Like all of Shakespeare's work, *Much Ado About Nothing* continues to find readers in each new generation, and with new readers, there are new points of view and new controversies. Modern criticism of the last few decades has tended to look at the play from sociological, psychological, feminist, and gay and lesbian perspectives.

Frank Kermode observes that *Much Ado About Nothing* is a different kind of comedy from Shakespeare's other comedies, "in that it is dependent on a well-maintained flow of witty and varied talk" (99). Kermode writes, "More than other comedies of the period, *Much Ado About Nothing* anticipates the witty dueling of Restoration comedy, perhaps by developing an older Elizabethan style, the courtly comedy of John Lyly, which had been out of fashion for a while" (99). He also notes that the witty exchanges of the play may "reflect more closely the character of aristocratic conversation in the later years of [Queen] Elizabeth, as Shakespeare might have heard it in Southampton circles" (100).

In "The Success of *Much Ado About Nothing*" (1959), Graham Storey finds that Benedick's statement in the play's final scene, "For man is a giddy thing, and this is my conclusion," is "surely the play's 'cause' or ruling theme" (20). This "giddiness" leads to the "inconstancy, mental intoxication, elation to thoughtfulness," resulting in "deception, self-deception, miscomprehension" (21). In Storey's view, the shaming of Hero at the wedding altar is "a repulsive scene" (19).

Francis Fergusson, in "Ritual and Insight" (1957), takes a somewhat similar line, finding that the several narrative lines of the play are joined under the "more general vision of man as laughable" (54). For Fergusson, the play is filled with ritual and "ceremonial occasions" (56), such as the wedding and cemetery scenes, that establish a sense of general truth.

Marjorie Garber also focuses on ritual in the play. In *Coming of Age in Shakespeare* (1981), a title purposely intended to evoke anthropologist Margaret Mead's famous book *Coming of Age in Samoa*, Garber finds a "submerged" analogy with the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, "another situation in which the dead bride can be retrieved from the underworld only by her husband's faith" (227). Claudio goes through various rituals, such as hanging an epitaph on Hero's "tomb," in order to enact this ritual rebirth.

John Crick takes a more sociological view of the play. In "Messina" (1969), Crick finds that the play provides "the precise delineation of an aristocratic and metropolitan society" (33). One aspect of his society is the flippant use of language: Words can and do harm. Hero is too "nebulous," while Claudio embodies "the worst aspects of Messina society ... shallowness, complacency, and inhumanity" (36). In such an artificial and shallow society, true evil is possible.

In "Crime and Cover-up in Messina" (1985), Richard A. Levin also casts a critical eye on Messina and its society. The play "consists largely of upper-class conversation among friends and relatives who are at leisure to enjoy one another's company" (72). Yet, "Beneath a thin veneer of civility, Messina is an anxious and insecure world," where, Levin notes, citing *Othello*, "the men hold their honors in a wary distance" (113), which easily sparks conflict.

Robert Grams Hunter, in "Forgiving Claudio" (1965), calls the play a "comedy of forgiveness" (60). Hunter argues: "Romantic love is celebrated as a source of happiness for the man and woman who love each other, and as the socially acceptable form of the force upon which the continued existence of society depends—sexual desire" (60). In the play, "Man's love fails, and women must charitably forgive the failure" (60).

Whereas Hunter sees a "comedy of forgiveness," Walter N. King sees the play as a "comedy of manners." In "Much Ado About Something" (1964), King argues: "Central to *Much Ado*, as to all great comedies of manners, is the critical inspection of a leisure-class world grown morbidly flabby by thoughtless acceptance of an inherited social code" (145).

