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Summary

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 play's 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."

Summary: 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**

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 unmasks. 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 Summaries

Act and Scene Summaries: Preface to the Summary

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, II.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 and Scene Summaries: 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 outspars 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 wordspar 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 and Scene Summaries: 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 and Scene Summaries: 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 and Scene Summaries: 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 and Scene Summaries: 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 and Scene Summaries: 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, Benedick 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 and Scene Summaries: 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-endearred 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 and Scene Summaries: 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 Leonaro 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 and Scene Summaries: 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 overhear 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 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 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 and Scene Summaries: 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 and Scene Summaries: 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 and Scene Summaries: 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 quatrain (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 they 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 reverance, 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 and Scene Summaries: 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 and Scene Summaries: 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, claiming mistaking 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 wisdoms 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):

[moreover, 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 and Scene Summaries: 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 smoothly 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 and Scene Summaries: 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 and Scene Summaries: 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 amiably, 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 witcrackers 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.
Themes

Themes

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 that 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.

Themes: 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 Much Ado is no exception to the pattern. In 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 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 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 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
Much Ado, as deception and false perceptions are not undone; rather, they are characteristic of the norm of Messina society.

Critics agree that 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 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 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

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: Characters Discussed**

**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-triehs), 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.
Analysis

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.

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 AdoAbout 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.

Analysis: Places Discussed

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.

**Analysis: 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 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


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.


Bibliography: 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.


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

**Topic #2**
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**
The 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.

**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 solidity 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,
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 lovest;
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 certain. . . .

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! Or 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 s 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 of the hero's mind, barely aware of the area in which that mind operates. Ironically, the heroic qualities which make the woman's stature minor by comparison can be seen as developing through and out of qualities 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 "Benedicte 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 overheard 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 forswears 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-centricness 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-endereared—
(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:

Shakespeare 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 Shakespearean 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-and 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.

**Criticism: 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 theirimaginations 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"; Cladio 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 blurs 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-delicite and full of life,
Into the eye and prospect of his soul,
Than when she lived indeed; . . .
(IV. i. 225ff.)

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: ... (11. 321ff.)

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 wisdows 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. i. 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.


**Criticism: 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 be 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 signals 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. 255-256). 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 in and 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.

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 happy union 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 overcome 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. It is only at the end that they are in tune with each other, each happy in his approaching marriage. 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.


Criticism: 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 repellent 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 pleasantry 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. 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 flatterered 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 really 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 point in the play.]
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 toBeatrice'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 climatic, 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.

Criticism: 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
cumbersome 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 unmasking, 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.

SOURCE: "The Shakespearean Lie-Detector: Thoughts on 'Much Ado about Nothing'," in The Critical

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 "runnagate"—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 gnawn 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.


**Criticism: 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. 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 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 "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 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 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. . . ."

[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 asininity of Dogberry, a linguistic rather than a theatrical code is invoked. In both plays, too, an ironic truth is discovered in asininity, 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 forgive 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.

**Essays: 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 over 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.

**Critical Essays: 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.
Critical Essays: 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 foppery of human love and courtship.

Nor is their foppery 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 strutting 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.

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

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

Stephen B. Dobranski, *Georgia State University*

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" (Li. 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 (Li. 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.

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

**Children of the Mind: Miscarried Narratives in Much Ado about Nothing: 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."⁷ 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."⁸ 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)."⁹ 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 Keepdown 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 juice 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?" (II.i.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.  

**Children of the Mind: Miscarried Narratives in Much Ado about Nothing: 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.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 furtively 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.³⁴ 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.35 "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.36

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).


3 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).

4 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 smirched 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.

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


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

8 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]ttitudes 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).

9 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).

10 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)

11 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.

12 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 adoe 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 Frauuce (1485; STC 5013), William Caxton writes "And made no more a-doo to bere hym, than dooth a wulf to bere a lytel lambe."

13 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.

14 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 feeses her selfe stirred and prouoked with throwes and paines," ought to "walke vp and down the chamber, and then lay her selfe down warm in her bed," repeating this action until "the water bee gathered, and the Matrice be opened" (L4r).


16 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-G4v; and William Langham, The Garden of Health [London, 1597; STC 15195], E8v-F3r).

17 Langham, E8v, F2v; Rueff, N6).

18 See II.i.268, 296 317.

19 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.iv.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), B8: "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 Mountjoy—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.

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).
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).

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

Margaret was in some fault for this,
Although against her will, as it appears
In the true course of all the question.

(V.iv.4-6)

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.

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.

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Much Ado about Nothing (Vol. 31): Introduction

Much Ado about Nothing

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 cuckoldng 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."

**Much Ado about Nothing (Vol. 31): 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 inexperience 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 determinèd 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 hid-fox'. 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 Berowne, the Bastard of *King John*, Petruchio 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 soldiermen, 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 ancienery; 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 presentely, 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, thouickest 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.

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)


[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….
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
wit. 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?

(6-10)

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.

(I. 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 Shakespeares 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 Rocheoucauld 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" (Temp. 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:

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)

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 Claudio 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 Claudio's 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?

(III. i. 53-55)

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 'Knowst
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.
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: 'If I see any thing tonight why I should not marry her tomorrow, in the congregation, where I should wed, there will I shame her' (III, ii, 124-30).
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:

```plaintext
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:

```plaintext
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:

```plaintext
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

```plaintext
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 naivété 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:

(III, ii, 40-1)

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, 65-7)

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, 91-5)

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 Messinans 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 Shakespearian 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:

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 …

the second with its precious quibbling and outrageous farewell to love:

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!
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; II, 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 villany 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 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 insufficiency of 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 complacence, 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  
> 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.

(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 curtsies, 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.
Much Ado about Nothing (Vol. 31): 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 when, 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 gulled 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. 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 ... mild ...., 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." (11. 244-52) 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 inkhorn 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 unmask 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 too long, 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 comportment 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
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, calumny, 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.

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 is 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 reportedly" (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.iv.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.iv.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 blurts 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.i.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 heretofore 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)

**Much Ado about Nothing (Vol. 31): 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 halting 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 blurs: "I wonder that you will still be talking, Signior Benedick. Nobody marks you" (117-118). Such is his personality that "Courtesy itself must convert to disdain, if [he] come in her presence" (123-124). With ominous bluntness she proclaims herself an antilover: "I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me" (132-133).

Benedick is no less adept with the insulting barb. Expressing surprise that "my dear Lady Disdain" is still living, he mocks her for hiding her romantic interest in him and pompously avers that, for the sake of the ladies, "I would I could find in my heart that I had not a hard heart" (127-128); though "loved of all ladies … truly, I love none." A few moments later, asked by Claudio to comment on Hero's beauty, Benedick seizes the opportunity to broaden his attack upon the fatuity of love: "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 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 other 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 antiquity; and then comes repentance and, with his bad legs, falls into the cinque pace faster and faster, till he sink into his grave"
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

> turns … every man the wrong side out,
> And never gives to truth and virtue that
> 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:

> Stand I condemn'd for pride and scorn so much?
> Contempt, farewell! and maiden pride,
> adieu! …
> And, Benedick, love on; I will requite thee,
> 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, 174).
"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, fantastical 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 wooes 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 being 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 Benedict'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 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.
Her. 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 reconsideres 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 renounces 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'est her with a thistle" (III. iv. 71)—suggests that wit retains its phallic, masculine character ("prick'est") 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?
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 Erickson 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 love-sick 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 lovesome exchange 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: Éver 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 continuier" (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. Bose 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 [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]:

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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 onstage 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.

**Much Ado about Nothing (Vol. 31): 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 forgivement, 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—

Wisdome and bloud combating in so tender a body, we have ten prooves to one, that bloud 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', be 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 proove 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 Hecatommithi, "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 breaking off 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 *A 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 tragi-comedy 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/Cladio plot by ventilating and displacing it and by transforming its romance elements. In turn, the impasse of the Hero/Cladio 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.
[V.iv.44-47]

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.
Here Benedick implies that Claudio, like his putative father, may become a cuckold, 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 spokesman 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/Her relationship 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.iii.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, sobs, 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).
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 pam'red animals

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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
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 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 unmasks, 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 "maiden": "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 ancienity; 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 Messina.]

*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.
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 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. (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 Shakespearean 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 correspondance 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 Shakespearean 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.
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."
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 indirectness. 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 reengeance. In the act of cuckoldling, 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 anciencty; 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 vulnerability 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 curt, 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
concur 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. Cludio'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!
(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.
(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.
(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 pamp'red 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 see'st 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 seek'st 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 taimed 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:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Is 'a not approv'd in the height a villain, that hath slander'd, scorned, dishonored my kinswoman? O that I were a man! What, bear her in hand until they come to take hands; and then, with public accusation, uncovered slander, unmitigated rancor—O God that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the marketplace!}
\end{align*}
\]

(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:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{O that I were a man for his sake! Or that I had any friend who would be a man for my sake! But manhood is melted into cursies, valor into compliment, and men are only turned into tongue, and trim ones too. He is now as valiant as Hercules that only tells a lie, and swears it. I cannot be a man with wishing; and therefore I will die a woman with grieving.}
\end{align*}
\]

(317-23)
The last line of her tirade raises the question of what might be an adequate "feminine" alternative to the "predominately 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.

(222-33)

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 flipptantly 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:

\[
\text{Trust not my reading, nor my observations,} \\
\text{Which with experimental seal doth warrant} \\
\text{The tenure of my book; trust not my age,} \\
\text{My reverence, calling, nor divinity,} \\
\text{If this sweet lady lie not guiltless here} \\
\text{Under some biting error.} \\
\text{(4.1.165-70)}
\]

The friar offers his own reading of Hero's blood:

\[
\text{I have marked} \\
\text{A thousand blushing apparitions} \\
\text{To start into her face, a thousand innocent} \\
\text{shames} \\
\text{In angel whiteness beat away those blushes …} \\
\text{(4.1.158-61)}
\]

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 "apparll'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.
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....

(3–10)

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
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" (3.5.50-53). 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 now 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 un masks. 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.

**Much Ado about Nothing (Vol. 31): 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 relathionships 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*

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 badinage 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 metal 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 sparkling in her eyes,
Misprizing 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 assure 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享受s 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 railer 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 remarks, 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 require 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 vagrums. 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.

(4.2. 74-86)

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.

(4.1. 31-32)

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.

(4.1. 63-65)
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

\[
\text{thou slander hast gone through and through her heart,}
\text{And she lies buried with her ancestors—}
\text{O, in a tomb where never scandal slept,}
\text{Save this of hers, fram’d by thy villainy!}
\]

(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:

\[
\text{My heart is sorry for your daughter’s death;}
\text{But on my honor she was charg’d with nothing}
\text{But what was true, and very full of proof.}
\]

(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

\[
\text{Scambling, out-facing, fashion-monging boys,}
\text{That lie and cog and flout, deprave and slander,}
\text{Go anticly, and show outward hideousness.}
\]

(5.1. 94-96)
At this point, it is Leonato's turn to restrain Antonio, who also speaks of Hero as “slandered 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 amorousness 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 humiliated 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).
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 …¹

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 the 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:

> 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 …

(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 insuch
> 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.
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.*

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 cuckolds 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:

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 trothèd 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 Benedick?
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 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.

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.

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 lustihood.
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 ancenity. 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
dost 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, I. 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.
Give not this rotten orange to your friend.

(IV, i, ll. 22-31)

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. ll. 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 please 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, ll. 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, ll. 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


**Criticism: Feminist Criticism: Claire McEachern (essay date 1988)**


[In the following essay, McEachern examines differences in Much Ado about Nothing and King Lear as compared to their original sources and contends that the changes Shakespeare made reflect his questioning of patriarchal authority and his desire to examine its root causes.]

The collaboration of critical methods suggested by the title of this essay might appear a rather unlikely, even forced, proposition. Source study and feminism are a strange pair: the first is largely interested in finding in Shakespeare verbal echoes of earlier texts, the second committed to discovering in Shakespeare a foreshadowing of particular political identities. Certainly, in considering “Shakespeare's feminism” (a debatable, and surely anachronistic, construction), the prospect of looking to Shakespeare's sources for the origins of any political understanding of “the woman's part” seems to offer little promise; behind the critical assertion that finds Shakespeare's portrayals of women remarkable lies the unarticulated suspicion of the rare if not unprecedented quality of his cultural voice. In other words, the assumption of Shakespeare's uniqueness presupposes a differentiating context, and it is in relationship to the conception of source as cultural context that I would like to consider Shakespeare. Traditionally the relationship between Shakespeare and his literary sources, which source study examines, has been imagined as linear and determinative, an empirical matter of subtractions and additions, in which Shakespeare finds and rejects or accepts details of plot structure, character, or style. I would like to re-imagine this relationship less as a transference of formal ingredients, with sources as sites of mere borrowings, than as a culturally determined reading by Shakespeare of contexts that he found provocative—or not provocative enough.

