclosure to Leonato.

Later in this Fifth Act, Don Pedro and Claudio will make solemn acknowledgement at the quasi-tomb of Hero. This action has its own meaning—the moment's music allows the gesture a dimension of the symbolic: the scene mutedly articulates some sadness which all grown-up 'understanders' of this highly civilised, social comedy know to be intrinsic to most passion seeking social embodiment. In the very preceding scene, 5.2, Benedick has lightly told Beatrice that she doesn't live in 'the time of good neighbours', if it ever existed; that 'if a man doe not erect in this age his owne tombe ere he dies, hee shall live no longer in monuments, then the Bels ring, & the Widdow weepes'—i.e., not long. But symbols are one thing, and facts another, even in our greatest poetic dramatist. Hero still isn't dead. And the fact that she isn't, and that we know that she isn't, and that her family, too, know that she isn't turns this grieving ceremony at the tomb into something like the masked dances which characterise this sophisticated comedy: an art, a game, a pretence—a deception exonerated by having been proposed in good faith and by a man, so to speak, of the cloth.

*Much Ado's* tomb-trickx may in short be considered as not unlike those bed-tricks in the two later, much darker comedies, *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well*. Greater, much more intense, these two plays tell us far more about Shakespeare's interest in the tragi-comic—though neither they, nor any other play written by him is truly identifiable with the genre as the Continental aristocracy of the period knew it. But *Much Ado* shares one striking characteristic with them. It has the tragi-comic concern with love in society, a society for which some version of the political, the power-issue, is serious: a world which defers to Courtship and to social hierarchy. From this point of view, the tomb-trick is like the bed-tricks in working as a special kind of 'good deceit' or virtuous untruth, a device of worldly accommodation in a light but moral art. The clever courtiers, with Don Pedro at their head, have descended on Leonato's provincial family, and have done these simpler if still socially aspiring people some harm. Now the tables are pleasingly turned, the foolers are fooled, and Leonato and Antonio regain something of their lost honour merely by the silent superiority of knowing what they know.

But if this is conceded, something else must follow. The tomb-trick is peculiarly like those forms of wise comfort (and the word comfort actually means 'self-strengthening') angrily rejected in the grieving scene by the passionate Leonato. The music of the tomb-scene, shortly after, though saying nothing true, can still both calm and resolve. It thus performs the act at first denied by Leonato in the scene I started from: it can, like the wag's wisdom, 'Charme ache with ayre, and agony with words'. While the old man scorns sorrow's wags, something wise in the play embraces them.

I have used the word 'embrace' here deliberately—and not only because it is a love-comedy we are concerned with. For Elizabethans, the chief image of Love itself was as a 'wag': as the Puck-like armed baby,
Cupid—naughtily dangerous, even disturbing to the coolly rationalistic eye of the Renaissance, yet in these 
comedies also the medium of great good. Puck himself is, after all, in the service of Oberon the King. Yet 
Puck moves in the night, 'Following darkenesse like a dreame', and the wood where the lovers wander is a 
distressing and frightening place. These complexities make Shakespeare's Love, and love's Happiness, a pair 
of twins, springing from the circumstances of sorrow: sorrow's wags.

I am hoping to suggest that in this casual phrase, a local crux in the text of a light comedy, we have some 
suggestion of the kind of rich complexity, of fruitful half-paradox, which gives Much Ado the vitality and 
deepth by which it now survives. The comedy's Italian director, Franco Zeffirelli, once referred to it as a 'very 
dull play'. And Much Ado is indeed simple if we compare it, for instance, to its predecessor The Merchant of 
Venice. But that play's fascinating intellectual battles, its energy of contrasts embodied in Portia and Shylock, 
the marketplace and Belmont, leave behind at the end a disquieting dissatisfaction, a sense of something 
unjust or unresolved. This is a subject I shall return to. For the moment I want only to suggest that Much Ado 
may have chosen to be a 'very dull play', to be simple to the eye.

But its simplicity is a solidity. Shakespeare uses the novelle sources from which he has taken his main plot to 
generate a special, almost novelistic sense of the real, of a world where people live together to a degree that is 
socially and psychologically convincing, and new in the poet's work. And this realistic, even novelistic 
comedy deepens itself by containing, indeed we may say, with Leonato in mind, by embracing contradictions 
everywhere beneath its smooth and civil surface. If there is, to Leonato's mind, a troubling indecorum, an 
unconventionality in the juxtapositions, momentarily glimpsed by him, of sorrow with joy and of play with 
love, then it has to be said that such vital oppositions pervade the play, and are its life. Let me touch on one 
famous passage. At one point Don Pedro finds himself proposing marriage to Beatrice. He does not love her, 
nor she him. He has been led into it by his belief in the kindness of his own impeccable manners: a 
self-defeating trap from which he is released by Beatrice, who of course has led him into it in the first place, 
with the neat licentious speed of some brilliant Court Fool. Panting slightly, the courtly Don Pedro tells 
Beatrice that she was 'born in a merry howre'. She wins again, both wittily and touchingly: 'No sure my Lord, 
my Mother cried, but then there was a starre daunst, and under that was I borne.' This nicely hints at some of 
the reasons why this (to my mind) superb heroine has been and can still be disliked by a whole host of male 
scholars, both past and present. She is Shakespeare's true heroine, woman as 'wag', the sharp and comical 
child of sorrow.

Beatrice does something far more waggish than merely walking along a razor's edge of good behaviour with a 
visiting grandee. Indecorum is embodied in the fact that she and her story, which a formal criticism calls 'the 
subplot', take over the play, edging aside the main-plot story of Claudio and Hero. It's well known that Charles 
I wrote against the title of his text of the play 'Benedik and Betrice', and the sympathy of most succeeding 
readers has agreed with him. But the high originality of this comic structure can leave editors behind. Much in 
accord with the New Penguin Introduction which I quoted earlier, the New Arden confronts as the chief 
critical problem the question, 'What can or should be done to balance the play?' and proposes as answer: 'Hero 
and Claudio can gain in prominence; Benedick and Beatrice can be less salient.' But perhaps the comedy has 
its own balance, which can only be impaired by these adjustments: and this balance has to do with the delicate 
poise of energies suggested by the phrase, 'sorrow's wag'. I have lingered over this conceit because of all it can 
suggest about the essential principles involved in a Shakespearean comedy: principles necessitating both light 
and dark, both seriousness and laughter.

It can be a struggle to explain why these romantic comedies carry the value that they do—why, seeming to be 
'About Nothing' (as their ironic or nonchalant titles suggest) they nonetheless evoke from those who truly like 
them, words like 'true' or 'brilliant' or 'profound'. The 'Nothing' of the Much Ado title is now, of course, 
somewhat undercut by our understanding that Elizabethans could pronounce 'Nothing' as 'Noting'. The plot of 
the comedy certainly turns on what this pun implies: notetaking, spying, eavesdropping. No other play in 
Shakespeare introduces so much eavesdropping—each new turn of the action depends on it. The confusions of
Don Pedro's wooing of Hero for his protégé Claudio, the machinations by which his bastard brother Don John deceives Claudio into believing Hero unchaste, the trick by which Beatrice and Benedick are persuaded that each loves the other, the discovery of the villains by the comic constables—all these are effected by the incessant system of eavesdropping. Yet underneath the noting there is nothing. The play's first act is filled by a flurry of redoubled misunderstanding which scholars often assume to be textual confusion or revision. This seems to me a mistake. The dramatist plainly wanted his comedy to be this way: he wanted the world he had invented to be swept through by these currents of pointless energetic bewilderment. Later, after all, he almost unwinds the villainy of the mainplot before our eyes, by having the pretend-Hero address her villainous lover as 'Claudio', a naming which would have left the heroine all but guiltless. Shakespeare's change of all his sources in this main plot is important here: what they presented as evidence, he converts to mere inference. An editor once complained that the omission of the 'Window Scene' does an injustice to Claudio. Perhaps; but it was meant to. And this stress in Shakespeare's play on the insecurities of mere social inference even touches the other lovers. In the last scene, the obdurately individual Beatrice and Benedick show signs of being as near as makes no matter to a readiness to back out of each other's arms: loving each other 'no more then reason', 'in friendly recompence', taking each other 'for pittie', yielding 'upon great perswasion'.