David Horowitz, in "Imagining the Real," takes his theme from a play on the words of the title, finding that the key term of the play is *noting*, which is a "special kind of perception" (39). In Horowitz's view, the issue of perception leads to larger questions of appearance and reality and the "tenuous and always complex" relationship between them, and "because of this uncertainty at the center of experience, reality is in a large sense what men make of it" (43–44). In Horowitz's view, a true relationship between lovers like Beatrice and Benedict achieves a "substantiality and permanence that no dream can have" (52).
Carl Dennis also deals with issues of perception. In "Wit and Wisdom in Much Ado About Nothing" (1973), he argues that the play "works on a distinction between the two modes of perception: the mode of 'wit,' which relies on prudential reasoning and a practical evaluation of sensory evidence, the mode of belief, which rejects reason and on reliance on the senses for intuitive modes of understanding" (223). In Dennis's view, the protagonists move from one mode of perception to another, and their success "is determined by their willingness to lay down their wits and approach the world through faith, through irrational belief" (223).

In "Love, Appearance and Reality: Much Ado About Something" (1968), Barbara Lewalski believes the play "presents Messina as a place of manifold confusions of appearance and reality, or constant mistakes, play-acting, pretences and misapprehensions, and proposes that the state of true love provides an ambiance from which a heightened knowledge of reality can be obtained" (225).

Karen Newman, in "Mistaking in Much Ado" (1985), finds that the two plots (Beatrice/Benedick, Hero/Claudio) "are linked by this common theme of credulity and self-deception" (123). Newman addresses the concerns of critics that the play mixes comic and tragic elements in an uneasy arrangement; instead, she finds that Shakespeare uses "deliberative strategies common to tragic characterization within the dramatic boundaries of his romantic comedies" so that "we perceive his comic characters as complex and lifelike" (132).

Ruth Nevo, in "Better Than Reportingly" (1980), sees the play as embodying numerous interlocking dualities: "courtly love conventions and natural passion, affection and spontaneity, romance and realism, … style and substance, saying and believing, simulation and dissimulation" (5). These dualities allow for the "reversals, exchanges and chaotic repositionings of those contraries during the dynamic progress of the plots" (5). As for the two couples who are central to the play, Nevo finds that "Beatrice and Benedick's unorthodox views on marriage are a parody of normal conventions and so confirm Hero and Claudio in their soberer ways" (5).

In "Much Ado About Nothing: The Temptation to Isolate" (1984), Joseph Westlund sees the play raising the central issue of "control" (63). In Westlund's view, "Messina is at once a world with too much control and too little—the worst of all possibilities since it causes confusion and anger, as well as the feeling of being manipulated" (64). Where Beatrice and Benedick experience "outer control—the tricks played on them—as self-control"—that is, they work through the tricks to gain their own ends—Hero and Claudio "are subjected to outer controls which they experience as impositions: they feel pushed about" (64). In this same manner, Don John's efforts are an attempt at freedom from control.

The famous poet W. H. Auden was one of those critics who found that the "subplot overwhelms and overshadows the main plot" (113). In his Lectures on Shakespeare (1946–47), Auden argues that the main plot, based on romantic traditions, is "boring," and that the play "shows some carelessness" in its construction (113). Auden believes that the "relation of pretense to reality is a major concern of the play" (113). Auden also observes that the play hovers between the light comedy foreground and the dark, malicious background represented by Don John.

Carol Thomas Neely, in "Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Comedies: Much Ado About Nothing" (1985), picks up on critics' uncertainty as to the gravitational center of the play, observing that whereas most critics find the Hero/Claudio plot to be central, they are attracted to the Beatrice/Benedick subplot and "concur that the subplot is rhetorically richer, dramatically more interesting and psychologically more complex" (105). The dramatic problem of the play is understanding the relationship between the two plots. In Neely's view, the Hero/Claudio plot explores the "anxieties and risks underlying the conventions of romantic love [that] are expressed and contained by the broken nuptials" (106), while the Beatrice/Benedick plot uses motifs, such as trickery, mockery, and parody, found in festive comedy (107). Drawing on modern feminist thinking, Neely finds that "The two plots are played out against a backdrop of patriarchal authority" (107), where men employ aggressive sexual manners and demonstrate fear of women's sexual power, while women fear male domination and employ "cuckoldry" as their own form of power.