Curiously it is this sense of a source as merely a site of borrowing that feminist criticism has unwittingly adopted in its effort to stake some ideologically consistent claim to Shakespeare. Until recently, feminist criticism of Shakespeare divided itself—and Shakespeare—into two seemingly incompatible ideological camps. Pioneering feminist forays into Shakespeare's canon, while seeking to “compensate for the bias in a critical tradition that has tended to emphasize male characters, male themes, and male fantasies” as well as to develop a uniquely feminist criticism capable of searching out “the woman's part,” discovered in Shakespeare an apparent commitment to the portrayal of liberated female characters, strong in voice and action.¹ Shakespeare here becomes a proto-feminist, testifying either to the Renaissance's general cultural emancipation of women, or to Shakespeare's own ahistorical transcendent genius, his freedom from his culture's assumptions.
Subsequent feminist approaches, confronted by a revision of the Burckhardtian thesis of the Renaissance emancipation of women, rejected this image as a naive idealization of Shakespeare, preferring instead to concentrate on exposing the patriarchal assumptions and structures that govern his drama and marginalize or contain its female energies. Shakespeare here appears as “the patriarchal bard,” an early modern author incapable of subverting patriarchal structures, able only to promulgate and reinforce a cultural ideology invested in subordinating women: as Kathleen McLuskie puts it, “Feminism cannot simply take ‘the woman's part’ when that part has been so morally loaded and theatrically circumscribed.” For these critics, Shakespeare is not free of his culture, but locked within it, its collaborator.

Advocates of both a proto-feminist and a patriarchal Shakespeare have posited a mimetic/deterministic relationship between art and society—the text is either an innocent mirror of cultural process or the no-less-idealized agent of patriarchal ideology. Most proto-feminist advocates, chiefly “psychosexual” in their approach to “the aesthetic, historical, and genre contexts” of a play, have found in Shakespeare's women, particularly in the comedies, evidence of his culture's incipient challenge to the patriarchy that, according to their reading, the text mirrors. Advocates of patriarchal Shakespeare, aligning themselves with the historical revisionism that ascribes to the Renaissance an increased suppression of women, have pointed to inconsistencies between the “feminist Shakespeare” and feminist ideology: again to quote McLuskie, “when a feminist accepts the narrative, theatrical and intellectual pleasures of this text she does so in male terms and not as part of the locus of feminist critical activity.” Critics who find Shakespeare less subversive than supportive of patriarchal culture, especially in the tragedies, sharpen the focus of their feminist critique and consider how best to subvert the power of the patriarchal structures he reproduces. Both approaches attempt to gauge Shakespeare's relationship to his culture (to which they seem to attribute a monolithic coherence), yet the conflict itself seems to posit either an ideologically inconsistent or incoherent text.

More recent feminists have sought to escape the proto-feminist/patriarchal polarity, and have turned to an investigation of the often contradictory, competing play of cultural texts that generates it. In complicating the mimetic model of literary genesis, exploring the interconnections of text and context, and revealing the discrepancies between various cultural definitions of the woman's place, such work has revealed patriarchy to be hardly a monolithic, coherent entity speaking with one—either liberating or oppressive—voice, but composed of, indeed founded in, ideological contradictions, inconsistencies, and incongruities. As a consequence, it would appear that the woman's part, and the man's, are hardly essential and stable categories of identity but contestable and changeable social constructs. Without themselves historicizing notions of gender, these critics have made manifest and urgent the necessity of doing so. They have also made apparent the need for feminism to foreground and further problematize the relationship of text to context, moving beyond the mimetic model of literary production congruent with essentialism.

The construction of social categories and cultural contexts is of interest not only to feminists but also, of course, to the critical movement in Renaissance studies known as new historicism; certainly the resolution of the polarity that some feminisms pursue would be of interest to new historicists, who are concerned with the dynamic that exists between cultural ideology and cultural fictions—with, in Jonathan Dollimore's words, “the interaction between State power and cultural forms.” Both critical schools share an understanding of literature as a social text. Yet if the great discovery of feminism may be that the personal is political, and that power operates even—if not foremost—on the level of the family, new historicism has tended to consider gender primarily in relation to the court. New historicism, however, does move beyond a strictly mimetic version of the text-context relationship to offer a more comprehensive (if not fully articulated) sense of a text's location in history; and it is this commitment to history from which feminism might profit. If in new historicism's often nostalgic fantasy of a totalized culture, change (indeed history, oddly enough) seems foreclosed, feminism's construction of gender from ego-psychology seems itself unresponsive to the reality of historical change.
To work towards an historicized notion of gender, to gauge progress and difference in how we envision ourselves as gendered subjects, would, I suggest, create a feminism more responsive to the historically specific ideological operations of a text and would also point the way toward our understanding a Renaissance culture in which the subversive impulse of a play (or a person) is not always re-subjugated to the orthodoxy of power, but is instead an agent of change. At the same time, the conception of a text as involved in the production of historical differences rather than in the unwitting or complicit replication of ideology not only leaves behind the mimetic model of literary production (and the delimiting conception of a source) but points to the possibility of a literary text as a significant intervention into history. If the problematic of Shakespeare's relationship to patriarchy—and of a feminist's relationship to Shakespeare—is to be clarified, Shakespeare's relationship to his cultural context must first be made the problem.

I propose to investigate Renaissance patriarchy through a study of fathers and daughters, using both Shakespeare's literary fathers and those fathers and daughters that he presents in his plays. Instead of constructing a deterministic, linear, and purely literary transaction between Shakespeare and his pre-texts, I wish to examine Shakespeare as reading, in his sources, his culture. Literary forebears here are not merely sources of plot and character, but themselves cultural inscriptions and registers of a patriarchal ideology. In studying Shakespeare's investigation of cultural documents, I wish to inquire into the causality and logic that motivates his reaction to their assumptions, a reaction that I see as historicizing both patriarchy and the roles of individuals within it. In a source study—a traditional, even patriarchal, critical method—we can take the measure of Shakespeare's difference from his patriarchal culture in his examination of it.

Shakespeare's experience and understanding of the pressures that patriarchy exerts upon its members enabled him to write plays that interrogate those same patriarchal systems. He developed this understanding by engaging with his artistic fathers and the cultural authority they represent and embody. In order to empower his own writing, Shakespeare rebels against the archetypes he inherits. His refusal to replicate the assumptions of patriarchy—while obviously not part of any specifically feminist agenda—originates in his inquiry into the nature of power, particularly as it is manifested in the imitative pressures of patriarchy. In revising his sources he recasts and demystifies the role of the father, and, mimicking the action he presents, Shakespeare, in the rebellious but also revisionary act of rewriting, questions the power of fathers, a power that demands replication for the perpetuation of the patriarchal system.

In the plays of Shakespeare that depict a father-daughter relationship, the issue of a woman's relationship to patriarchy inevitably gains a special kind of prominence. Marriage becomes the focal point. As Gayle Rubin's analysis in “The Traffic in Women” demonstrates, marriage enacts the exogamous valuing of women and thus exposes the patriarchal forms by which women are controlled: “If it is women who are being transacted, then it is the men who give and take them who are linked, the woman being a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it.” Needless to say, the emotional needs of individuals are not always congruent with the demands of a political system constituted in and by exogamy. The marriage of a daughter is a difficult moment for a father, especially if he lacks a wife. He must move from the center of his daughter's world to the circumference and must watch another take his place. Lynda E. Boose points out that marriage is inherently subversive of a father's authority in requiring that the daughter leave the father's control: “If she is classified as the family's most expendable member, it may be because she is actually its least retainable. To an institution that fears loss, the daughter's presence constitutes a threat to its maintenance of closed boundaries.”

A daughter's departure through marriage marks the end of paternal control, although a measure of control persists in the father's choice of his daughter's husband; and Boose suggests the emotional logic behind a father's relation to his daughter's marital partner: “Faced with the inexorable loss of something emotionally valued, individuals need to devise some way to reimage loss as benefit or at least equal exchange. Losing one's daughter through an exchange that the father controls circumvents her ability ever to choose another man over him. …” For Rubin, exogamy creates a political order among men; for Boose, exogamy entails a loss of paternal authority that demands an elaborate compensation.
At the heart of patriarchy is the conflict between the emotional integrity of the family and the demands of a political order that requires the severing of filial bonds in order to perpetuate itself. Patriarchy is, in fact, composed of two principal systems of affective loyalties: the family, over which the father rules, and a social/political system founded on male alliance, in which the father is invested. These two systems of authority, and the divergent commitments that they represent for the father, are conflated under the rubric of “patriarchy,” and they are imagined as compatible parts of a coherent whole, and even used analogously (by James I himself: “Kings are compared to fathers in families: for a King is truly parens patriae, the politic father of his people”11); in effect, however, these systems are hardly versions of each other but are in radical competition. When we look at daughters, we see that they, unlike sons, must violate the integrity of the family to forge the political bonds that constitute the greater social order; fathers must sacrifice one authority in order to uphold another. Patriarchy, then, is not seamlessly monolithic, as some fathers would have us believe, but rather is founded in a profound contradiction; it is this contradiction that Shakespeare explores, focusing on the moments of the intersection of political and familial loyalties, and examining our attempts to resolve or reject the conflicting demands that patriarchy imposes upon us.

In dramatizing the difficulty of marriage, then, Shakespeare dramatizes the difficulty of negotiating between the rival demands of patriarchy. Though The Book of Common Prayer specifies that “for this cause [marriage] shall a man leave father and mother, and shall be joyned unto his wife”12 (emphasis added), the departure of a daughter can prove far more disruptive to a Shakespearean world. In Much Ado About Nothing, the plot turns on “the niceties of matrimonial law,”13 and in King Lear, Lear's tragedy originates in the necessity of Cordelia's departure;14 central to both plays, and absent from their sources, is a problematic emotional climate that nurtures the bond of father and daughter. Shakespeare's sources would elide the bifurcated structure of patriarchy to present a coherent ideology, creating fathers who carry out their social function successfully. Shakespeare's modifications of his sources foreground both the emotional complexity of the family order and the price at which ideological coherence is acquired.

I

A complicated father-daughter bond is built subtly into Much Ado About Nothing through Shakespeare's deviation from his principal sources: Book V of Ariosto's Orlando Furioso and Bandello's story of Timbreo and Fenicia. In both sources the relation of father and daughter is in large part dictated by the economic and political logic of their two worlds. Both Ariosto's King of Scotland and Bandello's Lionato de Lionati of Messina love their daughters, but their selves are far less invested in their love than is that of Shakespeare's Leonato. While apparently preserving the narrative structure of its sources, Shakespeare's version of the story of the slandered daughter is regulated not merely by public patriarchal concerns but by private and emotional ones as well.

Bandello's tale and Shakespeare's Much Ado show especially marked differences. Messer Lionato de Lionati is the central protagonist in the story of his daughter's marriage; in Shakespeare's comedy, Hero as lover takes precedence. For Messer Lionato, the anxieties occasioned by the impending marriage are social and economic. His responsibilities as the father of a daughter are clear; he is the possessor of a marketable commodity. In keeping with the etiquette of this world, the offer of marriage from Fenicia's suitor is addressed to him. The source of the offer surprises Messer Lionato, who did not expect “that the knight would condescend to ally himself to him.”15 The benefits of exogamy have been shown at the highest social level of this patriarchally ordered world, with the King of Arragon exploiting those benefits by subduing the island of Sicily on the grounds that it “belonged to him as husband of Costanza, daughter of King Manfred” (p. 112). Messer Lionato recognizes a similar bond in the making when Sir Timbreo requests Fenicia as his own, and “knowing Sir Timbreo's power and worth he … showed by a gracious reply how pleased he was that the knight would condescend to ally himself to him” (p. 114). Messer Lionato scarcely mentions his daughter in his negotiations, nor is it made apparent whether he is aware of her attraction to Sir Timbreo; instead, we get the simple statement that “on his return home he informed his wife and Fenicia about the promise he had
given to Sir Timbreo” (p. 114). “Agreeable to both” (p. 114), this marriage is an economic alliance between two men, one generous, the other deserving. It is transacted in keeping with the warrant of exogamous exchange to “[confer] its quasi-mystical power of social linkage.”16 The news of the intended marriage “gave general pleasure to the Messinese, since Messer Lionato was a gentleman rightly loved as one who sought to hurt nobody but to help all as much as he could; so people expressed great satisfaction at the proposed alliance” (p. 114).

The world in which Shakespeare's Leonato receives a similar offer from Claudio is not so simply regulated, and Hero is not so easily dropped out of the male transaction. Unlike his prototype in Bandello, Claudio has no clear advantage of social class or fortune to recommend him to an indulgent father; his inquiry about Hero's inheritance—“Hath Leonato any son, my lord?” (I.i.282)17—suggests that he is not a wealthy man. After shrewdly ascertaining that Hero is Leonato's sole heir, he plans to propose directly to Hero—albeit through the gratuitous agency of Don Pedro, who, disguised as Claudio, will “take her hearing prisoner with the force / And strong encounter of [his] amorous tale,” and, after “to her father will [he] break” (I.i.312-14). Leonato, informed of a coming marriage proposal, says that he will reply through his daughter: “I will acquaint my daughter withal, that she may be the better prepar'd for an answer” (I.ii.19-20). Hero says that she “will be rul'd by [her] father” (II.i.47-48), yet she and her affections are recognized as party to the marriage negotiations in a way that Fenicia, and Fenicia's feelings, are not. Fenicia, if genteel, is also poor, and Sir Timbreo's social position is argument enough for his marriage proposal to appeal to Messer Lionato. In contrast, Hero's status as heiress requires that Claudio garner some support for his proposal from Hero herself. Hero's acquiescence contrasts with the insubordination of the fatherless Beatrice (II.i.49-52), and Leonato gives her to Claudio with “Count, take of me my daughter, and with her my fortunes. His Grace hath made the match, and all grace say Amen to it” (II.i.288-90).