_Much Ado About Nothing_ reminds us, both as title and play, that, though life is indeed serious, most human beings pass much of their time in little things, unseriousness; that the ordinary, social fabric of life can be very thin, made up of trivia, and we can often feel a kind of real nothingness underneath ('hee shall live no longer in monuments, then the Bels ring, & the Widdow weepes ... an hower in clamour and a quarter in rhewme'). Benedick's light definition of human void is a striking one, peculiarly apt in the theatrical world which has produced it, where revels are always 'now ... ended'. He evokes it in a context congenital to Shakespearean comedy, that of the presence or absence of real human feeling: love in a world which is defined as recognisably not 'the time of good neighbours', and in which the sound of the bells is short, of weeping even shorter.

Shakespeare's comedies are a 'Nothing' concerned with serious things: and these serious things are the principles of true human feeling, in a world in which a wise man knows that so much is nothing. To be at ease in such reflections demands at once ironic detachment and feeling participation. Consonantly, if we are trying to describe the power, the real survival-value of even the poet's earliest comedies, it has to do with his ability to bring laughter together with tenderness. We think of Launce and his dog in _The Two Gentlemen of Verona_; of the tough slapstick of _The Taming of the Shrew_, resolving into Katherine's sober devotion; or the weeping of the angrily jealous Adriana in the brilliant fast farce of _The Comedy of Errors_. The coolest and most intellectual of aristocratic revues, _Love's Labour's Lost_ ends with a father dead and Berowne sent, in the name of love, to 'move wilde laughter in the throate of death'; and it includes the memory of a girl, Katherine's sister, who died of love: 'He made her melancholy, sad, and heavy, and so she died: had she beene Light like you, of such a merrie nimble stirring spirit, she might a bin a Grandam ere she died.' Titania, similarly, in _A Midsummer Night's Dream_, tells of her loyalty to the friend who died in childbirth, like so many Elizabethan women:

> she being mortall, of that boy did die,  
> And for her sake I doe reare up her boy,  
> And for her sake I will not part with him.

I quoted Beatrice's 'No sure my Lord, my Mother cried.' Immediately after, with Beatrice sent out of the room, Leonato tells that, by Hero's report, Beatrice has 'often dreamt of unhappiness, and wakt her selfe with laughing'. Something very similar might be said of Shakespeare's comedies in themselves: their character from the beginning has to do with finding a way of being 'sorrow's wag'. His art recognises the interdependence of the dark and the light in life, especially at those points of love and friendship where feeling is most acute, and often most complex. The mature comedies seek to perfect a style or condition in which happiness exists not just despite unhappiness but through it, because of it, yet charitably and
sympathetically, like Patience smiling at grief. There must in the end be the co-existence, the smiling and the grief. In *The Merchant of Venice*, for all its brilliance, there is no final co-existence: something has been sacrificed to the desired achievement of extreme contrarieties, of the play of light and dark. As the sociable Bassanio has to use the lonely loving Antonio, so in the end the golden Portia must destroy the embittered, darkhoused Shylock, the greatest personage in the comedies.

It's in the art of co-existence that *Much Ado's* supremacy lies: this, the first of Shakespeare's mature comedies in which very different human beings believably live together. Its 'dullness' (to quote Zeffirelli) is only the prosaic quality of the novel as against the poem. Yet this temperate, equable and witty world Shakespeare has created has surprising resonances, depths and possibilities. If prose is the comedy's dominant medium, the work's very coherence and inventiveness is a poetic achievement of a high kind.

That creativity is first manifested by Shakespeare's making of 'Messina'. That the dramatist calls his play's setting Messina, and makes his elderly Leonato, father to Hero and uncle to Beatrice, Governor of it, does not have to be taken too seriously—seriously in the sense of literally. 'Messina' is any romantic place lived in by rich and relatively important people. But, off the literal level, 'Messina' has extraordinary self-consistency and convincingness. The fantasy-place also functions as the grounding of the real; and, immediately below the surface, things hold together. I will give one small example from the first lines of the play: it says something about the way the poet's imagination has worked on his fantasy-place, and may even give some hint as to why Shakespeare chose this Sicilian port as his locality. *Much Ado* begins with the descent of grand visitors, heralded by formal letter and Gentleman-Messenger, on the excited and grateful Leonato: the visitors being the well-born and triumphant young warriors, Don Pedro and friends. The stage 'Messina' is thus flooded by a desired and aspired-to standard of Court behaviour, one evidenced in the battle just won (the chief occupation of a Court culture was warfare); and also in the good manners everywhere, the formal wit, the letters, the vivid sense of worldly hierarchies.

But directly this Court standard is initiated, we feel its ambiguity. Don Pedro brings with him the brother he has just defeated, the villainous Don John. The opening words of the drama speak of the distinguished visitor by his Spanish title—he is *Don Peter of Arragon*; and his brother Don John's title can hardly fail to remind an Elizabethan audience of that Don John of Austria who was similarly a Spaniard, a natural son of Philip II. Oddly enough, it was at the port of Messina that the fleets gathered before the great battle of Lepanto, where 'Don John of Austria' rode 'to the wars'. Catholic Spain was at Lepanto the defender of what Renaissance Christians held to be true civilisation against the barbarian hordes of the East. But she was also the lasting, unchanging threat to English supremacy at sea—and she represented a Church thought by many of Protestant Elizabeth's subjects to be wickedly authoritarian: a double face, as the play's courtliness will shift between light and dark.

For, though Leonato welcomes Don Pedro's visit as a high honour, Don Pedro brings with him the bastard brother, Don John, the at least nominal source of all the play's troubles, his dark, surly, lonely ill-nature an interesting shadow to Don Pedro's all-too-glittering sociality. And young Claudio, Don Pedro's friend, is as amiably disagreeable as he is conventional. It is entirely unsurprising that he should later indicate his interest in Hero by making certain that she is her father's heir; that his deception by the villains should be as rapid as his consequent repentance; and that the girl he readily accepts at Leonato's hand as second bride should be 'Another Hero'. In the triviality of their love is the necessary stability of their society.

The story of his two independent individualists, Beatrice and Benedick, Shakespeare seems to have invented for himself. But the main Hero-and-Claudio plot of his play he took from the great stock of international Renaissance romance. These facts are perhaps suggestive: they may tell us something about the kind of world Shakespeare saw himself creating in this comedy of 'Much Ado'. 'Messina' is a figure for the most courtly, most worldly aspirations of ordinary people. The society of 'Messina' is governed by decorum, convention and fashion. Its only alternative, bred within itself, is the hostile isolationist Don John, the lawless brother who has
determined 'not to sing in my cage'. Everyone else does sing in the cage—the cage being Leonato's great house with its arbour-full of secrets for a garden, a world of spiky high-level chatter where formal compliments intertwine with informal insults. It's not surprising that the comic policemen get the impression that the villains are led by one Deformed, a man of some fashion. Even Shakespeare himself sings in his cage: amusedly inventing at one point the babble of *Vogue* magazine, telling us that Hero's wedding-dress will be worth ten of the Dutchesse of Millaine's 'cloth a gold and cuts, and lac'd with silver, set with pearles, downe sleeves, side sleeves, and skirts, round underborn with a blewish tinsel.'

'Messina' is tinsel itself, and yet very real. It can't be satirised or politicised out of existence, nor even assumed to be a mere preserve of the rich. The constables who enter the play in its third act to resolve the problems of their nominal superiors are just as much given to chat and argument as anyone else in Messina, and as interested too in social status. They are rustic, obdurately English instead of Sicilian, and often very funny ('We will rather sleepe than talke, wee know what belongs to a Watch'—'Nothing' operates here, too). 'Messina' represents a mundane if aspiring social reality which we recognise at sight: that social world which is, as Wordsworth remarked, the 'world/Of all of us', and in it, we 'find our happiness, or not at all'. When Benedick resolves to marry, he remarks briskly that 'the world must be peopled', and we all (of course) laugh. Yet he is serious too; and this is what *Much Ado* portrays in 'Messina'—the world of people that 'must be peopled'.