Valerie Traub also employs a feminist critical perspective in her Desire and Anxiety: Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama (1992). Traub relates the plot of Much Ado to those of A Winter's Tale and, particularly, Othello. Traub argues that "the fraught courtship of Claudio and Hero is replicated in Othello's marriage to Desdemona" (41), and Claudio, like Othello, "first idealizes the object of his affection" before symbolically slaying her at the altar (41). Comparing Hero to other Shakespearean heroines, Desdemona and Ophelia, Newman observes, "Hero is divided into virgin and whore" in the eyes of Claudio (41). In turn, "The flip side of Claudio's romantic idealism is his misogyny," which stems from "a fear of female erotic power" (42). Traub argues that chastity is the defining issue in Shakespeare's treatment of women's role, a veritable matter of life and death.
Thomas J. Scheff takes a sociological perspective on the gender issue in "Gender Wars: Emotions in Much Ado About Nothing" (1993). Scheff argues: "Although Much Ado is certainly a comedy, it displays the usual Shakespearean dark underside with considerable prominence: physical and emotional violence between men, and between men and women" (151). He applies sociological theory to argue the connections between romance, shame, and anger. The play suggests "that love between a man and a woman involves unending tension and conflict, much like the distrust, deception and outright warfare between nations" (149).

Adam Piette draws on sociological theories on the self and society in "Performance, Subjectivity and Slander in Hamlet and Much Ado About Nothing" (2001). Piette's point of departure is the work of the American sociologist Erving Goffman, particularly The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1959), in which Goffman "argued for the theatricality of the self, relocating the source of the generation of identity in social interaction rather than in inner psychobiology" (3). Drawing from Goffman, Piette argues that "what we took to be the source of our sense of real being, our own nodular psychobiological self, is a contrivance, a confidence trick, a mere performance of false figures of the self. The only valid source of the real is in social situations themselves proven to be thoroughly and incontrovertibly staged" (6). Noting the numerous instances of "staged" performances in Much Ado (particularly the scenes in which Beatrice and Benedick are tricked into thinking each is loved by the other), Piette finds that the identity of the self is both performative (making others think what we want them to think of ourselves) and subject to the performances of others (others making us think what they want us to think of ourselves).

Douglas E. Green draws on queer theory in his view of the play and focuses on its presentation in current cinema, particularly the Kenneth Branagh version, in "Shakespeare, Branagh, and the 'Queer Traitor': Close Encounters in the Shakespearean Classroom" (2002). Green writes, "The whole of Shakespeare's Much Ado certainly emphasizes the reluctance of (young aristocratic) men to shift their primary interests away from each other and their masculine pursuits toward marriageable women," and he notes that this "honesociality" feeds the misogynistic tendencies of the men in the play (198).

Celestino Deleyto also finds relevance in Branagh's cinematic version of Much Ado About Nothing. In "Men in Leather: Kenneth Branagh's Much Ado About Nothing and Romantic Comedy" (1997), Deleyto argues that Branagh's adaptations of Much Ado follow in the tradition of Hollywood romantic comedy. In Deleyto's view, the movie presentation of the play "hinges on Beatrice, the female protagonist, as the main point of identification for the audience" (92). Deleyto also finds that Branagh's treatment of the play allows him "to deal at length with the threat that homoerotic desire may pose to heterosexual romances" (92). Prospects of marriage in the play do not lead to harmony; rather, "the immediate prospect of socialization through heterosexual monogamy seems to bring to the surface all the sexual tensions that have remained muted during the war" (93). The men in the play "are only half-heartedly reconciled to an immediate future of stable monogamy, because such a prospect will entail the abandonment of the company of men and the intense state of male bonding favored by the war" (93).

As these selected critical works demonstrate, there are many ways to think about and discuss Shakespeare generally and Much Ado About Nothing specifically. Each provides a new slant on the play. As each new generation evolves its own interests and concerns, new modes of writing about the play will continue to develop.

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