This marriage, as in Bandello, involves male identity and male honor, and to that extent it models exogamous exchange. Claudio and the Prince invite Leonato, through the transfer of Hero, to join their own privileged company. For his part, Leonato gives his daughter, “and with her my fortunes,” to a man on whom “Don Pedro hath bestow'd much honor” (I.i.9-10). Yet Shakespeare complicates the simple protocol that expresses Messer Lionato's responsibility towards his daughter. He replaces it with a contract whose ambiguities and problems will be revealed in the reaction of Leonato to his daughter's slander. Shakespeare confounds the relationship between social and psychological realities, moving beyond economic or civic rhetoric to expose the potentially destructive emotional logic of patriarchy.

Bandello's unambiguously male and property-oriented world permits a relatively mechanical resolution of the obstacle to comic process that is posed when Sir Timbreo rejects Fenicia. Despite his initial pleasure upon hearing “that the knight would condescend to ally himself to him,” when he is served notice to “find another son-in-law”’’ (p. 118), Messer Lionato repudiates the knight and his “‘injurious accusation of whoredom’” (p. 118). Messer Lionato's faith in his daughter and the quality of her upbringing translates into a genuine knowledge of her worth on the Sicilian marriage market:

“It is indeed true that all things are possible, but I know how my daughter has been reared and what her habits are.” … The good father, never having found his daughter anything but honest, thought that the knight had been seized with disdain at their poverty and present lack of worldly success.

(pp. 118-19)

Messer Lionato can believe in Fenicia in a way that Shakespeare's Leonato is incapable of emulating. Explaining Sir Timbreo's disdain by his own lack of financial worth, Messer Lionato is able to phrase his defense of his daughter in the economic and exclusively male terms that have governed the transaction throughout. We sympathize with Messer Lionato and his daughter as victims of class prejudice rather than
emotional cruelty, for Fenicia's moral character is never at issue in the minds of those who matter to her: “it is enough for [her] that before the just tribunal of Christ [she] shall be known innocent of such baseness” (p. 120). The economic mores that regulated Fenicia's exchange from one man to another now protect her from blame of promiscuity.

In Shakespeare's version, the social status and concerns of father and suitor no longer completely dictate their behaviors or define their roles. Unlike their counterparts in the source, Leonato and Claudio are social equals, and therefore Claudio's wish to marry Hero does not breach class hierarchies. Leonato is richer; Claudio, better connected. Thus economic considerations do not explain his rejection of Hero. Bereft of this explanation, Leonato reveals an investment in Hero more complicated than Messer Lionato's in his daughter. Shakespeare's Leonato is a father too ready to disown his Hero, and too ready to believe her suitor's accusation. When he hears of Hero's “misgovernment” (IV.i.98), Leonato judges her to be guilty as her accusers do. Believing Claudio's report of “a ruffian at her chamber-window” (IV.i.90), Leonato believes—contrary to every indication of her character—that Hero has committed this breach of both his emotional and exogamous authorities, choosing a sexual partner without regard to his interests and without his consent or knowledge. Leonato is certain that he has misplaced his trust in her, and, much like Brabantio in Othello, feels that the “fatherly and kindly power” (Much Ado, IV.i.73) he exercises is subverted, and that Hero, like Desdemona, has “made a gross revolt” (Othello, I.i.136). Yet the revolution of Much Ado is less Hero's than Shakespeare's.

Denied the benign economic explanation of Claudio's refusal that Messer Lionato has access to, the benevolently paternal response of Messer Lionato is unavailable to Leonato. Leonato must construct a response to Hero's presumed betrayal of his authority unaided by any clear cultural logic. As he is apparently bereft of his alliance with his daughter, the only response immediately available to Leonato is to attempt to imitate Claudio's action. Claudio refuses Hero as damaged goods, citing the code of exogamy: “There, Leonato, take her back again. / Give not this rotten orange to your friend” (IV.i.30-31). But although Leonato tries to imitate Claudio's rejection, he cannot. Leonato has not only taken the expedient of allying himself with his daughter as a route to male alliance but has also taken the risk of loving her. With Claudio's rejection of Hero, Leonato's identity in the male world becomes incompatible with his identity as a father, and this comedy verges on tragedy as Shakespeare confronts the ideological confusion of the patriarchal system.

These contradictions inform Leonato's attempted repudiation of Hero. In its last paternal exercise, his authority has been flouted; to regain his social power among men, Leonato paradoxically must disown her. If Hero were merely a commodity to be exchanged, Leonato would suffer a loss of male pride and property, but Leonato's response betrays a deeper suffering and betrays the power of his love for his daughter: “Hath no man's dagger here a point for me?” (IV.i.108). Shakespeare divests patriarchy of its disinterested political aspect to reveal its radical investment in the affective order of the family. Leonato's regard for Hero reveals itself in a vocabulary of possession that is shockingly narcissistic:

But mine, and 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 …

(IV.i.135-38)

Contrary to the expectations of exogamy, Hero here is no mere commodity to be exchanged in a male marketplace, but an aspect of Leonato's identity. The confrontation with Hero's sexuality that Claudio's accusation forces means that Leonato must also recognize his daughter's identity as separate from his own. With the loss of male alliance, the benevolent political rhetoric of patriarchy gives way to a poetics of desire. Patriarchy—potentially a simple political order—has been powerfully rephrased in psychological terms.
As Leonato realizes the implications of disowning his daughter, the conflict between his fatherly love for Hero and his social need for male honor reveals itself in his response to Hero's physical self. As seen in happier times, “Truly, the lady fathers herself. Be happy, lady, for you are like an honorable father” (I.i.105-7). Hero's physical resemblance to her father guarantees her mother's fidelity, and with it, her father's honor. Yet once Hero's own honor appears “but … sign and semblance” (IV.i.32), Leonato abruptly rejects the testimony of physiognomy. Obsessively exploring the taint of sexuality, he now wishes Hero derived “from unknown loins” (IV.i.134), for she

is fall’n
Into a pit of ink, that the wide sea
Hath drops too few to wash her clean again,
And salt too little which may season give
To her foul-tainted flesh!

(IV.i.138-42)

When Hero faints and is believed dead, Leonato responds almost thankfully: “O Fate, take not away thy heavy hand! / Death is the fairest cover for her shame” (IV.i.114-15). Leonato's perverse resolve to sever himself from his blood results in an inability to recognize that blood. The Friar, viewing Hero's blush, instinctively recognizes her innocence:

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.

(IV.i.157-63)

Leonato, in contrast, believes that, as Claudio claims, “Her blush is guiltiness, not modesty” (IV.i.41), and he interprets this evidence accordingly:

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 seek’st thou then to cover with excuse
That which appears in proper nakedness?

(IV.i.169-74)

It is as if Hero's very body is marked by the competing demands of patriarchy. Only the fictional death of her offending flesh will allow Hero to escape the contradiction to assume the only role this system permits her: “One Hero died defil’d, but I do live, / And surely as I live, I am a maid” (V.iv.62-63).18 Leonato's rejection of Hero testifies to his radical possession of her, a possession inappropriate to comedy and exogamy alike, however psychologically understandable. In order for the play to conclude in marriage, Leonato must become a father again in a less possessive way and acknowledge the necessity of granting his daughter's alterity.

Shakespeare's source in Ariosto supplies a model for Leonato's transformation. The father in Book V of Orlando Furioso has a daughter whose fate is similar to that of both Fenicia and Hero, yet his reactions are even more strictly defined by patriarchal law than are those of Messer Lionato. This father, though “sore … grieu’d to heare these newes” (V.66.1), submits to his own law in the treatment of his slandered daughter; for
... on this point the lawes are so expresse,  
Except by combat it be proou’d a lie  
Needs must Geneura be condemn’d to die.(19)

The determination of Genevra's chastity rests not on personal judgment or knowledge but on trial by combat: an imposition of a formal, stylized, arbitrary—above all, impersonal—arbitration of Genevra's sexual behavior: all that Leonato's tortured outburst has not been. The patriarchy of Ariosto urges an even greater distance between father and daughter than in the Bandello, where both the insistence on marriage as an alliance between men (rather than as separation of parent from child) and the social determinants of marriage preempt the confrontation of the father or the text with the emotional content of the father-daughter bond. Ariosto's King of Scotland acts not as a father but as a king, and the regulation of Genevra's sexual behavior is a public issue: the private, affective space of the family does not exist, or is made irrelevant by the public domain of patriarchy (although it is to his credit that the king does not doubt Genevra's chastity, despite his lack of any explanation for the slander. Perhaps if you are king, you have fewer anxieties about male bonding).

In fact, at issue in Ariosto is less the marriage of a daughter than the barbarity of a double-standard that condemns women alone for adultery: it is significant that Rinaldo defends Genevra (and justice) sight-unseen and anonymously: "If fair Genevra had her friend or no. … The law, I say, is partial and nought" (IV.51-54.401-25). His chivalry provides an attitude, a certain generosity and judicious impartiality that Leonato needs in order to regain his fatherly qualities and make the emotional transition that the marriage of his only daughter requires of him. In the distant, idealizing stance of the chivalric champion, Leonato can love Hero and learn to release her, chivalry gracefully mediating her loss, while the "macho" aspect of the challenger allows him to recover the social honor and identity that Claudio's rejection of Hero and exogamous alliance has called into doubt.

In Bandello's Messina, the reconstituting of exogamous alliances contrasts significantly with Shakespeare's psychological reconstitution of Leonato's identity. Messer Lionato's recourse is that of a man aware of his social responsibilities as father of a marriageable daughter. He resolves to "send the maiden out of Messina. … Then, having restored the girl … until she had regained her former beauty and strength … he might marry her off in two or three years under another name" (pp. 121-22). He designs his plan with confidence in his daughter's recuperative abilities and with a shrewd business instinct. When Sir Timbreo discovers Fenicia's innocence and suggests by way of recompense that Messer Lionato "must make use of me and mine as if the alliance had taken place," Messer Lionato requests that "since ill fortune has made [him] incapable of an alliance by marriage" (p. 127) he be allowed to provide Sir Timbreo with a wife should he choose to marry, and thus to sustain the alliance no longer directly available through exogamy. Once Fenicia is restored to health, her father "decide[s] to delay no longer in putting his plan into effect. … Then and there in so many words [he] wed[s] his Fenicia” to Sir Timbreo (pp. 127-28).

Leonato arrives at this culturally and comically desired goal by a significantly different route, one that derives from Ariosto. The King of Scotland is prevented by his own law from the defense or guardianship of his daughter's chastity, and it is this distance that Shakespeare collapses and then cultivates. When Benedick simultaneously defends the "very bent of honor" of Don Pedro and Claudio yet allows the possibility that "their wisdoms be misled in this" (IV.i.185-86), he suggests to Leonato the opportunity for the recovery of both his honor and his love for Hero. As Benedick is part of the male world Leonato would join, his endorsement of the possibility of Hero's innocence allows Leonato to retract his rejection of his daughter and to permit himself access to the emotional knowledge of her character (and his own) that he thought he needed to suppress. Now his "soul doth tell [him] Hero is belied" (V.i.42), and he exchanges the vocabulary of narcissism for that of a chivalric protector. While Leonato's subsequent defense of Hero employs the rhetoric of the lover, it is a rhetoric that represses any overt suggestion of sexuality in its attitude towards the loved one.
“If they wrong her honor” (IV.i.190), Leonato declares, he will be her most formidable champion. His response transcends the call of Messer Lionato’s simple duty. Leonato is that which Ariosto’s King of Scotland wishes for: he “that will in armes defend his daughter deare, / And prove her innocent in open fight” (V.68.3-4). Leonato defends Hero with a chivalric righteousness and challenges Claudio as an equal, despite his age:

I speak not like a dotard nor a fool,  
As under privilege of age to brag  
What I have done being young, or what would do  
Were I not old. Know, Claudio, to thy head,  
Thou hast so wrong’d mine innocent child and me  
That I am forc’d to lay my reverence by  
And, with grey hairs and bruise of many days,  
Do challenge thee to trial of a man.  

(V.i.59-65)

Her knight, he acts to rescue Hero’s honor, and his own. In the stylized posture of the knight—a nostalgic image of an innocent patriarchal culture—Shakespeare provides Leonato with a model for expressing love for his daughter, a model that edits the suggestion of incestuous possessiveness while simultaneously allowing him to defend his male honor in the exogamous system. Leonato becomes, quite literally, a courtly old gentleman, and the archaism of the formal vocabulary is ironically adequate to his own aged “reverence.”

Leonato’s appropriation of a courtly rhetoric allows him to enact the process of comedy in which fathers are made archaic. Having paid for his excessive, obsessive doubt of Hero’s virtue with a more than fatherly effort to defy her slanderers, Leonato is saved from certain defeat at the hands of Claudio by the ubiquitous Dogberry. Leonato regains the composure of his role only after Shakespeare allows us to view the extremes of his love for Hero, exposing the simple patriarchal regulations of his sources as controlling mechanisms for the emotional turmoil inherent in the father-daughter relationship. As Leonato changes from jealous slanderer to chivalric champion, he resurrects Hero, who changes from cast-out whore with “foul-tainted flesh” (IV.i.141), to “my Lady Hero … falsely accus’d” (V.ii.90-91). The proprietary and proper patriarchs of the sources have given way to a father who expresses the depth and character of his love for his daughter—a potentially destructive love—in a vocabulary that is inconsistent with the images of fathers that his culture propagates. Shakespeare, then, re-idealizes the patriarchal system; yet he does so in terms so highly artificial that they make us conscious of their presence and the emotional logic they would dissemble.