This wonderfully real and recognisable world Shakespeare brings alive in the very style and structure of his comedy. 'Messina' talks a fine and formal, conversational yet mannered prose, which in the genuinely intelligent becomes admirably flexible. Only those who are unusually deeply moved (Beatrice in love, Hero's family in and after the Church Scene) speak in verse, and that not often. The play is a very Elizabethan work, yet it sometimes sounds to the ear almost like Restoration Comedy, at moments even like Wilde. Its structure has the same tacit expressiveness. The action falls naturally into Messina's large crowded scenes of social encounter—the opening arrival of the soldiers, the evening dance in mask, the church wedding, the final celebration. It is because of these thronged and bustling scenes that the moment when Benedick and Beatrice speak their love to each other, left alone on the stage after the interrupted marriage, has such startling effect. Despite the eventfulness of what we call the main plot, nothing really happens to the more social characters of the play, who are precisely defined as people to whom nothing can happen (hence, 'Another Hero'). Late in the play, after Hero has been cruelly rejected on her wedding-day and is believed to be dead by all but her family and friends, there is a decidedly subtle and embarrassing encounter between the young men, as Don Pedro and Claudio think to take up again their old verbal teasing of Benedick, and can't realise by how much he has now outgrown it. This unawareness is the continuity of the social, the process by which it survives: 'Messina' lives in a perpetual present, where salvation depends on the power to forget. It has all been, after all, 'Much Ado About Nothing'. And yet there is of course an exception to this. Beatrice and Benedick do change. And the index of this change, their falling in love, is the great subject of the comedy.

Beatrice and Benedick are most certainly inhabitants of Messina. Hero's cousin and Claudio's friend, they belong in their world, possessed by a social realism summed up in Beatrice's 'I can see a Church by daylight.' Moreover, there is a real sense in which we are glad to see the cousins and friends join hands again at the end of the play, with a sensible patient warmth foreshadowing that romantic yet worldly wisdom which keeps the families joined, if at some distance, at the end of *Pride and Prejudice*.

Yet Beatrice and Benedick do still change. Modern Shakespeareans who work assiduously to banish this change, to work the hero and heroine back into those borders of the action from which they come, seem to me to be in serious error, and to be breaking the back of a work of art. *Much Ado*'s very originality of action and structure, that power of mind which animates Shakespeare's lightest comedies, here depends on the growing importance of two people who, though their intelligence gives them authority from the beginning, are socially on the margins of the action, subordinate in interest to the possibly younger Hero and Claudio. But, where the trick played on Claudio by Don John destroys his shallow love for Hero, Don Pedro's fooling only releases
real depths of feeling in Beatrice and Benedick, the two unsociable individuals who think themselves determined to resist the enforcements of matrimony.

There has been in much recent criticism a comparable resistance to the originality of Much Ado itself, one evidenced by the repeated insistence that Beatrice and Benedick do not change and fall in love in the course of the play: they are (the argument goes) in love when it begins. Again, I have to say that I find this near-universal assumption entirely mistaken. Despite all the sophisticated techniques of the modern psychological novel, the analysis of actual human feeling often lags far behind Shakespeare still. Beatrice and Benedick begin their play attracted to each other, but not in love. Both are children of ‘Messina’; both play its games; both belong to a social world for which such attraction is an ordinary datum of experience. ‘Messina’ assumes that men and women are always after each other and always betraying each other: ‘Men were deceivers ever’; and Benedick joins in with Leonato’s social by-play of distrusting his own child’s legitimacy.

But both from the first see beyond, and through, the merely social, as Benedick really prefers ‘my simple true judgement’ to what he is ‘professed’ or supposed to think. This soldierly preference for sincerity suggests that he might similarly like to be truly in love with Beatrice. But he isn’t. When he finally does fall, he is honest enough—in a fashion both comic and heroic—to tell her how ‘strange’ he finds it to feel so much. Earlier, though, what has angered Beatrice is this sense of a mere conditionality in Benedick, which might never have become fact. With an allusive dimension of past and future which distinguishes the two senior lovers from the rest of timeless Messina, Beatrice has two curious references to time past which have puzzled critics. She tells of the moment when Benedick ‘challeng’d Cupid at the Flight’, and was in turn challenged by Leonato’s fool. This narrative anecdote works, I believe, as a conceit of analysis, a definition for a pre-psychological age: she is saying that Benedick may think his resistance to love so clever and aristocratic, but really it is just stupid. This is Beatrice the ‘odious woman’, descended from Katherine the Shrew; but Shakespeare has deepened the moment and justified the rudeness. With a touch of Lear’s Fool in her, Beatrice is the true human heart, struggling against the mere manners of Messina.

And this becomes plainer in her Second-Act answer to Don Pedro, who tells her she has ‘lost the heart of Signior Benedicke’:

   Indeed my Lord, hee lent it me a while, and I gave him use for it, a double heart for a single one, marry once before he wonne it of mee, with false dice, therefore your Grace may well say I have lost it.

This is less private history than a fine open act of analysis. Beatrice describes what the courtly Don Pedro, without knowing it, means by ‘heart’: a world of mere lending and borrowing, a scene of mere winning and losing. The dice are false. Charmingly, wittily and sometimes politely, Beatrice is looking for something else again. Her brisk, tough and cool character belongs—and this is Shakespeare’s profound insight, in the most psychologically interesting romantic comedy he has yet written—to one of the most romantic and idealistic of human beings. But she isn’t intending to discuss her heart in Messina, a world which is, in her own words, ‘civill as an Orange, and something of a jealous complexion’.

With these views, Beatrice may well, as she knows herself, ‘sit in a corner and cry, heigh ho for a husband’. And Benedick is as true an individual as herself. Despite the friendly effervescence of his successful social being, there is another Benedick who is most himself when he ‘sits in a corner’. In a curious small scene (2.3) he complains of the change in Claudio: and his soliloquy is prefaced, in a way that editions don’t explain, by his sending of his boy to fetch the book ‘in my chamber window’ for him to read ‘in the orchard’. The vividness of this is on a par with the thorough realism elsewhere in Much Ado: and it throws up a sudden image of the solitude of the real Benedick, whom we see when no one else is there. The book in the hand is for Elizabethans a symbol of the solitary.
In short, here are two people who could easily have remained divided from each other, in a state of irritated or quietly melancholy resentment at themselves and at life. This Elizabethan comedy brings alive what we may think of as a datum of peculiarly modern experience, the randomness, the accidentality of existence: the fact that many things in the life of feeling remain 'a perpetual possibility / Only in a world of speculation'. Attraction starts up socially but there need be no happy endings; there is only 'Much Ado About Nothing', a waste of wishes and desires.

The two difficult lovers owe much to the courtiers for bringing them together, a debt which justifies the forgivingness of the last scene. Yet neither Beatrice nor Benedick is precisely dependent on the tricks of a trivial milieu for their feeling. Orthodox Elizabethans believed that God indeed made 'Much' out of 'Nothing', the Creation out of Void. The change of these two intelligent and principled lovers asks to be comparably explained. They come together over the quasi-dead body of Hero, at the end of the Church Scene. They are, that is to say, drawn together by their shared sympathy for the wronged girl. It is this tertium quid outside themselves that permits Benedick to say at last, 'I do love nothing in the world so well as you, is not that strange?' and Beatrice to answer, 'As strange as the thing I know not, it were as possible for me to say, I loved nothing so well as you.'

I am hoping to suggest that there is a paradox here not far from the oddity of 'sorrow's wag'. The moment is so romantic because not romantic—or not so in the Messina sense; it is the true romanticism of the real. Benedick is at heart a kind man, which to Elizabethans meant 'kinned', 'brotherly'. He is deeply grateful to Beatrice, and besides can't bear to watch her crying. All this, on top of her usual attraction for him. She responds in precisely the same way, not merely changing the subject when she says firmly: 'I am sorry for my cousin.' It's as if she were drawing up the rule-book for the rest of their lives. Both Beatrice and Benedick are individuals who have feared love because it means so much to them; when they do lose their heart, as here, it won't be a 'double' one, in the sense of dishonest. What brings them together at last is neither trick nor fluke, but the conjunction of shared principle—a principle which depends on their independence, even their loneliness as human beings. As a result, their professions of love are deep with risk and danger, which is why their bond is involved with a girl in some sense dead, and why Beatrice must ask Benedick to 'Kill Claudio'. He doesn't, and it's as well that he doesn't obey the whim of a wildly angry woman. But he's ready to. There is therefore a kind of death in their love, for both of them. 'Sitting in the the corner' is the posture of a prizefighter or duellist; when the two advance to the centre, someone may lose, and something must die. There is a delightful, comic, humorous charm and truth in the fact that, as soon as the trick is afoot and love declared, both start to feel terrible: Benedick gets toothache and Beatrice a fearful cold. Many critics assume a pretence on their part, but I think not.

When Shakespeare borrowed his immensely widely disseminated main-plot story from many sources, he did something strange to it. He used a legend that turned on strong evidence of infidelity, and he took the evidence away. There is no 'Window-Scene' in our comedy. The poet has thereby transformed a tale of jealousy into something much nearer to a definition of love, which asks the question: 'How in the world do we ever know?' The answer of Much Ado is: 'By whatever we take to be the dead body of Hero'—a character whose very name is suggestive. Leaving aside the Leander-loss, we may say that in Much Ado About Nothing one kind of hero and heroine is replaced by another. Comparably, one kind of social, winning-and-losing false-dicing love finds itself quietly upstaged by something quite different: a feeling intensely romantic, because involving real individuals, yet grounding itself on something as sober, or we could even say 'dull', as an extreme and responsible human kindness. And the true lovers are kind, to each other and others, because they are aware that life necessitates it even from the romantic. They are both, that is to say, sorrow's wags.

Beatrice and Benedick, 'sitting in the corner' of life, each resent marriage because they are helplessly individual beings. But their very independence and individuality, their corner-view, gives them what no one else in the comedy really has—truth of feeling. Their thinking and feeling for themselves has as its high-water-mark that famous moment, already quoted, at which Beatrice, always quick off the mark, thinks
almost too much for herself. As she weeps angrily in the church after Hero's rejection, Benedick makes his vital move—he lets Don Pedro's party leave without him, and stays to comfort Beatrice, asking gently if he can help her. Yes, she says, he can; he can kill Claudio. The play is a comedy precisely because Benedick, always the sounder in sizing up the mark he is being asked to get off, doesn't have to kill Claudio; and we can hardly regret the fact that 'Messina' survives. Here is a co-existence we can like as well as finding likely. But we can't regret either the two individuals who are, as Benedick says, 'Too wise to wooe peaceablie'. The comedy needs their wisdom, just as it needs the constables' folly. Intensely romantic, therefore, as well as consistently funny, Much Ado is serious in its concerns while always wearing the air of being entertainingly 'About Nothing'.

Analysis

Historical Background

The Commedie of much A doo about nothing a booke was entered in the Stationer's Register, the official record book of the London Company of Stationers (booksellers and printers), on August 4, 1600 as a play of My lord chamberlens men (Shakespeare's acting company) and stayed (not published) without further permission, to prevent unauthorized publication of this very popular play. This quarto text, generally regarded as having been set from Shakespeare's own manuscript, was the copy used for the First Folio of 1623, which is lightly annotated, with minimal and mostly typographic emendation. Since Will Kempe, the great comic actor who played Dogberry, left the Chamberlain's Men in 1599, it is generally agreed that Shakespeare completed this play no later than 1598-1599. Although scholars have attempted to trace the play's roots to Ariosto's tragedy, Orlando Furioso, to Bandello's twenty-second story from the Novelle, or to Spenser's poetic work, The Fairie Queen, in truth, no play ever existed quite like this one, with its interwoven plots, the wit and verve of Benedick and Beatrice, and the highly inventive comic element of Dogberry and his watch, which gives the Claudio-Hero plot most of its vitality. Much Ado About Nothing is a subtler version of Taming of the Shrew, transposed from farce to high comedy, and it is the scaffolding upon which Othello is built.

Much Ado About Nothing is a subtler version of Taming of the Shrew, transposed from farce to high comedy, and it is the scaffolding upon which Othello is built. Well known and often presented to packed houses before its publication, Much Ado About Nothing has not lacked the interest of either producers or reviewers over the last four centuries—it has been popular onstage throughout virtually all of its history. It was performed at court in 1613 for Princess Elizabeth and Frederick, Elector Palantine. David Garrick gave Much Ado About Nothing its first performance at Drury Lane on November 14, 1748, playing Benedick brilliantly, and regularly offered it until his farewell performance from the stage in May 9, 1776. Notable presentations in the nineteenth century, when productions tended toward lavish spectacle, include Miss Helen Faucit's personation of Beatrice, noted in the Manchester Courier of May 9, 1846 as "a performance of rare beauty" and Henry Irving's "exquisite performance" of Benedick at the Lyceum Theater, noted as having been "given with infinite grace" in the Saturday Review of October 21, 1882. Twentieth century renditions have frequently changed the time and locale of the play, with productions as diverse as the American Southwest shoot-em up era, the bicycle-riding Edwardian era and the Teddy Roosevelt era of gramophones and Keystone Cops. The success of these productions show that the original text is universal enough in appeal and balanced in its composition to withstand these chameleon-like experiments without losing any of its sense.

A. C. Swinburne describes this play as Shakespeare's "most perfect comic masterpiece," and states that "[f]or absolute power of composition, for faultless balance and blameless rectitude of design, there is unquestionably no creation of his hand that will bear comparison with Much Ado About Nothing." George Bernard Shaw on the other hand, while stating that the success of this play "depends on the way it is handled in performance," salutes the Bard as a "great musician" and declares the play "irresistible as poetry" but questions Shakespeare's mastery of "gallant badinage" and dismisses Benedick's wit as "coarse sallies" and Beatrice's wit as "indelicacy," all of which is perhaps more a reflection of the taste of his Victorian time than a true assessment of the play. In the end, the merit of this play rests with its proven ability to continue to touch the hearts and cheer the souls of its audience.
Leonato’s house

Leonato’s house. Home of Leonato, the governor of Messina on the island of Sicily, which during the thirteenth century in which the play is set was an important European cultural center. The governor would have had rooms enough in his house lavishly to entertain and host nobles from the artistic and intellectual Italian cities of Florence and Padua, as well as the one of the most powerful independent kingdoms in medieval Spain, Aragon. Although most of the governor’s guests are Italians, they are regarded as foreigners in Messina, and as such, are easily duped.

The grounds around the house contain an elaborate orchard described in act 1, scene 2, as having a “thick-pleached alley” or an arched walkway lined with trees whose boughs are interwoven. The thickness of the boughs would hide anyone who wanted to overhear a conversation; in this way, Shakespeare could present secrecy and comedic intrigue.
Modern Connections

Three major aspects of *Much Ado About Nothing* can be related to contemporary life. The first is the idea of the innocent being wrongfully accused. Hero is accused of not being a virgin. False and very slight evidence is offered on the night before her wedding. The evidence is taken at face value and believed by a range of significant people in her life, including her fiancé, his influential friend, and her own father. These three individuals immediately believe the worst about Hero. They scarcely question what little evidence is offered. In fact, it is almost a case of one person's reputation and social standing weighed against another's. In addition to the swiftness and injustice of the reaction to Claudio's accusation, the reaction is also severe. Claudio and the prince publicly shame Hero on her wedding day at the ceremony itself. Hero's father utters a wish for her death. Modern audiences may recoil at the shaming scene and many find it almost baffling. For an Elizabethan woman, her value to society, to her family and to herself lay in her marriageability. This in turn was dependent on her physical and moral purity. Also, arranged marriages, or at least marriages where a go-between would play a role, were common. The go-between would be concerned about his own honor and public reputation in this dealing as in all his dealings. In spite of changed social attitudes on these particular points, many people experience the feeling of being accused of some deed they did not do or at least some comment they did not make. Hero is utterly unable to defend herself. Her word is not given any credit. Modern audiences of young people may feel that parents and other adults are sometimes too ready to think the worst on slight evidence, rather than pausing to investigate. A related aspect to this feeling of the unjust accusation is the need for solid evidence. The play contains various points where characters suggest something that they use as a basis for truth. For example, Benedick is fooled by the conversation about Beatrice's love for him because an older, respected gentleman is in on the trick. Beatrice is able to convince Benedick to challenge Claudio to a duel because she says she is certain that her cousin Hero has been wronged. She is sure as she has "a thought or a soul" (IV.i.330). Her certitude is enough for Benedick.