As if testifying to the impossibility of Leonato’s giving away a daughter who is “mine so much / That I myself was to myself not mine,” Shakespeare has Antonio, Leonato’s brother, give Hero in marriage. Antonio has no such investment in Hero—his affection is, quite simply, avuncular, and he can thus comply with the conventions of exogamous exchange without further ado. Antonio “must be father to [his] brother's daughter, / And give her to young Claudio” (V.iv.15-16). Disguised, and given in marriage by her uncle, Hero is safely removed from Leonato; the father is doubly replaced: first by Antonio, and finally by Claudio. Leonato is relegated to spectator, and it is Antonio who, this time, says to Claudio, “I do give you her” (V.iv.53). Like the resolution of this comedy, Leonato’s arrival at the posture of the patriarch is labored and highly ironic, requiring a suggestion of tragedy that can never be fully dismissed by the high artifice of a happy ending. Only with the symbolic death of his daughter—a death he once wished for in earnest—can the objectives of both comedy and exogamy be achieved, and in the macabre fantasy of Hero’s death, Shakespeare insists upon the costs of constructing and maintaining his patriarchy.

King Lear probes even more deeply into the emotional content of the father-daughter bond. Here, the incestuous aspects of the relationship between father and daughter are more explicit and, in the context of tragedy, less easily redeemed and purified than in comedy. Again the catalyst of emotional disclosure is
marriage. Leonato's dilemma exposes the emotional costs of patriarchy; in Shakespeare's rendering of Lear's story, another aspect of patriarchy—i.e., its consuming nature—is revealed in Lear's attempts to engineer a version of exogamy that will disguise—if only rhetorically—the loss that marriage entails. Leonato may be confused about how to choose between conflicting patriarchal commitments, but Lear tries impossibly to fuse familial and political authorities, to combine the impulse to conserve the integrity of the family with the social demands of exogamy. Leonato slanders his daughter only after others have declared her undesirable; Lear's slanders are unprompted, and he defames Cordelia in the hope that “Dow’r’d with [his] curse,” others will refuse her (I.i.205).

As Much Ado transforms Bandello's simplicities, King Lear transforms its sources to create more problematic patriarchal relations. Most significantly, both in Holinshed's account (1587) and in the anonymous play The True Chronicle Historie of King Leir (1605), Leir's behavior is clearly motivated by the question of political succession. In Holinshed, Leir's preference for Cordeilla is made explicit: he loves “specially Cordeilla the youngest farre aboue the two elder.” Logically enough, Leir wishes to “preferre hir whome he best loued, to the succession ouer the kingdome.”20 As stressed in the anonymous play, there is no “heyre indubitate, / Which might have set upon [Leir's] royall throne … by [whom] we might have peace.”21 Leir must confer his kingdom on his daughters, and the question remains: how best to protect “our state … ’gainst all forrayne hate” and “so establish such a perfitt peace” (p. 338; King Leir, I.i.55-68). Leir's solution is to marry off his three daughters to three political successors “by whose united friendship, this our state / May be protected” (p. 338; King Leir, I.i.54-55). Since Gonorill and Ragan have already been spoken for, the youngest daughter's engagement is all that remains to be negotiated.

In the anonymous play, Leir knows and appreciates that his youngest daughter loves him best. So, with unabashed manipulative intent, he seeks to secure her profession of love in order simply to assure his own choice of a political successor. Just as, in Bandello, Messer Lionato's interest in his daughter was innocently benevolent, so Leir's is naively coercive. By demanding the public profession of love from all three daughters, Leir hopes to disguise his attempt to manipulate the youngest through her love for him. In the play, Leir frankly, even gleefully, admits his scheme and its use of Cordella's love. The three sisters of this play are not competing for dowries so much as for the husbands a dowry would insure. Leir wishes to manipulate his daughters' dependence upon dowries in order to force Cordella to abandon her desire for a love-match—“No liking to a Monarch, unlesse love allowes” (p. 338; King Leir, I.i.62)—to his own desire for a marriage of convenience:

... they joynently shall contend,
Eche to exceed the other in their love:
Then at the vantage will I take Cordella,
Even as she doth protest she loves me best,
Ile say, Then, daughter, graunt me one request,
To shew thou lovest me as thy sisters doe,
Accept a husband, whom my selfe will woo.

(p. 339; King Leir, I.i.81-87)

Leir does not want to minimize loss here, but to maximize gain—of the “heyre indubitate.” He views Cordella's love for him as his one advantage over her resolve, and intends to exploit this for his own ends: “to match her to some King within this Ile” (p. 338; King Leir, I.i.66). He anticipates, as he schemes, his victory:

Although (poore soule) her sences will be mute:
Then will I tryumph in my policy,
And match her with a King of Brittany.

(p. 339; King Leir, I.i.89-90)
The reasons for King Lear's staging of the dowry pageant in Shakespeare's play are not so simple or self-evident, nor so safely hinged upon politics. Lear faces two problems at the beginning of Shakespeare's play: the threat to the coherence of the English nation, compounded by, even contingent upon, the threat that exogamy poses to the integrity of Lear's authority over his family. In Lear's attempt to meet these threats, Shakespeare explores the emotional conservatism of patriarchy (literally, the desire to conserve the order of the family), which Lear converts into a tyrannical legislation of affective bonds.

Shakespeare removes a concern with political succession from the list of Lear's declared priorities. “The division of [his] kingdom” (I.i.4) seems to be a foregone conclusion that poses few problems for all concerned. As Coleridge notes,

It was not without forethought, nor is it without its due significance, that the division of Lear's kingdom is in the first six lines of the play stated as a thing already determined in all its particulars previously to the trial of professions. …

Lear seems to have no patrilineal regrets about the parcelling of his isle; he is not looking to choose a sole male successor. Indeed, as Harry Jaffa remarks, Lear seems never to have had any intention of relinquishing his kingdom:

Lear divided his kingdom into “three” but the parts are not mathematical “thirds.” Cordelia was not only to be situated in the middle, but to have the richest portion of the realm. … Living on as king with Cordelia, with Albany and Cornwall acting as his deputies in regions which he could not control without their loyalty anyway, does it seem that Lear was giving up anything that he could in any case have kept to himself much longer?

In Shakespeare's dramatization, the general acceptance that greets the division of the kingdom may well signal that this unusual gesture will have little impact on power relations; Harry Berger, Jr., observes that Lear “formally renounces power and property primarily with the intention of keeping informal control over them.” But if the division is merely ceremonial, why the need for a public display?

The need arises, I would argue, out of the fact that Shakespeare has created not only a political but also a personal set of pressures as motivations for the dowry division. The urge to preserve his authority over his family, no less than over his kingdom, complicates Lear's actions. This desire is threatened in the marriage of Cordelia, Lear's favorite. Her marriage signifies the final dissolution of the Lear family and the Lear empire, and painfully emphasizes the irrevocable passage of time, which all of Lear's authority cannot counteract. Lear is concerned with parental succession; to whom must he cede Cordelia, to whom shall he render up “rule … interest … and cares” (I.i.49-50) of his youngest daughter?

Unlike his literary predecessors, Lear already possesses two sons-in-law. In keeping with the tone of his relationship with his elder daughters, Lear claims a filial and perfunctory relationship with both “our son of Cornwall, / … our no less loving son of Albany” (I.i.41-42). The two dukes are natural choices as sons-in-law, each occupying strategic extremities of Lear's kingdom. In both sources, Cordelia's prospective husband is absent from the court at the moment corresponding to Shakespeare's dowry distribution. In Holinshed it is only after Leir divides the kingdom in halves between his two eldest daughters that “one of the princes of Gallia … hearing … of the said Cordeilla, desired to haue hir in mariage” (p. 13). Similarly, in the source play the Gallian king first appears in his native land, planning a voyage to Britain, blithely unaware that Leir has already divided his “Kingdome … / 'Twixt [Cordella's] two sisters to their royall dowre” (p. 345; King Leir, I.iii.318-19).

In Holinshed Leir cares little who or if his daughter marries: “answer was made [to Aganippus], that he might haue his daughter, but as for anie dower, he could haue none” (p. 13). In the anonymous play Leir's attitude to
her marriage is different but equally straightforward: he is deeply interested in Cordella’s choice, and he schemes to force her into a politic marriage. Both play and chronicle sources lack the pressure of the expectant France and Burgundy attending on Lear’s decision; both France and Burgundy pose significantly different marriages—different both from each other and from the source play—in terms of the power relations the exogamous exchange would construct. In Shakespeare’s version neither foreign suitor presents as stable a political bond as might “some King within this Il. e.” They have furthermore been “long in our court”; Lear must answer them. The prospect of losing his daughter is much more immediate and is highlighted as the concern of the play. But if Holinshed’s king is indifferent to his daughter’s marriage, and the source play’s father quite the opposite, the attitude of Shakespeare’s Lear is difficult to characterize.

The sources do not present the dowries as objects for rivalry among the sisters. In Holinshed’s account Leir simply asks “how well she loved him” without informing his daughters of the reason for his request; furthermore, it is not clear in the text whether the demand is meant to solicit rivalry or merely to confirm Leir’s favoritism: “he thought to understand the affections of his daughters towards him, and prefer hir whome he best loued, to the succession ouer the kingdome” (p. 12). In the source play, the evident stakes are husbands, with dowries only as the necessary route to matrimony. But Leir does not disclose this condition, and his request is phrased rather ingenuously:

Resolve a doubt which much molests my mind,  
Which of you three to me would prove most kind;  
Which loves me most, and which at my request  
Will soonest yeeld unto their fathers hest.

(p. 343; King Leir, I.i.232-35)

In Shakespeare’s version the stakes are not husbands but dowries, and the conflict of the scene is Cordelia’s marriage alone, the choice of her suitor the ostensible end. With this in mind, Lear announces the dowry contest; his purpose and phrasing are bald:

Which of you shall we say doth love us most,  
That we our largest bounty may extend  
Where nature doth with merit challenge?

(I.i.51-53)

As Goneril and Regan are already married to ducal power and property (if Jaffa is correct, the assets they perfunctorily flatter for are the ones they are already married to), with no fears of impoverished spinsterhood to motivate their flatteries, Lear must be speaking to Cordelia alone. For his purposes, it is not “Our daughters’ several dowers” (I.i.44) that are at stake, but Cordelia’s only.

Given the prominence of Cordelia’s imminent departure, her removal through the necessity of exogamy, King Lear’s elaborate divestment of authority could be construed as a way to ease his pain at her loss. The ceremony of the division of the kingdom may be a way for Lear to formalize his loss and thereby minimize his pain. If the division of the kingdom and the division of Lear’s family are inextricably linked, perhaps Lear resolves to divest himself of his kingdom, hoping that, by signing away his worldly goods and titles, he will find it easier to accept the loss of Cordelia. “Conferring [all] on younger strengths” (I.i.40), specifically those of France or Burgundy, he will be able to relinquish Cordelia as he parts with his lesser possessions, and perhaps the loss of “our joy” (I.i.82) will be less to him among the loss of all. Lear assembles the members of his court in order to persuade himself, under public pressure, to relinquish Cordelia to that “lord whose hand must take [her] plight” from him (I.i.101).
More likely, however—given the purely formal nature of his divestment of political authority—Lear never intends to relinquish Cordelia. Or rather, he wishes both to give her away and to keep her, to marry her off and yet “to set [his] rest / On her kind nursery” (I.i.123-24). (In practical terms, this desire suggests that Lear's probable intention is for Cordelia to marry Burgundy, both remaining in Cordelia's third of England, it being unlikely that the king of France would move to England, or the king of England to France.) Lear hardly wishes to divest himself of either of his patriarchal positions of authority, but rather to combine them in a fantasy of absolutism, which reveals itself as such in the contradiction of Cordelia's both going and staying. His perversion of the dowry ceremony reveals his desire to prevent its consummation, to conserve and combine his emotional and territorial authorities in a monolithic whole.

Though Lear knows he must fulfill the public responsibilities of patriarchy in exogamous exchange, the demands of exogamy are at odds with political and emotional needs, and the pressures of the latter subvert his rhetoric of policy. Lear's insistence that his daughter flatter him for her dowry is ostensibly his last act of ownership over her, but it is designed to retain control. He makes no mention of maintaining the patriarchal prerogative to choose a husband, a prerogative that would compensate him for his loss of parental authority. Rather, he wishes Cordelia to buy from him, with her capacity to love, her right to marry.

The custom of exogamous exchange, however, does not normally demand that the daughter buy her right to marry. Indeed, it is the father who buys, with his offer of a dowry, his daughter's right to marry from another man whom he will choose. Lear wishes to reformulate this exchange. Where the Leir in the anonymous play hopes to make his daughter buy the husband of his choice with her need of a dowry, Lear wants Cordelia to buy her dowry with the very capital she herself must use to marry: her love. Unlike his predecessor, the last thing Lear wishes is that Cordelia “shew thou lovest me as thy sisters doe”; he has no desire that Cordelia prove her love by marrying his choice of suitor. In fact, any mention of Lear's choice of suitor is conspicuously absent: France and Burgundy “are to be answer’d” (I.i.48), but presumably by Cordelia. The relationship under negotiation here is not between two men but between father and daughter. Lear's wish is to secure a pledge of love that, as the rhetoric of Lear's ultimatum urges and as Cordelia implies, would make her marriage impossible (I.i.82-86, 95-104).