The romance in the play also serves as a connection between the play and the contemporary audience. Throughout the play, friends serve as "go-betweens" or in some way help potential lovers come together. Don Pedro helps Claudio woo Hero, and, similarly, Don Pedro, Leonato, Claudio, Hero, Margaret, and Ursula all help Beatrice and Benedick get together. Although the tricking ("gulling") is an Elizabethan stage convention, there is still room today for friends to play an agreed upon role to find out someone's attitude to a potential romantic partner and also to generally stir up an interest.

Another aspect of romance—the time frame in which romance develops in Shakespeare's plays—also interests modern audiences. The action of this play is one week and a day. Claudio and Hero's engagement comes early in this time frame. The very compression of their romance and its being in its first rosy bloom seem to intensify the anguish and shock of the shaming scene.

The third point of interest is the unexplained maliciousness of Don John. He fits the part of the Elizabethan comic villain. His actions seem less than comic, but the fact that he appears in a comedy will mean that ultimately his cruel and hurtful actions will be rendered ineffectual. One possible motive for his behavior is the psychological effect of the stigma attached to his illegitimacy. Laws and social attitudes made illegitimacy more problematic and shunned in Shakespeare's time than it is now. Illegitimate male offspring were publicly branded by distinguishing marks on the shields they used in battle and displayed in their homes. Also, illegitimate children were usually prevented from inheriting their families wealth, with common law favoring the oldest legitimate son.
Bibliography (Great Characters in Literature)


Bibliography and Further Reading

**Quotations** from *Much Ado About Nothing* are taken from the following translation.


**Other Sources**


Hockey, Dorothy C. *Notes Notes, Forsooth ...*. *Shakespeare Quarterly* 8, 1957, pp. 353-358. Delineates the pattern of misnoting or false noting as the thematic device of the play.


"As Merry As The Day Is Long"
Context: Beatrice, the charmingly witty niece to Leonato, Governor of Messina, is determined never to marry. She says she "could not endure a husband with a beard on his face," and could have no use for an unbearded one unless it was to "make him (her) waiting-gentlewoman." When she dies, she says, she will go to the gate of Hell but will be told to go to Heaven, for there is no place in Hell for maids. Then she continues:

BEATRICE. . . So deliver I up my apes, and away to Saint Peter. For the heavens he shows me, where the bachelors sit, and there live we as merry as the day is long.

"Benedick The Married Man"
Context: Claudio, a young lord of Florence, and Benedick, a young lord of Padua, are discussing love and marriage. Claudio is falling in love with Hero, who he thinks is the greatest "jewel," the "sweetest lady that ever (he) looked on." Benedick, a witty self-styled woman-hater, confesses that he is glad that his mother was a woman, but he "will live a bachelor." Don Pedro, Prince of Arragon, tells Benedick that he will fall, "in time the savage bull doth bear the yoke." To this Benedick responds:

BENEDICKThe savage bull may, but if ever the sensible Benedick bear it, pluck off the bull's horns, and set them in my forehead; and let me be vilely painted, and in such great letters as they write, here is good horse to hire, let them signify under my sign, here you may see Benedick the married man.

"Done To Death By Slanderous Tongues"
Context: Hero, daughter of Leonato, Governor of Messina, is promised in marriage to Claudio, a young Florentine lord. However, Don John, the unhappy brother of Don Pedro, determines to frustrate the marriage. He plots with Borachio to cause Claudio to doubt Hero's honor. At the wedding ceremony, Don Pedro and Claudio denounce Hero, and she falls into a swoon. It is then given out that Hero is dead. Claudio visits the Leonato tomb and there reads from a scroll, which he then hangs up on the tomb:

CLAUDIODone to death by slanderous tongues,Was the Hero that here lies,Death, in guerdon of her wrongs,Gives her fame which never dies,So the life that died with shameLives in death with glorious fame.

"Everyone Can Master A Grief But He That Has It"
Context: The principal comic device of this play is an elaborate intrigue in which Don Pedro, Claudio, and Leonato attempt to provoke romantic interest between Benedick and Beatrice, the mocking anti-lovers. By arrangement, each while eavesdropping overhears a declaration of the other's love, and each in turn feels an attraction for the other which he erstwhile has refused to admit to himself, let alone to others. One of the great comic moments comes with this public admission. After all, the jeerers at love have a reputation for barbed wit and cynical jests--directed especially at each other--and difficult indeed is the admission that they who
were love's mockers are now love's victims. The comic anticipation is high, then, as Benedick comes on stage for the first time since the eavesdropping scene. His friends, primed for lighthearted taunting, wait to see how he will face down his change of attitude. Ironically, the gallant who has always been the first to accept the gage of verbal combat now finds himself unable to compete, unable even to defend himself against their jibes concerning his cleanshaven, washed face and his well-kempt hair:

DON PEDRO... I will only be bold with Benedick for his company, for from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot, he is all mirth. . . .BENEDICKGallants, I am not as I have been.LEONATOSo say I, methinks you are sadder.CLAUDIOI hope he be in love... .BENEDICKI have the toothache.DON PEDRODraw it.BENEDICKHang it.CLAUDIOYou must hang it first, and draw it afterwards.DON PEDROWhat? Sigh for the toothache?LEONATOWhere is but a humour or a worm?BENEDICKWell, every one can master a grief but he that has it.CLAUDIOYet say I, he is in love.

"My Dear Lady Disdain"
Context: As the play opens, the victorious forces of Don Pedro are returning to Messina. Among them is a young gallant named Benedick, with whom Beatrice—niece of Leonato, Governor of Messina—has engaged in a rhetorical war of comic badinage long antecedent to the play. Before the soldiers return, she mockingly asks a messenger whether "Signior Mountanto [thruster]" has returned from the wars and how many he has killed ("for indeed I promised to eat all of his killing"). Leonato explains to the confused messenger that "there is a kind of merry war betwixt Signior Benedick and her. They never meet but there's a skirmish of wit between them." Their repartee forms a major thread of the comedy throughout the play. Moreover, with each claiming to be invulnerable to Cupid and with each supposedly holding the other in utter disdain, they are primed for falling in love despite their articulations to the contrary. Don Pedro, Leonato, and Claudio scheme to let each overhear a conversation describing the other's love as strong but reticent in the face of mockery. The bait takes, and the comedy concludes with a wedding of these anti-lovers. As predicted in the first scene, when Benedick and other soldiers enter, their war of words begins almost immediately. She tartly interrupts Benedick's conversation with Don Pedro:

BEATRICEI wonder that you will still be talking, Signior Benedick. Nobody marks you.BENEDICKWhat my dear Lady Disdain! Are you yet living?BEATRICEIs it possible disdain should die, while she hath such food to feed it, as Signior Benedick? Courtesy itself must convert to disdain, if you come in her presence.BENEDICKThen is courtesy a turncoat. But it is certain I am loved of all ladies, only you excepted. And I would I could find it in my heart that I had not a hard heart, for truly I love none.BEATRICEA dear happiness to women, they would else have been troubled with a pernicious suitor. I thank God and my cold blood, I am of your humour for that. I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow, than a man swear he loves me.

"Paper-bullets Of The Brain"
Context: Don Pedro, Claudio, and Leonato have decided that it would be the height of jests to provoke a romantic liaison between Benedick and Beatrice, two young rebels who delight in mocking love in general and each other in particular. An elaborate intrigue is arranged in which each will overhear a conversation describing the other's love. According to these remarks, the partner who is romantically inclined has been desperate to withhold the truth of his passion lest it be jeered and mocked by the other. Benedick is the first to fall victim to this trap of comic exposure. He eavesdrops as Leonato describes his niece's desperate infatuation with Benedick, the more so since Benedick's mockery of love renders her affection hopeless. And her actions betoken her condition: she writes him love letters, only to tear them up and rail at herself for writing to one who would flout her; she falls upon her knees, "... weeps, sob, beats her heart, tears her hair, prays, curses--O sweet Benedick, God give me patience." When Benedick hears these protestations of her love, he suddenly finds himself sympathetically interested in her, a condition which renders comic the presumptuous
hateur of his soliloquy a few lines earlier. In other words, he is now faced with the necessity of denying his former position on grounds which, to him at least, appear rational. His former attitudes, his "paper-bullets of the brain," must now give way to more mature considerations:

BENEDICK. . . Love me? Why it must be requited. . . . I did never think to marry. I must not seem proud. Happy are they that hear their detractions, and can put them to mending. . . . I may chance have some odd quirks and remnants of wit broken on me, because I have railed so long against marriage. But doth not the appetite alter? A man loves the meat in his youth that he cannot endure in his age. Shall quips and sentences, and these paper-bullets of the brain awe a man from the career of his humour? No, the world must be peopled. When I said I would die a bachelor, I did not think I should live till I were married.

"She Speaks Poniards"
Context: Beatrice, the merry and quick-tongued niece of Leonato, Governor of Messina, stoutly claims that marriage is not for her. However, she especially directs her gay and often chiding repartee at a particular young gentleman, Benedick. At a masked ball Beatrice, who covertly recognizes Benedick, rails at him, saying he is just a jester for the prince, Don Pedro, first laughed at for his slanderous jokes and then beaten for them. After the ball, Benedick tells the prince of his humiliation at the tongue of the quick-witted Beatrice:

BENEDICKO she misused me past the endurance of a block. An oak but with one green leaf on it would have answered her; my very visor began to assume life, and scold with her. She told me, not thinking I had been myself, that I was the Prince's jester, that I was duller than a great thaw; huddling jest upon jest, with such impossible conveyance upon me, that I stood like a man at a mark, with a whole army shooting at me. She speaks poniards, and every word stabs. If her breath were as terrible as her terminations, there were no living near her, she would infect to the north star. I would not marry her, though she were endowed with all that Adam had left him before he transgressed.

"Sits The Wind In That Corner?"
Context: Don Pedro, Leonato, and Claudio have undertaken the Herculean task of provoking a romantic affair between the comic anti-lovers Benedick and Beatrice. To that end, they scheme to allow each to overhear a conversation in which the other's love is described. In both cases the refusal to admit romantic interest openly is said to be a result of the fear of mockery and disdain by the other. In what would appear to the spectator as one continuous scene, first Benedick, then Beatrice, is—by careful arrangement on the part of the intriguers—an eavesdropper on the conversation. And in both cases the bait takes; the ultimate marriage of these mockers of love is one of the major resolutions of the action. As Benedick prepares for his moment of comic exposure, he delivers a lengthy soliloquy denouncing as foolish and stupid any man who falls in love; "... till all graces be in one woman, one woman shall not come in my grace." When he is led to believe that Beatrice is romantically inclined, however, his mockery turns to sympathetic interest and eventually to love:

DON PEDRO. . . Come hither Leonato. What was it you told me of to-day, that your niece Beatrice was in love with Signior Benedick?CLAUDIO[Aside to DON PEDRO] O ay, stalk on, stalk on; the fowl sits.—I did never think that lady would have loved any man.LEONATONo nor I neither, but most wonderful, that she should so dote on Signior Benedick, whom she hath in all outward behaviours seemed ever to abhor.BENEDICK [aside.]Is't possible? Sits the wind in that corner?LEONATOBy my troth my lord, I cannot tell what to think of it, but that she loves him with an enraged affection—it is past the infinite of thought.BENEDICK [Comes forward.]This can be no trick. The conference was sadly borne. They have the truth of this from Hero. They seem to pity the lady. It seems her affections have their full bent. Love me? Why it must be requited. . . .
"Speak Low If You Speak Love"
Context: Don Pedro, Prince of Arragon, promises to woo Hero, daughter of Leonato, Governor of Messina, for Claudio, a young lord of Florence, who is in Don Pedro's suite. At a masked ball, Don Pedro asks Hero if she will walk with him. Banteringly Don Pedro brings the subject around to love, and as they step away from the others, he tries to bring the conversation to his real subject.

DON PEDRO: Lady, will you walk about with your friend?
HERO: So you walk softly, and look sweetly, and say nothing. I am yours for the walk, and especially when I walk away.
DON PEDRO: With me in your company?
HERO: I may say so when I please.
DON PEDRO: And when please you to say so?
HERO: When I like your favour, for God defend the lute should be like the case.
DON PEDRO: My visor is Philemon's roof, within the house is love.
HERO: Why then your visor should be thatched.
DON PEDRO: Speak low if you speak love.

"They That Touch Pitch Will Be Defiled"
Context: Dogberry, a constable, and Verges, a headborough, and the watch are on the street and are talking nonsense about what kind of man would make the most deserving constable, and then commenting on the duty of the watch. The directions are obvious contradictions. The watch must challenge every unknown man, but if the stranger refuses to halt, the watch is to consider itself lucky to be "rid of a knave." Drunken men are to be left alone "till they are sober." The flavor of this talk is revealed in the following dialogue, including the quotation, which is close to one in Ecclesiasticus, 13:1. ("He that toucheth pitch shall be defiled therewith"):

DOGGERELF you meet a thief, you may suspect him, by virtue of your office, to be no true man; and for such kind of men, the less you meddle or make with them, why, the more is for your honesty.
SECOND WATCHMAN: If we know him to be a thief, shall we not lay hands on him?
DOGGEREL: Truly by your office you may, but I think they that touch pitch will be defiled. The most peaceable way for you, if you do take a thief, is to let him show himself what he is, and steal out of your company.

"You Shall Comprehend All Vagrom Men"
Context: Dogberry and Verges, Shakespear's clownish constables, are charged with enlisting and supervising the night watch in Messina. As a result of overhearing a conversation between Conrade and Borachio, Don John's henchmen, they gain possession of information which could refute the false charges later brought against Hero by her fiancé Claudio at the wedding ceremony. For the constables learn that Borachio has wooed Margaret, Hero's maid, at Hero's window while Claudio observed from a distance assuming, as the villainous Don John charged, that his intended bride was entertaining a lover. The constables, though utterly naïve, at least have sense enough to realize this information should get to Leonato, Governor of Messina, immediately. But so laborious and repetitious is their report that the impatient Leonato, anxious to attend his daughter's wedding, leaves them to examine the prisoners themselves. If their ineptness very nearly permits tragic consequences, certainly in other ways it enhances the comic tone of the play. Like Hostess Quickly, they are linguistic bumblers whose malapropisms create comic confusion. Dogberry, having selected Hugh Oatcake and George Seacoal because they can read and write, issues his instructions to these night watchmen and, in so doing, illustrates the comedy of his verbal confusion:

DOGGEREL: Come hither neighbor Seacoal. God hath blessed you with a good name. To be a well-favoured man is the gift of fortune, but to write and read comes by nature.
SECOND WATCHMAN: Both which master constable—DOGGEREL: You have. I knew it would be your answer. Well, for your favour sir, why give God thanks, and make no boast of it, and for your writing and reading, let that appear when there is no need of such vanity. You are thought here to be the most senseless [sensible] and fit man for the constable of the watch. Therefore bear you the lantern. This is your charge. You shall comprehend all vagrom men, you are to bid any man stand, in the Prince's name.
Character and Theme Quotes

Essential Quotes by Character: Beatrice

Essential Passage 1: Act 1, Scene 1, Lines 50-59

LEONATO:
You must not, my lord, mistake my niece. There is
a kind of merry war betwixt Signior Benedick and her.
They never meet but there's a skirmish of wit between
them.