Lear appropriates the public patriarchal terms that his predecessors exercised conventionally in the sources, but he misunderstands their use. Their use of custom is unselfconsciously coercive and conventionally exogamous. Lear, in contrast, wishes to force the two contravening orders of family and state into a metaphorical relationship with each other, and he strives to make the order of his kingdom dependent upon the coherence of his family. Cordelia, however, points out the ideological inconsistencies in Lear's monolithic designs, exposing the contradiction upon which he has built his absolutist fantasy. Whereas the Leir of the anonymous play hoped to silence Cordella's recalcitrant wish for a love match, Shakespeare's Lear finds Cordelia's resolve to “Love, and be silent” (I.i.62) subversive of his plan. Her denial of her father's authority responds to his own perversion of patriarchal power and repudiates his claim to such power over her. Cordelia's refusal to “draw / A third more opulent than [her] sisters” (I.i.85-86) exposes the all-consuming greed of Lear's request, and this criticism, coupled with the disproportionate rage that it provokes, reveals the qualitative difference of Lear's emotionally confounded power from the merely manipulative political authority of his predecessors.

Cordelia never claims, as Cordella does, that she will only marry for love: on the contrary, she is perfectly willing to comply with her father's choice of suitor. Her subversion, as she herself points out, is no rebuke to patriarchy: “No unchaste action, or dishonored step, / … hath depriv’d me of your grace and favor” (I.i.230-31). Cordelia reminds her father—and us—of the emotional loss he would deny, or would configure as merely political or economic. She is sensitive to the “necessity” of patriarchal custom but more so to the emotional logic it would gloss; as far as exogamy is concerned, she is perhaps Shakespeare's most conservative daughter.
Cordelia's answer to Lear points out the totalizing structure of his request, and she reminds him that political structures are built by the limiting of affective bonds. If her answer is callous, it is so only in response to the greater insensitivity of Lear's question. As he wishes to know “Where nature doth with merit challenge” (I.ii.53), she answers him in terms of her natural duty: “According to my bond, no more nor less” (I.ii.93). Cordelia's reply is meticulous in its calculation of filial duty, much like Desdemona's reply to her father:

My noble father,
I do perceive here a divided duty.
To you I am bound for life and education;
My life and education both do learn me
How to respect you. You are the lord of duty;
I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband,
And so much duty as my mother shew'd
To you, preferring you before her father,
So much I challenge that I may profess
Due to the Moor my lord.

(Othello, I.iii.182-91)

Ironically, it is Cordelia alone, in refusing Lear's monolithic desire to retain her within his emotional and geographic boundaries, who insists throughout upon the exogamous definition of marriage. In this play, it is the father who subverts the conventions of patriarchy in defying its demand for male alliance through marriage. Unlike Leonato, who is eager to contract male alliance through marriage, Lear's terms demand an alliance with his daughter in spite of marriage. In Much Ado, Leonato thinks that Hero has chosen another over his choice, and he reacts accordingly. Cordelia's behavior, however, is completely consistent with the terms of exogamy, and thus Lear's response is bewildering in a way that Leonato's is not. In the comedy, Leonato's repudiation of his daughter hinges on the unclear circumstances of Claudio's rejection. We understand the source of Leonato's response even if we condemn it, attributing his credulity to the power of the male word in a patriarchal world. In King Lear, we need more to help us make sense of Lear's response, for he himself has tampered with the logic of patriarchy. His anger and pain are “irrational” in a way that Leonato's are not. In disowning Cordelia he testifies to the desires that inform his request: his love for her, his fear of losing her, his need to mitigate the pain of her departure. In this scene, rather than simply presenting a patriarch's control over a woman, Shakespeare investigates the incestuous possessiveness that exogamy counteracts; in demystifying the public forms that govern the exchange of women, he reveals the conservative emotional logic of those forms.

Shakespeare explores both the willful nature of political power and the politics of the family. Confronted with the emotional truths that Cordelia will not suppress, Lear continues to abuse his power as a king to protect his emotional investment as a father; as Coleridge puts it, “the inveterate habits of sovereignty convert the wish [to enjoy his daughter's violent professions] into claim and positive right, and an incompliance with it into crime and treason.” Lear has tried to phrase concerns of state in the disarming and beneficent terms of affective loyalty; conversely, in his rage he de-mystifies the nature of fatherly power to reveal its coercive, tyrannical potential. His last proprietary act as father over Cordelia is defied, and Lear's shaky acceptance of her marriage is undermined. He disowns her with the ruthlessness of a despot. As Cordelia has made it impossible for him now to “rest / On her kind nursery” (I.ii.123-24), Lear acts swiftly to insure that no other enjoys it. He tries to remove her from the reach of the two princes, his “Great rivals in our youngest daughter's love” (I.ii.46). Paradoxically, to keep Cordelia he must discard her, as the contradictions of patriarchy assert themselves once again.

Cordelia will take truth alone for her dower (I.ii.108), and she will marry pride (I.ii.129). Lear hopes that if she will not marry on his terms, she will not marry at all. Lear's slanders recall Leonato's, yet they are more powerful in their originality: “thou my sometime daughter … here I give / Her father's heart from her” (I.ii.120-26). Doing his best to make her unattractive, “her price … fallen. … / … Unfriended, new-adopted to
our hate, / Dow’r’d with our curse, and stranger’d with our oath” (I.i.198-205), Lear hopes to discourage Burgundy and France. Predictably, he succeeds in convincing Burgundy of her undesirability, but not France. Burgundy, confused by Lear's sudden violation of the social codes that should govern marital exchange and political alliance, demurs: “Pardon me, royal sir; / Election makes not up in such conditions” (I.i.206-7). Knowing that exogamy is an alliance between men, Burgundy knows that Cordelia “with [her father's] displeasure piec’d” (I.i.200) is an inappropriate conduit to such a relationship, and he cannot respond to Lear's terms: “I know no answer,” he says (I.i.202). He wins Lear's favor by refusing to become his son-in-law: “Come, noble Burgundy” (I.i.268). France, on the other hand, accepts Lear's unorthodox terms and responds in kind: “Thee and thy virtues here I seize upon, / Be it lawful I take up what’s cast away” (I.i.254-55). In terms of exogamy, France's action is not lawful, since Cordelia, “this unpriz’d precious maid” (I.i.261), is no gift, but a cast-off.

At the play's conclusion, stripped of his political authority, Lear also exchanges his public relationship with Cordelia for the private inclusive one his terms had urged:

... Come, let’s away to prison.
We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage.
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,
And ask of thee forgiveness. So we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies. ...

(V.iii.8-13)

Lear has found a metaphor and rhetoric properly expressive and has left the constraint of patriarchal forms behind. He greets Cordelia with “… as I am a man, I think this lady / To be my child Cordelia” (IV.vii.71-72); she is both lady and child, he both man and father, and in his bewildered conflation of roles he enunciates the emotional complexity of the father-daughter bond.

II

To identify the place of women in Shakespeare is frequently to describe the controlling artistic and patriarchal forms. Women are celebrated (if domesticated) in comedy; marginalized (if excused) in history; empowered (if destroyed) in tragedy—and are a subversive presence in each mode. A feminist critique, exploring the politics of gender, may also expose something about the politics of genre and reveal the implicit similarity between the authority of literary forms and the power of the cultural forms they represent. One of feminist criticism's greatest strengths is its ability to identify and analyze the workings of power structures—both the literary and the more overtly political—that define the roles of women in a culture. Lynda E. Boose notes that the subversive aspect of the daughter's role within the patriarchy of the family (in her necessary departure from the domain of the father) may be a lesser threat to patriarchal structures than the father's incestuous wish to retain his daughter in defiance of the cultural demand for exogamy:

Patriarchal ideology has always imagined that women—and especially the unstructured daughter—pose the ultimate threat to the maintenance of its control. But the real threat to patriarchy may not be the imputed female enemy at all. It may instead be the fathers themselves. To quell the menace of paternal behavior deviating from the authoritarian ideal, the cultural mythmaking apparatus seems to have continually needed to reify patterns of dictatorial, resolutely unsentimental fatherhood modelled into father-Gods and God the Fathers. By insinuation, the model is divinely sanctioned. The greatest menace to patriarchy would be the threat of the fathers rebelling against the archetypes they inherited. …26
In this formulation the culture's glorification of the father forecloses his potential for threatening exogamy and thus patriarchy. And if the real threat to patriarchal political structures, as Boose and Shakespeare's plays suggest, is the father's desire to contain the daughter within the parental family, then a critique of patriarchal power would be most effective in exposing the labelling of woman-as-subversive-agent, as an instrument engineered to idealize the father. Consequently, much of feminist criticism locates the sanctification of the father inscribed in various cultural texts, including Shakespeare's.

I am, however, arguing that Shakespeare himself works against this sanctification; his portrayal of fathers refuses to authorize patriarchal power. Shakespeare's fathers have a real difficulty (verging on inability) accepting their replacement by another in their daughters' affections, and as a result they abuse their political power over their daughters, confusing political and emotional needs, behaving coercively and destructively. It is a fairly simple (and by now unremarkable) activity of feminist criticism to discover the ways in which patriarchy is produced and reproduced in literature and in the world; it is, however, more difficult and perhaps more rewarding to move beyond identification of the ideological structuring of experience—as I believe Shakespeare does—to explore the emotional logic in human relations that generates such structures.

Kathleen McLuskie's "The patriarchal bard" attacks Shakespeare's collaboration with received cultural authorities. Her source study of King Lear finds that "the folk-tale of the love-test provides an underlying pattern in which harmony is broken by the honest daughter and restored by her display of forgiveness. The organization of the Shakespearean text intensifies and then denies those expectations so as once more to insist on the connection between evil women and a chaotic world" (p. 102). She assumes a mimetic relationship between play and world, although she does posit an incoherent patriarchal culture accessible to feminist criticism: "the text was produced within the contradictions of contemporary ideology and practice and … similar contradictions exist within the play" (p. 104). McLuskie finds a role for the feminist critic in searching out and exposing those contradictions in the play. For her, however, Shakespeare remains an adversary of the feminist project, neither questioning nor resisting the patriarchal culture from which he draws his plots. For her, then, literary production remains an imitative rather than an interrogative process.

Ironically, this assumption of Shakespeare's unproblematic relationship to his cultural sources recalls the patriarchal and essentialist model of literary transmission advanced by Harold Bloom, whose theory of poetic influence excuses Shakespeare from the battle of father-to-son poetic inheritance. Bloom argues that both the nature of his dramatic form and his lack of a strong precursor liberated Shakespeare from the anxiety that was to plague poets from Milton to the present. Shakespeare, rather, achieves "the absolute absorption of the precursor"; literary influence remains a process of (male) strife, in which an author's inevitable choices are either collaboration with the father or competition resulting in patricide, both of which re-gender (and re-gender) the oedipal configuration. Yet while Shakespeare's response to his literary predecessors may exhibit ingenuousness, clearly he is not exempt from or ignorant of the weight of literary precedent. Must the response to cultural authority be located in a combative, self-perpetuating totality that disallows the possibility of change? Shakespeare is not, by some quirk of literary history, free of anxiety, but rather he frees himself from it. Shakespeare makes this influence his subject, interrogating the power of patriarchy instead of guilelessly imitating it.

Like the daughters in his plays, Shakespeare defies the control of patriarchy, separating and individuating his own identity from that of his literary authority. This is not to say that Shakespeare stands as a daughter to his literary fathers; he does, however, strike an analogous relation to patriarchal influence to which the metaphor permits us access. In the daughters he creates and in the stormy necessity of their removal from the control of their fathers, he forges a critical perspective from which to view patriarchy, a perspective that need not replicate patriarchy's self-characterizations innocently or idealistically. If Prince Hal, while in Eastcheap, may be "sworn brother to a leash of drawers, and can call them all by their christen names" (I Henry IV, II.iv.6-7), he nonetheless realizes that he must be reinscribed within the patriarchal order and the order of the family. Upon his father's death he assures his brothers "I'll be your father and your brother too. / … Yet weep that
Harry's dead, and so will I; / But Harry lives …” (2 Henry IV, V.ii.57-60). While oedipal conflict demands a challenge of patriarchal authority, it is a temporary tension, for the son always becomes the father: if Oedipus kills his father, it is only to marry his mother and to take his father's place in the family order. Patriarchy demands, at least of its sons, its replication; its pressures are those of imitation. Daughters, on the other hand, must leave the control of the father and the emotional system of the family, limiting, as Cordelia does, the love that would contain them within family bounds, separating and differentiating themselves. In the departure of the daughter, Shakespeare realizes the limitation of the omnipotence of a certain kind of cultural authority, and thus provides us with the possibility of its revision.

In Much Ado, Shakespeare creates in Leonato a father whose authority we question. We see him caught in the inconsistency at the heart of patriarchy, and Hero's passivity serves only to accentuate his ambiguous position. Her very subservience works to de-idealize Leonato's fatherhood: she cannot bear the weight of the accusation directed against her, and, fainting, defies any attempt to paint her as a subversive presence in order to preserve Leonato's honor. Our knowledge that Hero did not in fact contravene her father and suitor's bond forces us to censure Leonato's belief in Claudio's accusation with, at the very least, indignation: he is unjust, disloyal, and too ready to sacrifice his love for his daughter to the ideal of male alliance. The omniscient and innocent patriarchal power, fully operative in the source, is de-idealized in Shakespeare's version and shown to be incapable of sustaining the emotional toll of exogamy.

King Lear works in a similar way to call into question our own assumptions about patriarchal authority, especially as it is manifested in the omnipotent form of monarchy. If anything, Lear is more manipulative than his prototypes, and, disowning Cordelia, he uses political power to further emotional ends. The misappropriation of one rhetoric for another reveals the coercive nature of a power that would represent itself as disinterested, innocent of desire and of emotional bias. Cordelia's denial of her father's request and her refusal to accept blame demystify Lear's glorification of his own omnipotence. What in the source is mere manipulation made explicable, if not excusable, by political circumstance becomes a power comprehensible only in terms of a tragic willfulness born of fear, of anger, and of a complicated love. Lear, like Leonato, abuses his authority. Shakespeare, in letting us see him make such a mistake, undermines our confidence in the power that we invest in kings and fathers.