BEATRICE:
Alas! He gets nothing by that. In our last conflict
four of his five wits went halting off, and now is the
whole man governed with one; so that if he have wit
enough to keep himself warm, let him bear it for a difference
between himself and his horse; for it is all the wealth
that he hath left to be known a reasonable creature.

Summary

Beatrice, niece to Leonato of Messina, is hearing news from a messenger of the approach of Don Pedro and
Aragon and his company. Included in that group is Benedick, with whom Beatrice has a long-running battle of
wits. Acting as though they despise each other, Beatrice and Benedick exchange continual barbs on every
event that they meet. Each proclaims his or her contempt of the other, with each one proclaiming victory.
In terms of "battle," and in conjunction with the return of the army after a military excursion involving the
repression of a rebellion on the part of Don John (the illegitimate brother of Don Pedro), Beatrice describes
for the messenger her last encounter with Benedick. He lost that battle but managed to survive with “one wit”
left. Now, according to Beatrice, he is functioning with his one remaining wit, her point being that he is even
less than a half-wit.

Essential Passage 2: Act 2, Scene 1, Lines 27-42

LEONATO:
You may light on a husband that hath no beard.

BEATRICE:
What should I do with him? dress him in my
apparel and make him my waiting gentlewoman? He that
hath a beard is more than a youth, and he that hath no
beard is less than a man; and he that is more than a youth
is not for me; and he that is less than a man, I am not for
him. Therefore I will even take sixpence in earnest of the
bear-ward and lead his apes into hell.

LEONATO:
Well then, go you into hell?

BEATRICE:
No; but to the gate, and there will the devil meet me
like an old cuckold with horns on his head, and say ‘Get
you to heaven, Beatrice, get you to heaven. Here’s no place for you maids.’ So deliver I up my apes, and away to Saint Peter—for the heavens. He shows me where the bachelors sit, and there live we as merry as the day is long.

Summary
Leonato is holding a masked ball for the entertainment of his household guests. Beatrice and her uncle Leonato are engaging in a conversation about the guests, and the topic runs from Benedick to men in general. Beatrice states that she would not want to marry a man with a beard. She would rather sleep with a sheep. Her uncle suggests that she might marry a man who had no beard. This suggestion is met with Beatrice’s usual sarcasm. She would have no use for a beardless man, because that would mean he is not grown up. She may as well dress him up as a woman, perhaps meaning a court eunuch. Beatrice proclaims that a beardless man would be too young for her. Yet a man with a beard would mean he is too old for her. Thus she has no use for any man. As the belief that an unmarried woman would be punished by leading apes into hell, Beatrice proclaims that she is ready to do so. Her uncle asks her, with some concern, if she means to go to hell. Beatrice replies that she will lead the apes to the gates of hell, where the gatekeeper will declare that there is no use for virgins in hell, so she may as well go to heaven. Beatrice then states that in heaven, she will find where the bachelors are staying to make fun of them for all eternity.

Essential Passage 3: Act 3, Scene 1, Lines 109-118

BEATRICE:
What fire is in mine ears? Can this be true?
Stand I condemned for pride and scorn so much?
Contempt, farewell! and maiden pride, adieu!
No glory lives behind the back of such.
And, Benedick, love on; I will requite thee,
Taming my wild heart to thy loving hand.
If thou dost love, my kindness shall incite thee
To bind our loves up in a holy band;
For others say thou dost deserve, and I
Believe it better than reportingly.

Summary
Don Pedro, Hero, and Claudio are joined in a plot to get Benedick and Beatrice to admit that they are in fact in love with each other. By placing themselves where Benedick can overhear their conversation, Don Pedro and Claudio discuss the secret love that Beatrice has for Benedick. Benedick is surprised, yet after some thought it seems reasonable to him. He decides he will win her love and give up his vaunted claims to intend to die a bachelor. On the ladies’ part, Hero and her friends discuss Benedick’s love for Beatrice, having made sure that Beatrice can eavesdrop on the conversation. By stating that it will never happen, Hero and her companions discuss that Beatrice is too full of pride and sarcasm to ever let Benedick go far in his pursuit of her. She will make fun of him and drive him off, just as she has always done. She has a reputation of being prideful and scornful. After they leave, Beatrice is bothered by her newly discovered reputation. To prove them wrong, and to dispel this unwanted public perception of her, Beatrice vows to let Benedick love her and let herself be caught and joined with him in marriage. Because others say that Benedick’s reputation is high, she will set aside her objections and consent to become his wife.

Analysis of Essential Passages
Beatrice and Benedick are an early example of the stock characters of a romantic comedy, where a man and woman, professing to despise each other, eventually fall in love. Beatrice is one of the strongest women in
Shakespearean drama and holds her own in any battle of wits with any man. Her professed bitterness toward men and marriage is a thread running through the play, on which much of the comedy, especially in scenes with Benedick, is based.

The play begins with the relationship between Beatrice and Benedick already established. It is suggested later that Benedick once played false with Beatrice, causing her to fall in love with him and then abandoning her or hurting her in some way. This basis of bitterness is not fully dealt with, but the eventual love between the two is thus given some history, lessening the sense that this sudden appearance of affection in the midst of hate is unrealistic. It is out of her hurt that Beatrice deals in such sarcasm and scorn, especially with men and on the subject of marriage. It is this past hurt that makes Beatrice, despite her cold and scornful manner, such an appealing character. The reader’s identification with her hurt allows Beatrice’s vulnerability to be apparent even through her sarcasm.

Beatrice is very much an independent woman. As an orphan being cared for by her uncle, her ties are a bit looser than the average, allowing her freedom to be herself. Her friendship with her cousin Hero is a friendship of opposites. Hero is much more passive than is Beatrice, submitting to others, especially men, in a way that Beatrice never would. Beatrice seems content with going against society’s dictates that an unmarried woman is an aberration. She does not find her identity in being a wife and mother, but in being her own person. She is an independent woman, much like Queen Elizabeth I, during whose reign Shakespeare did much of his writing. With the image of this self-reliant monarch in the minds of the audience, Beatrice comes through true to life in a way that probably would not have been possible at other times in history.

Beatrice’s eventual decision to love Benedick (or at least let him love her) on the surface appears to be more of a reaction to her dislike of the reputation as a scold that she has gained. She seems more intent on proving the skeptics wrong than to truly love Benedick. Even to the last, at their eventual marriage, she maintains her wit, holding Benedick a bit off at arm’s length, just to keep him in his place. Beatrice loses none of her independence or her spirit in being married: what she has been she will continue to be. It is doubtful that this “merry battle of wits” will end any time soon.

Essential Quotes by Theme: Deception

**Essential Passage 1:** Act I, Scene 1, Lines 280-288

**DON PEDRO:**
I know we shall have revelling to-night.  
I will assume thy part in some disguise  
And tell fair Hero I am Claudio,  
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.  
In practice let us put it presently.

**Summary**
Claudio, Don Pedro’s most trusted comrade-in-arms, is in love with Hero, the daughter of Leonato. Having returned from putting down a rebellion by Don Pedro’s brother, Don John, Claudio returns to Messina with the troops, who are invited to state with Leonato for a month. Claudio, along with the others, has been acquainted with the household of Leonato for some time. Claudio has noticed Hero prior to going off to battle, but has said nothing to her of his affections. Unsure of himself in love, Claudio is reluctant to speak to her. Don Pedro, out of friendship, suggests a solution by which Claudio may find out Hero’s feelings for Claudio without Claudio being vulnerable to rejection. Leonato that night is giving a ball for the troops, during which...
all the party-goers will be wearing masks. Don Pedro suggests that he, disguised by his mask, pretend to be Claudio. He will then woo her, securing her affections for Claudio, so that the latter can then approach her with full confidence of acceptance. Don Pedro will then speak to Leonato on Claudio’s behalf.

**Essential Passage 2:** [Act 2, Scene 2, Lines 19-43](#)

**BORACHIO:**
The poison of that lies in you to temper. Go you to the prince your brother; spare not to tell him that he hath wronged his honour in marrying the renowned Claudio whose estimation do you mightily hold up, to a contaminated stale, such a one as Hero.

**DON JOHN:**
What proof shall I make of that?

**BORACHIO:**
Proof enough to misuse the prince, to vex Claudio, to undo Hero, and kill Leonato. Look you for any other issue?

**DON JOHN:**
Only to despite them I will endeavour anything.

**BORACHIO:**
Go then: find a meet hour to draw Don Pedro and the Count Claudio alone; tell them that you know that Hero loves me; intend a kind of zeal both to the prince and Claudio, as—in love of your brother's honour, who hath made this match, and his friend's reputation, who is thus like to be cozened with the semblance of a maid—that you have discovered thus. They will scarcely believe this without trial. Offer them instances; which shall bear no less likelihood than to see me at her chamber window, hear me call Margaret, Hero, hear Margaret term me Claudio; and bring them to see this the very night before the intended wedding—for in the meantime I will so fashion the matter that Hero shall be absent—and there shall appear such seeming truth of Hero's disloyalty that jealousy shall be called assurance and all the preparation overthrown.

**Summary**
Don John, the illegitimate brother of Don Pedro, has been defeated in his attempt to usurp his brother’s position. Not only that, he has come to despise Claudio, who is Don Pedro’s most trusted companion. Jealous of both for denying him what he feels is rightly his due, Don John seeks revenge against them. Borachio devises a plan that might effectively destroy all. Margaret, Hero’s friend, has been in love with Borachio for some time. Borachio suggests that he make love to Margaret (who will be dressed to look more like Hero) in an open window. Don John will bring Don Pedro and Claudio by as this is occurring so that it will appear that Hero is unfaithful to Claudio on the night before their wedding. Not only will this separate the close bond between Don Pedro and Claudio (for it was Don Pedro who brought the couple together in the first place), but it will destroy Claudio. The fact that Hero and her father will also be destroyed is of little consequence, since
they are in close association with the “enemy” anyway. Don John agrees to this plan, and will get Don Pedro and Claudio to pass before the window as Borachio is seemingly making love to Hero.

Essential Passage 3: Act 5, Scene 1, Lines 251-282

**LEONATO:**
Art thou the slave that with thy breath hast killed
Mine innocent child?

**BORACHIO:**
Yea, even I alone.

**LEONATO:**
No, not so, villain! thou beliest thyself.
Here stand a pair of honourable men—
A third is fled—that had a hand in it.
I thank you princes for my daughter's death.
Record it with your high and worthy deeds.
'Twas bravely done, if you bethink you of it.

**CLAUDIO:**
I know not how to pray your patience;
Yet I must speak. Choose your revenge yourself;
Impose me to what penance your invention
Can lay upon my sin. Yet sinned I not
But in mistaking.

**DON PEDRO:**
By my soul, nor I!
And yet, to satisfy this good old man,
I would bend under any heavy weight
That he'll enjoin me to.

**LEONATO:**
I cannot bid you bid my daughter live;
That were impossible; but I pray you both,
Possess the people in Messina here
How innocent she died; and if your love
Can labour aught in sad invention,
Hang her an epitaph upon her tomb,
And sing it to her bones—sing it to-night.
To-morrow morning come you to my house,
And since you could not be my son-in-law,
Be yet my nephew. My brother hath a daughter,
Almost the copy of my child that's dead,
And she alone is heir to both of us.
Give her the right you should have giv'n her cousin,
And so dies my revenge.

**Summary**
It has finally been discovered that Don John and Borachio lied about Hero’s unfaithfulness. Borachio is
brought before Leonato, along with Don Pedro and Claudio, to hear the full account. Borachio is especially repentant because Leonato along with Friar Francis have given out the report that Hero has died from the accusation of infidelity, so that Claudio and Don Pedro may feel even more remorse for the falsity of their words. Don John has escaped, but the two remaining must pay. At Borachio’s confession, Leonato continues the charade of Hero’s death to inflict even more guilt on the two who so swiftly believed in her loss of virginity. Leonato mocks them for their “honor” now that an innocent maiden has died because of them. Claudio vows that he will do anything that Leonato wants. Leonato states that Claudio can post his grief on Hero’s tomb first of all. Then he must marry Leonato’s niece, who is similar in looks to Hero and is also the heir to both Leonato’s fortune as well as his brother’s. With this, Leonato claims, his revenge will be satisfied. Claudio readily agrees, not knowing that Hero is alive and that Leonato plans to surprise him at the wedding when his bride, the real and living Hero, is revealed.

Analysis of Essential Passages

The theme of deception is repeated constantly throughout the play. Its purpose is as varied as the situations in which it is utilized. The scheming and plotting of the characters drive the plot forward by creating situations in which the deception either works for good or evil, depending on the person.

The first purpose in which deception is used is for love. Claudio is a timid lover and is unable to confess his feelings to Hero until he is sure of her feelings for him. Don Pedro disguises himself and deceives Hero into believing that he is Claudio. However, Hero has been warned that Don Pedro will be approaching her with talk of love, but it is misunderstood to be for himself rather than Claudio. Not only does Hero believe this is Don Pedro’s intentions, but Claudio does as well, when Benedick reports to him what has happened. Torn apart, Claudio rushes off. Soon, however, he discovers the truth and that Hero is really his, willing to be his wife.

Another instance in which deception is used is pure evil. Don John is determined to have his revenge on Don Pedro and Claudio, so he joins with Borachio in an elaborate scheme by which Hero’s character will be destroyed and Claudio will be brokenhearted. Claudio, observing a woman whom he assumes to be Hero with another man, quickly rejects her, but he intends to wait to publicly denounce Hero at the altar. His own deception in refraining from breaking off the wedding before it occurs is also evil on a certain level. He is endeavoring to publicly humiliate Hero, destroying her standing in society as a wanton woman, thus preventing her from any honorable marriage in the future. The possibility that she would die (as Leonato deceives him into believing is the case) does not cross his mind. His lack of care for the reputation of others matches that of Don John. The depth of his love is in question, considering how quickly he believes an evil report about his intended wife. Yet even more is it in question that he would sink to the level of deception as that of Don John.

Leonato’s deception in pretending that Hero is dead leads to another situation in which both his own revenge and the redemption of Claudio is accomplished. With little regard for Claudio’s possible grief, he appeals to Claudio’s guilt by forcing him to marry a woman whom he does not know. He perhaps correctly guesses Claudio’s mercenary intentions (as Claudio had previous to courting Hero ascertained that she was Leonato’s sole heir) when he mentions that this unknown niece is the heir not only of his own fortune but that of his brother as well. Claudio, again perhaps more out of guilt that greed, agrees to the marriage. At the wedding, he finds the bride in a mask (hearkening back to the ball), which is removed to reveal Hero herself. Thus Claudio is not only returned to the role of bridegroom, but also to his stature with Leonato and the others.

Shakespeare’s use of deception, especially in comedy, develops a deeper and more serious theme. As shown throughout Much Ado About Nothing, deception for whatever reason seldom goes according to plan. Although the eventual outcome may be that which was desired, people are injured, character is damaged, and relationships are destroyed. Although in a comedy the ending is happy, the deception that brought about this
end is not usually dismissed as innocent. Although it may be quickly forgiven, as in the case of Leonato’s deception in Hero’s death and disguised wedding to Claudio, Shakespeare in a parallel subplot always portrays the harm that deception can cause. Even if deception is presented as “the ends justifying the means,” as well as a device to keep the plot moving along, Shakespeare makes it clear that there will always be victims along the way.