Much like Cordelia, Shakespeare exposes and investigates the coercive pressures of patriarchy. Shakespeare does not become another patriarchal bard. He responds to his sources in a way that consciously rebukes and revises patriarchal authority; he does not transpose, unaltered or unjudged, the cultural propositions that generate the sources' unremarkable conclusions. And while he struggles to subvert his fathers, he does not do so only eventually to replace them in propagating their assumptions, because the form of his rebellion is not so much a categorical rejection of forms as an inquiry into our need for their construction. He does not replicate ideology; rather, he exposes its assumptions, forcing us to examine their emotional content, their source in human desire, and the loss and vulnerability they would work to prevent or deny. Shakespeare rewrites patriarchy, resisting its conclusions, revealing its idealized images of fathers as fictions constructed against the complexity of human desire. What perhaps made him attractive to his culture, and what continues to make him attractive to our own, is his interrogation of cultural orders. Shakespeare defies his literary fathers as the women of his drama resist patriarchy, and his subversion of cultural authority empowers their own.

Notes


4. Lenz, Greene, and Neely, p. 9.


6. See, for example, Coppélia Kahn, “‘Magic of Bounty’: Timon of Athens, Jacobean Patronage, and Maternal Power,” in Shakespeare Quarterly, 38 (1987), 34-57; Carol Thomas Neely, Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare’s Plays (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1985); Marilyn Williamson, The Patriarchy of Shakespeare’s Comedies, (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1986); and Rewriting the Renaissance: the Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe, eds. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986). Also exploring these issues were the papers presented at the session “Shakespeare and the New Feminisms,” held at the Shakespeare Association of America’s 1987 meeting, chaired by David Scott Kastan, who, in his opening remarks, described this “New Feminism” as “seeking to locate difference in the cultural and textual densities they explore, and … to disrupt the binary that has been constructed between feminism's largely psycho-social concerns and the historical political focus of (what seems to me an equally inadequately theorized) new historicism. The new feminisms reveal that gender and politics are reciprocally tied, each at least partially responsible for the other, and literature is recognized as a significant cultural locus for the production and reproduction, the articulation and interrogation of these constructs” (“The Cell and the Beehive”).


14. For further discussion of Lear’s proposal, as well as an analysis of the ritual structure of Shakespearean marriage, see Lynda E. Boose, “The Father and the Bride in Shakespeare,” PMLA, 97 (1978), 325-47.


17. All Shakespeare citations are from *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. David Bevington (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1980).

18. Carol Thomas Neely's suggestive discussion of this and other "deaths" of Shakespearean heroines concludes with a recognition of the significance of the "death" as a public event: "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" (*Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays*, p. 53).


26. *Daughters and Fathers*. Rubin also points out that Levi-Strauss argues that "the incest taboo should best be understood as a mechanism to insure that such [exogamous] exchanges take place between families and between groups” (“The Traffic in Women,” p. 173).


**Criticism: Feminist Criticism: Kathleen L. Carroll (essay date 1990)**


*In the following essay, Carroll examines two nineteenth-century American portrayals of Beatrice and contends that each reflects a different idealization of femininity.*

To nineteenth-century theatre managers, who believed in the play as a commercial venture rather than an aesthetic one, portrayal of the modern American woman presented a dilemma. Sophisticated theatre-goers, familiar with the rhetoric of the women's suffrage movement, looked to female role models for direction on how to maintain a delicate balance between independence and subservience: to project strength of convictions without loss of femininity (traditionally measured by male desirability), and to remain dependent on the economic necessity of marriage (Ziff, 278-80). Speculative theatre managers found Shakespeare's comedies especially adaptable to modern audience's tastes because the plays lacked stage directions, required no royalty payments, were exempt from copyright laws, and centered on ambiguous female characters. American audiences, believing they were becoming cultured, supported Shakespearean revivals, and strongly applauded those plays Americanized by theatre managers. Two late nineteenth-century productions of *Much Ado About Nothing*, one in 1882 by Henry Irving, the other in 1896 by Augustian Daly, clearly demonstrate how each speculative manager, acting in the name of art, refashioned Shakespeare's text and interpreted Beatrice around his own ideal of femininity, an ideal each believed American audiences would endorse.

Charles Shattuck has said that, “During the last quarter of the nineteenth century and throughout the Edwardian era, society in America … experienced an extraordinary intensification of woman-worship” (II, 93). This phenomenon, running concurrently with the women's rights movement, contradicted feminist thinking. The fashions of the 1890s—“party gowns with exposed, glowing shoulders, conspicuous bosoms,
constricted waists, swelling hips, and long sweeping trains”—demonstrate that “women were being dressed and paraded, coveted by men and envied by women, for their attractiveness as sex-objects” (Shattuck, II, 93). The Theatre Diary of Marie Elizabeth Jeffreys Hobart, a privately collected scrap book containing programs, photographs, and newspaper clippings, as well as private commentaries on the performances she and her contemporaries witnessed during the 1890s, confirms Shattuck's claim. Female stars and plays featuring these stars predominate the scrapbook's contents.

Mrs. Hobart witnessed both Irving's and Daly's Much Ado; the contents of her scrapbook reveal her preference for Daly's production, as well as her adoration of Ada Rehan. Living in an era when magazines and the theatre provided the basic reference source for feminine behavior, Mrs. Hobart and her companions religiously followed Ada Rehan's performances. Shattuck reports that “As public affection for Miss Rehan grew into almost a cult (and Daly's affection for her grew into a personal passion), Daly promoted her above everything else. His theatre became a temple where the people gathered to worship the beloved Ada, a secular Madonna” (95). Mrs. Hobart regularly attended Daly's “temple,” and her theatre diary reflects her interest in the stage portrayals of womanhood. Like other controlling theatre managers of his time, Daly, to suit his own commercial needs, shaped the image of femininity projected by Ada Rehan and adored by Mrs. Hobart and her companions. Within the annals of American theatre history, Augustin Daly holds a reputation as “autocrat of the stage” (Taubman, 114). To historians his reign, 1876 to 1899, symbolizes nineteenth-century theatre tradition: a theatre manager whose commercial ventures incorporated the American love of melodrama and popular character types; who endorsed the American practice of centering a play around a star; who Americanized foreign productions instead of encouraging native playwrights; and who firmly believed that in return for the “very large popular support [he] always received” his own generation deserved the opportunity of seeing the works of Shakespeare “in their best shape” (Felheim, 242, quoting Daly). Daly's critics have tended to deprecate his management style and his notions of stagecraft by insinuating that he modeled his theatre practices after those of Henry Irving (Felheim, 14). Although Daly denied these accusations in a letter to Winter, whom he commissioned to write the scripts for his Shakespearean revivals,1 he and Irving shared the common belief that they could stage Shakespeare better than Shakespeare himself.

To render Shakespeare into ‘his’ best shape, Daly (and Irving) rigorously inspected the texts to adjust “the decor to suit the poetry” and to eliminate all taints of bad taste—a standard determined “by an audience whose manners were dictated by fussy society editors” (Felheim, 234). To accomplish his goal, “Daly saw no harm in transferring speeches from one character to another” (Felheim, 236), meddling with lines and words, and rearranging scenes to give his featured performer stronger stage presence—a stage practice employed by Irving as well. These practices and beliefs justified Daly's 1896 production of Much Ado About Nothing, a rendition he announced would “secure from promptbooks the most approved rendering of the many disputed passages” (“Announcement of Daly's Opening,” 11). Daly's point of comparison was Irving's 1882 revival, a production that enjoyed three successful American tours in 1884, 1888, and 1894.

Since Shakespeare offers few explicit stage directions, theatre managers have traditionally taken the liberty of modernizing Shakespeare's characters into facsimiles of their own contemporary society. A comparison of the historical productions of Much Ado demonstrates this American (and British) practice and reflects the changing idealized view of femininity during the last decade of the nineteenth century. Staging Beatrice as either a strong-willed or a submissive woman determines audience interpretation of the play. How seriously Beatrice delivers her command to Benedick to “kill Claudio” as a sign of love for her determines whether the audience sees the play as a light-hearted comedy or a disturbing one, hinting at an underlying tragic tone. A half-serious, joking delivery of these lines would suggest that Beatrice is frivolous, flirtatious, and a submissive marriage partner; whereas, a strong, serious delivery would suggest a woman who believes in the power of her selfhood, one who will stand on equal footing with any man she marries. In the text Shakespeare cleverly balances the verbal exchanges between Benedick and Beatrice, distributing their verbal sparring equally between the two; and cleverly contrasts the Hero-Claudio marriage plot to that of Benedick and Beatrice. Female character strength or submission is determined by the performer's expressions, inflections,
actions and gestures—the stage directions dictated by the manager to render his desired portrait of Beatrice.

Traditionally *Much Ado* was staged as a comedy, and Henry Irving’s 1882 production was the most comic rendition of the day. Critics used this rendition as the standard against which they evaluated other productions. They measured the play’s success by how convincingly the humorous verbal wit swept over the tragic elements, or what these theatre managers called “the disputed passages.” Although Augustin Daly’s interest in rendering a different interpretation was primarily commercial, his refashioning of the play into a melodrama challenged Irving’s ‘authoritative’ version. Each manager interpolated the original to attain his goal; ironically, each manager claimed he was giving his audience the most authentic interpretation of Shakespeare’s text.

In 1882 Irving needed another Shakespearean production “to balance the programme for his forthcoming visit to America” and believed that *Much Ado* would “relieve the tragic gloom of the other plays he was taking with him” (L. Irving, 401). In this spirit, Irving included *Much Ado* in his repertoire and cast Ellen Terry as Beatrice. To effect the comic spirit, he “rejected entirely any suggestions of the capricious shrew” in Beatrice’s character and rendered Ellen Terry/Beatrice into a “personification of a pleasant-spirited lady—all mirth and audacious mockery—a stranger to melancholy” (L. Irving, 401). He downplayed the image of Beatrice as a disdainful woman, diminished the sincerity of her request to “kill Claudio,” and consequently reduced the significance of the uncomic affair of Hero and Claudio. The 212 nights the play ran before full houses indicate the audience’s enthusiasm for the play. Irving wanted to make Beatrice’s indignation rather comic. His promptbook demonstrates that he interpolated gestures and altered lines to maintain the image of Beatrice as a character lacking complexity—his “pleasant-spirited” lady is angry at Claudio, pities Hero, and hopes to win Benedick’s affections.

When Irving arrived in America in 1884, he brought a production of *Much Ado* that required a company of celebrities, artistic scenery noted for its “beautiful scenic effects,” and a production whose musical arrangement required an orchestra, military band, an organ, and a full chorus. To intensify the merry effect Irving “made the comedy almost an opera.” He concentrated on the capricious and witty verbal exchanges between Benedick (played by himself) and Beatrice to draw many laughs from his audience. Irving delivered Benedick’s jests with a “military bluntness”; he produced “strong comic effects when love leads Benedick to play the fop in his attire, and causes him to quarrel with Claudio.” Ellen Terry stressed Beatrice’s femininity throughout the play. She delivered the comic scenes with “airy graces and charming coquetry” (Fiske, “Review-1884”).

Benedick and Beatrice's verbal exchange begins when he greets her with “Well my dear Lady Disdain! Are you yet living?” (I.i.119). Irving pencilled in his promptbook that at this moment, Benedick “kisses her hand.” This gesture diminishes Beatrice's disdainful manner, for few men would kiss the hand of a scornful woman. Irving strengthens this initial portrait by including “hoo’s and Ah’s” throughout the verbal sparring in Act I. These merry additions suggest the characters on stage do not take the bantering seriously; the audience takes their cue from the characters. In Act II, the masquerade scene, Beatrice delivers her barbs to Benedick in disguise “with an airy grace”; Benedick, in turn, omits the most scornful lines describing Beatrice in his “O, she misus’d me” speech. After Hero's defamation in Act IV, when Benedick asks: “Is there any way to show such friendship?” Benedick “takes Beatrice's hand and kisses it.” Irving's stage directions imply he wants the “kill Claudio” scene to serve as pivotal in the realization of their mutual love. Benedick responds to Beatrice's ultimatum with “HA! not for the wide world,” and then “seizes her hand.” Irving interpolates lines and gestures into this disengagement scene: he seals each of his pledges by “kissing her hand”; to Benedick's line “I will challenge him,” he adds “by your will, by your bright eyes I will”; to “I must say she’s dead,” he adds, “as sure as I’m alive I will”; and he omits “And so farewell.” Irving added this gag because “many actors felt this scene lacked vehemence, and Benedick needed a more forceful disengagement” (L. Irving, 403). Irving's addition strengthens Benedick's and Beatrice's commitment; their mutual agreement on Claudio’s wrong becomes a reason to pledge their love. Irving manages to win the audience’s approval of this love match with
his “devouring eyes,” repeated embraces of Beatrice, and Beatrice's willing surrender to his approaches (Fiske, 1884). Their love continues to grow throughout the rest of the play. To remind the audience of their bond, Irving ends their exchange with Benedick's promise: “I will never love that which my friend hates.” At the end of the play, “Beatrice goes up stage to read and kiss his poetry and hide it next to her heart when the other characters move to the front for their final speeches” (Fiske, 1884). Irving's ending is complete; reviews highly praised the way he effected the happy ending.

American critics made Irving's 1884 production legendary. The Spirit of the Times stated: “We have not been accustomed to such complete representations of Shakespeare in this country; but having once seen them, our public will be satisfied with nothing else” (Fiske, 1884). The New York Times hailed the production as “one of the best dramatic achievements of its time” (Review of Much Ado, 14 November 1884). Reflecting the woman-worshiping terminology to which Shattuck refers, a critic for the New York Times extolled Ellen Terry's performance: “Superlatives have long been exhausted. In our judgment, it is one of the new impersonations which justify the use of superlatives … there has never been a more radiant, mirthful, sunny Beatrice than this one, so fair of person, so musical in her speech, so true to her womanhood in all the merry episodes of her love story” (“Review of Much Ado,” 12 March 1885). According to Laurence Irving, no critics detected Irving's interpolations in the church scene. “No doubt his delivery of the offending line (‘as sure as I’m alive I will’) was so forceful that Shakespeare, himself, might have been persuaded he had written it” (403). American critics continued to endorse this production as “one of Shakespeare's loveliest comedies” and as late as 1895 praised Irving's third American revival for “softening in effect the brutality of its central incident … with no loss of either truth or vigor” (“Review of Much Ado,” 5 December 1895). The laudatory American reviews determined that this British production established a standard for evaluating all other productions. Much Ado should be staged as a light comedy, and Beatrice should be feminine, flirtatious, loving, and submissive.3

Ellen Terry's memoirs note she never played Beatrice as she felt her. In these lectures on Shakespeare, she described Beatrice as a proud woman, not vain, who “recognizes an element of truth in what Hero and Ursula say about her” in the arbor scene. She disagreed with Irving's use of the scene as a moment to reveal Beatrice's happiness at the discovery that Benedick loves her. Terry also stated that Beatrice's realization scene should be “charged with passion of a strong, deep heart”; however, she delivered the lines with “emotion,” “not passion” (Terry, 87). She further disagreed with Irving's plan to make Beatrice's indignation in the church scene comic. Mr. Lacy, an “actor of the old school” who was engaged by Irving, was quite serious when he explained to Miss Terry: “When Benedick rushes forward to lift up Hero after she has fainted, you ‘shoo’ him away. Jealousy, you see. Beatrice is not going to let her man lay a finger on another woman.” Terry's reaction was: “Oh nonsense Mr. Lacy,” to which he retorted: “Well, it’s always been done … and it always gets a laugh” (Terry, 95). Ellen Terry refused to follow these directions and finally managed to convince Irving to drop this action, but failed to convince him to drop the ‘gag’ he interpolated into the end of the church scene, the gag “hallowed by tradition” (L. Irving, 403).

Although most of the male critics highly praised Irving's submissive Beatrice, Terry's comments imply that she questioned Irving’s interpretation that the marriage of Benedick and Beatrice should be a foregone conclusion from the start of the play. Nina Auerbach, in her recent biography, Ellen Terry: Player in Her Time, demonstrates that the actress used indirect strategies on stage to protest playing her roles in the way Irving envisioned them. When Terry disagreed with Irving's interpretation, her “impulse was to drown her plays in laughter … she used laughter to fight and transcend the roles she was given” (277). However, as his leading lady, she adapted Irving's stage personality to the roles she was assigned and subordinated herself to his “self-obsessed performances.” As an actor in the company he managed, Irving centered his productions around himself and reduced equally important roles to supporting roles. In Much Ado, where Shakespeare equally balances the verbal exchange between Benedick and Beatrice, Irving downstaged himself by delivering his exchanges “in a slow and stately manner” (Memoirs, 115, 172) and arranged the set design to give himself primary visibility to the audience. Ellen Terry became an “ornament of Irving's theater … the
visual power of her presence was so overwhelming that it obliterated her performance” (Auerbach, 195).

At the Lyceum Terry never received equal billing with Irving. When they toured America, Irving revised the program layout to give it to her: “American democracy claimed to be enlightened about women … its intelligentsia was ostentatiously conversant with feminist ideas; Ellen Terry was presented to America as Irving’s proud equal and was billed accordingly (Auerbach, 194). But in the actual performance Irving continued to claim centrality. From her subordinated position in his theatre, Terry enviously looked at Ada Rehan and the acting opportunities given to her in Daly's company. In her Memoirs Terry “wistfully” describes the acting combination of a leading actor and actress, John Drew and Ada Rehan, in contrast to her own situation: “With what loyalty he supported Ada Rehan! He never played for his own hand but for the good of the piece” (Memoirs, 225, quoted by Auerbach, 235). In Ada Rehan, Ellen Terry believed she saw an actress given all she was not—boy's parts (Rosalind and Viola—characters she longed to play, but could not because they did not fit Irving's image of womanliness), and the opportunity to play Shakespearean heroines in the way she felt they were written to be played.

Terry overlooked the similarities between herself and Rehan. According to Auerbach, “Ada Rehan is Ellen Terry in reverse” (236). Like Terry, Rehan's stage self was created by Daly to meet the needs of his productions and to represent his audience's tastes, but unlike Terry, she was playing for “liberal” American audiences who applauded productions championing the “New Woman.” On stage Ada Rehan represented to Terry (and to the audiences she played before) the possibilities for women. In reality both actresses intuitively understood the underlying resentment in Beatrice's character, and her disdain for female powerlessness in patriarchal societies.

In Shattuck's view: “It was only through Ada Rehan … that [Daly] found the perfect means of self-expression that he craved” (II, 54). Graham Robertson implied that Daly must have been “a great actor who couldn't act” (Shattuck, 54). When John Drew, Daly's leading actor, left the company, “Daly had no choice but to stake his fortune on Miss Rehan” (Shattuck, 57). William Winter, the senior drama critic in New York, adored her and believed in Daly's decision wholeheartedly. His reviews, which “defined … femininity in terms exactly typical of a woman-worshiping American gentleman of the day,” defended the images of womanliness Daly presented to his public (Shattuck, 100). Mrs. G. H. Gilbert, a loyal member of Daly's company as well as a New York Times drama critic, claimed that Ada Rehan also believed Irving's interpretation of Beatrice was “too simple.” Mrs. Gilbert even stated that “Beatrice is the reason for Daly's [1896] revival” (Gilbert, 8). According to the critic, Ada Rehan saw Beatrice as a “strong-willed, complex character—a woman capable of strong love and hate—mentally developed among her feminine associates, not to be called sweet or coy or dainty, yet not lacking in the graces of gentle womanhood” (Gilbert, 8). Needing a powerful role in which to cast his leading lady, Daly commissioned Winter to rework Beatrice into a prototype of the American New Woman and decided to center the play on her.

The American New Woman became a popular character type on the American stage during the 1890s. Ibsen's A Doll House, a favorite among New York intellectuals, played to packed houses in 1891 at the Garden, Lyceum, and Harlem Opera House, and reopened in Hoyt's in 1895 (Hornblow, 233). In a letter of 21 November 1894 to Daly, Sydney Rosenfield, one of his playwrights, expressed his desire to write a play of this kind that would star Ada Rehan: “I am pregnant with an idea for a 'strong woman's play'—Before I sit down in cold blood to write it, I want to have its goal in immediate contemplation. I have Ada Rehan in view for the part” (Rosenfield, “To Augustin Daly”). Rosenfield's suggestion would have appealed to Daly, who was plagued by internal problems among his company. Many actors were leaving because Daly adhered to strict company policies. Even Ada Rehan, his close friend, leading lady, and alleged mistress, had a disagreement with him in the summer of 1894. She agreed to remain with his company only after he agreed “to star her and to pay her a salary commensurate with her improved status” (Felheim, 31). In 1896 Daly assigned William Winter the task of refashioning Much Ado to star Ada Rehan. Winter chose to utilize the same techniques that had brought Daly's 1887 revival of The Taming of the Shrew popular acclaim.
Following the nineteenth century tradition of refashioning Shakespeare to suit what managers perceived to be the tastes of their audiences, Daly had hired Winter to tailor the plays and to write the commendatory prefaces for his adaptations (Felheim, 220-21). Winter insisted that a performance should be “relieved wherever possible” so as to last no more than three hours; should exhibit “good taste” by elimination of vulgar language; and should be pared of superfluous descriptive passages that impede the action (Felheim, 221). Winter exhibited no compunction when he centered The Taming of the Shrew around Ada Rehan. He metamorphosed the play into “the taming by the shrew” and delayed Rehan's entrance until the second act, at the highest pitch of the performance—a technique he repeated in Much Ado (Felheim, 240-41). Rewriting Much Ado at a point when Daly's company had been “weakened by death and desertion,” Winter modeled this adaptation after the earlier success, a highly popular production continually brought back “as a means of reviving [Daly's] fortune after a failure” (Felheim, 262, 239). Hoping for a New York success to replenish a dwindling bank account, Daly, with the assistance of Winter, attempted to give the American public all he believed to be fashionable in New York theatre: a lavish production of Shakespeare that bordered on melodrama, with a popular star cast in the role of the modern woman.

In the Commendatory Preface to Much Ado, Winter defends his and Daly's interpretation against Irving's. His 1884 review of Irving's production commends Miss Terry's performance but finds her sarcasm superficial: “She is nothing harsher than a merry tease … after the arbor scene she drops all flippancy and grows into tender and loving womanhood. A more fascinating personality than this Beatrice could not be wished; and Miss Terry's method of expressing it is marked with pliant, effortless power and absolute simplicity” (Winter, Commendatory Preface). To substantiate Daly's interpretation, Winter views Beatrice as “high-spirited” rather than “pleasant-spirited”; “complex rather than ‘simple,’” and as a character whose “remarks are extremely diverting … [but] no more sapient than other women, once her heart is touched” (Winter, Commendatory Preface). She scorches the necessity in herself of longing for love and disdains the conventional assumptions toward marriage suggested by Claudio's proposed marriage arrangement to Hero. He identifies the wedding scene as:

the great moment of the play, for Beatrice is that of her prodigious, passionate, unspeakable resentment of the awful insult that is offered to the poor and gentle girl whom she so tenderly loves. It is as if all womanhood were incarnated in her single person, to rebuke, humiliate and punish the arrogant injustice of man. Women, usually, are the sternest censors of other women; but women at their best may well admire Beatrice, for she is all woman and the splendid champion of her sex. (Winter, Commendatory Preface)

According to Winter, Ada Rehan conveyed the ideal Beatrice to her audience. Daly's promptbook reveals how he effected this portrait.

Daly opened his Much Ado with the messenger-Leonato exchange up to line 30. The script then jumps to line 96. Beatrice is not on stage until Hero draws attention to her entrance. After the men exit, Beatrice and the messenger backtrack to the exchange that begins at line 30, “I pray you, is Signior Mountanto return’d from the wars?” Hero assumes Leonato's lines, so all attention focuses on Beatrice. The scene continues with few other changes to line 95. However, at the entrance of Don Pedro, Claudio, and Benedick, the dialogue moves ahead to line 162 and continues to the end of Act I. Then Beatrice reenters, saying “I wonder that you will be talking Signior Benedick, nobody marks you,” and Benedick greets her with “What, my dear Lady Disdain!” (ll. 116-17). Their dialogue ends at line 145, where Don Pedro clears the stage for the new end of Act I. Daly's rearrangements interrupt Shakespeare's witty exchange between Beatrice and Benedick to maintain Beatrice's centrality. She has the first chance to deliver her venomous lines while defenseless Benedick remains off-stage.

In II.i.51, Beatrice delivers her “Yes faith, it is my cousin's duty to make cur' sy and say Father, as it please you. … Father as it please me” in a “mocking tone;” stage directions indicate she should emphasize the
Beatrice sharply contrasts with the demure Hero in this scene. She will not subscribe to her uncle's orders. After Hero and Claudio's betrothal, stage directions indicate Beatrice should tap Claudio on the shoulder as she says “Speak, Count, 'tis your cue,” then loudly sighs as Claudio says to Hero, “Lady, as you are mine” (ll. 305, 308). In this same scene she says “Heigh-ho for a husband!” in a mocking tone (l. 320). All of these gestures clearly communicate to the audience where Beatrice stands on the issue of arranged marriages—she will follow no man's orders.

Of Rehan's interpretation of Acts I and II, Gilbert, in her New York review of the play, says that “Beatrice more than half means what she says, when she declares she'll never wed. It seems possible she may fall in love with Benedick, but she is surely heart-whole in the first encounters with that valiant and loquacious soldier.” For Beatrice to be convincing in this play, she must realize her own sentimental possibilities. Gilbert says that at the masked ball, Beatrice reveals tenderness and sympathy … at the news of Hero's betrothal—she appears the loving elder sister more than half pitying Hero for being so early doomed to captivity, yet recognizing her fitness for wifehood. Miss Rehan shows the beginning of change when she summons Benedick to dinner, and delivers her soliloquy at the end of the arbor scene with “strong passion”; she regrets her cruelty and shows pity and sympathy.

By III.i. the audience sees two dimensions to Beatrice's character; both reach a climax in the church scene where she shows her love for Benedick as well as her hatred for Claudio. Daly omits the pre-nuptial scene in Hero's bedroom, apparently because this scene shows Beatrice's physical vulnerability, which is inconsistent with the image the audience should have acquired in the first three acts.

William Winter called Rehan's rendition of the church scene the moment where she crowned her triumph by a magnificent outburst of passion—not turbulent, nor combative, not hysterical, but that of a woman's outraged mind and suffering heart—which while it impelled the dramatic action swiftly to a brilliant climax, it also operated to illuminate the whole character and to disclose it as intrinsically the soul of womanlike virtue and honor (Commendatory Preface).

Since Daly planned to make Hero representative of the powerless female and Beatrice her spokesperson, he needed to interrupt the balance of the scene. Unlike Irving, who reduced the seriousness of Beatrice's lines and characterization, Daly interpolated lines and gestures to draw the audience's attention toward the passion and sincerity of Beatrice's lines and to reduce the power of Benedick's.

At IV.i.65 stage directions indicate Beatrice should “fix her glare” on Don Pedro when he says, “I stand dishonor'd, that have gone about to link my dear friend to this common wanton, here.” Her glare as well as Daly's alteration strengthen the audience's awareness of the implied irony of his lines, while the connotation “common wanton” justifies Beatrice's readiness to attack. At line 209, after Leonato asks “What shall become of this? What will we do?” Beatrice kneels before the altar, apparently praying for mercy. When Benedick professes his love to Beatrice, he kneels before her as he says, “I lov’d nothing so well as you.” These interpolations work to heighten Beatrice's character on stage. When she delivers “Kill Claudio,” Gilbert says “she means the lines … that is the price of her love.” Gilbert reports that the audience “gasped at Beatrice's vehement utterances,” demonstrating they realized the tragic force of Rehan's delivery. As Beatrice delivers her two “O that I were a man” speeches, she again looks fixedly at Benedick. This look implies that if Benedick is a man he will kill Claudio. Beatrice becomes more tender-hearted when Benedick accepts her challenge. To ensure that the audience would understand his acceptance as submission to Beatrice, Daly revised from line 331 to the scene's end, intertwining Irving's emendations with his own:
Bene: I will challenge him.
Beat: You will!
Bene: I will kiss your hand and
so leave you. By this hand, Claudio shall render me a dear account.
Beat: You will challenge him!
Bene: By these bright eyes I will!
Beat: Kiss my hand again!
Bene: As you hear of me, so think
of me; and so, farewell.
Beat: Kill him! Kill Claudio!
Bene: As sure as he’s alive
I will.

Although Daly’s loyal supporters commended Ada Rehan’s performance, Shattuck notes that a New York Post review of 24 December 1896 “said Miss Rehan never really ‘got into the skin of Beatrice;’ She fell back upon her old impersonation of Katherine the Shrew, and ‘imparted a bitterness, not to say a rudeness, to the sallies of the fair disputant which does not belong to them’” (quoted by Shattuck, 89).

Both Daly and Irving’s renditions of Much Ado demonstrate the liberties managers have taken with Shakespeare's folio text under the claim of art. While proclaiming to have a more artistic sense of the play than the originator, managers like Daly and Irving were capitalizing upon American audiences’ innocence as well as their social belief that culture could be purchased. In the eyes of these managers the theatre was a commodity, not an art form; in the eyes of the public, art was a commodity. Theatre revenue records indicate that Americans, believing they were becoming cultured, supported these disembowelments of Shakespeare; in turn, they expected the performances to reflect their social world.

Since managers traditionally took the liberty of making Shakespeare identifiable and understandable for their society, examination of Shakespearean stage history provides insight into the conflicting perceptions of femininity on the American stage. The historical tradition of staging Much Ado as a comedy implies that stage directors have ignored the underlying complexity of Beatrice’s character. In America (and England) Much Ado continued to be staged as a comedy, until Gielgud’s 1952 production permitted “the sincerity of the scene between Benedick and Beatrice to be realized,” when Gielgud’s “low-toned, disbelieving” first refusal to “kill Claudio” eliminated the usual laugh (Campbell and Quinn, 567). Although Gielgud was not the first to challenge the traditional comic interpretation, his production is credited by Campbell and Quinn as the first to examine the underlying complexity of Beatrice’s characterization. Producers and directors follow this precedent today when reviving Much Ado.

Augustin Daly clearly was not a feminist. His artistic ideal was corrupted by personal and commercial motives. Nevertheless, he did experiment with strengthening Beatrice’s characterization and giving her stronger stage presence. Like his contemporary, Irving, he used his leading actress to project to American audiences a portrait of femininity he perceived would be compatible with the expectations of 1890 theatregoers. In contrast to Irving, he attempted to draw attention to the underlying complexity of Shakespeare’s female characters. By refashioning the text to suit his purposes and his audience’s tastes, Daly successfully staged Beatrice as an identifiable role model for American audiences. He failed to keep his interpretation grounded in Shakespeare’s folio text; yet, his vision of Beatrice looked forward to modern revivals of Much Ado—a vision modern producers have found obvious within the text.

Notes

1. “My style of management,” he wrote, “has not been an imitation of anyone else's. That precision of detail, luxury, completeness of surroundings and general unity of company and performance which was found so fascinating in Irving’s performance, was inaugurated by me in 1869, ten years before Irving began his career as manager” (Felheim, 15, quoting Daly).
2. William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, as arranged for the stage by Henry Irving and presented at the Lyceum Theatre on Wednesday 11 October 1882 (London: Cheswick Press, 1882). This promptbook is in the Folger Shakespeare Library. Irving's stage directions and interpolations are pencilled in the text. All of Irving's stage directions, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from this promptbook. Line references refer to the play as published in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans.

3. Not all Americans were blinded by Irving's textual infidelities. On 30 March 1885, an anonymous “student of Shakespeare” in a Letter to the Editor of the *New York Times*, criticized American critics for not commenting upon Irving's lack of respect for the text: “I simply am astounded that none of the good students of Shakespeare in this good city of Gotham have seen fit to comment upon this addition to the divine William's lines” (anonymous letter, 30 March 1885). The author is referring to the “gag hallowed by tradition” at the end of the church scene.

4. William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing: A Comedy in Five Acts*, as arranged for production at Daly's Theatre, and privately printed for Mr. Daly, 1887. This text is part of the Folger collection. Daly's stage directions, rearrangements, and interpolations are printed as part of his text. All of his stage interpolations are taken from this text. Line references refer to the play published in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans.

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Criticism: Feminist Criticism: Roy Battenhouse (essay date 1991)


[In the following essay, Battenhouse criticizes Claire McEachern’s interpretation of patriarchal issues in Much Ado about Nothing, particularly for its lack of consideration of the play’s Christian aspects.]

My aim in this brief essay is to sketch an alternative to Claire McEachern's recent depiction of Shakespeare in “Fathering Herself” (SQ 39:269-90) as a critic of patriarchy. His portrayal of fathers, she writes, “refuses to authorize patriarchal power” (288). She offers her analysis as a contrast to that of Kathleen McLuskie, another feminist who dislikes patriarchy. In McLuskie's view Shakespeare was enbondaged to the patriarchal assumptions of his culture; an essay of hers has dubbed him “The Patriarchal Bard” to warn readers against an alleged anti-feminism in his art. McEachern, on the other hand, would insist that Shakespeare “forges a critical perspective from which to view patriarchy” (289).

Now insofar as this approach seems to promise some attention to the difference between faulty patriarchy and true patriarchy, it sounds attractive to me. But alas, it turns out that for McEachern all versions of patriarchy become problematic. Even the patriarchally ordered happy ending in Much Ado is regarded as dubiously satisfactory and “highly ironic” (280). Why so? Apparently, because McEachern reads patriarchy as an unstable social construct “founded in a profound contradiction” (273). In her view, the term is only a “rubric” which conflates two conflicting “systems.” One involves ruling the family and the other a negotiating of male alliances. The contradiction between those, she asserts, is “at the heart of patriarchy” and is what Shakespeare explores (273).

I shall test this contention by examining the patriarchy of Leonato in Much Ado. McEachern's discussion of Leonato relies on a terminology borrowed from modern sociology and psychoanalysis. I hope I may be pardoned for suggesting that these tools may be inadequate for grasping Shakespeare’s assumptions.

First, permit me a few words about comedy. As I see it, comic action includes both a happy ending and some intermediate exhibits of human folly and foibles. In Much Ado the funniest moment for me is the wedding scene fiasco, for here the comedy of human folly has its most spectacular display. A deluded groom rejects his bride, not quietly and in private, but at the church altar, where he shouts at her bewildered father:
There, Leonato, take her back again
Give not this rotten orange to your friend.

(4.1.30-31)

Disregarded is the girl's modest testimony of innocence. Her accuser parades as the exposer of false seeming. “O what authority and show of truth,” he exclaims, “Can cunning sin cover itself withall!” (34-35). But note the dramatic irony: this speaker's own rhetoric unwittingly points his proverb at himself. For what is as comic as a speaker who intertemperately denounces intemperance, while he credits hearsay yet refuses to hear? His folly is particularly out of place in a church, since the Bible, in Leviticus 19:16 and Matthew 7:1, forbids slander and blind judgment.

The response by Leonato is equally absurd. He believes Claudio's “show” and duplicates it. Rejecting his own daughter, he talks wildly of wishing to strike at her life. “Death is the fairest cover for her shame” is his comment when Hero faints on the floor. “Help, uncle!” her cousin Beatrice cries out, but only the sensible clergyman answers with a timely “Have comfort, lady.” Leonato is wholly absorbed with self-pity. Lamenting ever having loved Hero, he cries: “Hence with her, let her die.” This lack of fatherly concern is as shamefully ludicrous as Claudio's lack of loverly concern.

The comedy is enhanced, let me note, by the metaphors with which Shakespeare lets these high-society fools expose their versions of duty. Claudio vows to

\[\ldots\text{ lock up all the gates of love}\]
\[\text{And on my eyelids shall conjecture hang.}\]

(104-05)

Leonato cries, “Do not ope thine eyes” (122). To prefer closed eyes and conjecture is contrary, surely, to both husbandry and fatherhood. Through further details Shakespeare reveals the illogical reasoning of these rash judges. Claudio trusts the testimony of a “ruffian” who confessed to a thousand secret vile encounters with Hero (90-94). Is it sensible to believe a ruffian? A moment later when Beatrice is called on for testimony, she reports having been the bedfellow of Hero every night but one in the past twelve months (147-48). That should make evident that Hero has been belied. But Leonato is bent comically on a dark imagining of the one night outside Beatrice's knowledge. Grasping at this straw of non-evidence, he declares Claudio's charge “Confirmed! Confirmed!” Bogus reasoning is an old staple of comedy, and surely Shakespeare counts on his theatre audience to laugh at it here.

I have sketched the scene's comic aspects so that I can now appropriately ask how much awareness McEachern has of these. She doesn’t mention any of them when discussing the “critical perspective” she credits Shakespeare with providing on Leonato. Rather, she tells us that Shakespeare is forcing us to be indignant at Leonato:

Our knowledge that Hero did not in fact contravene her father's and her suitor's bond forces us to censure Leonato's belief in Claudio's accusation with, at the very least, indignation: He is unjust, disloyal, and too ready to sacrifice his love for his daughter to the ideal of male alliance.

(290)

I would say, instead, that our native understanding of a father's normative responsibility prompts us to feel a huge amusement at Leonato's topsy-turvy version of fatherhood. We see him as the victim of his witless
imagination, making much ado about nothing. To say that he “sacrifice(s) his love for his daughter to the ideal of male alliance” seems to me inaccurate. Actually he is repudiating love, not sacrificing it, and he makes no mention of “male alliance” as his ideal. His ideal here, I would infer, is simply to maintain his honor in the public eye and in his own estimate. He is, like Claudio, a shallow man overly concerned for worldly reputation. He therefore falls into and duplicates what later he will repent of and oppose as Claudio's “fashion-monging” unmanliness (5.1.95). Momentarily, Leonato is Fashion's fool, as I read him.

But from McEachern's pages one would never guess that Shakespeare intended any comic element in these characterizations. His aim, she tells us, was “to expose the potentially destructive emotional logic of patriarchy” (275). Leonato's rhetorical lament that “mine I loved, and mine I prais'd / And mine that I was proud on” (135-6) she diagnoses as “shockingly narcissistic” (276). And then she proceeds to associate this narcissism with “the power of his love for his daughter,” his having taken “the risk of loving her,” and “patriarchy's radical investment in the affective order of the family”—all of which Shakespeare is presenting as “the ideological confusion” of the patriarchal system (276). Leonato's “fatherly love for Hero,” we are told, is in conflict with “his social need for male honor” (277). When he interprets Hero's blush as guiltiness, “It is as if Hero's very body is marked by the competing demands of patriarchy” (278). His rejection of her “testifies to his radical possession of her, a possession inappropriate to comedy and to exogamy alike, however psychologically understandable” (278). “In order for the play to end in marriage, Leonato must … acknowledge the necessity of granting his daughter's alterity” (278).

This medley of explanation seems to me mostly a loose jargon that is wide of the mark. Why equate fatherly love with narcissism? Further, I can see no evidence that Leonato's predicament is due to the competing demands of patriarchy. Family order and exogamy were both respected by him when he gave Hero to Claudio in Act Two. And in this match, made with her full consent, there was no possessive scanting of her “alterity.” I see the real cause of the ensuing trouble, rather, in the limited horizons of Leonato and Claudio. When I hear Claudio hail his betrothal with the comment, “I give away myself for you and dote upon the exchange” (2.1.295), his doting strikes me as signifying a superficial understanding of love and marriage. And Leonato's equally superficial understanding is surely signaled by his comment to the Friar as the wedding party gathers at the church: “Come, Friar Francis, be brief—only the plain form of marriage, and you shall recount their duties afterwards” (5.1.1-3).

The here-neglected particular duties, as the play's final outcome will make clear, turn about a faithful caring for the loved one. Without this religious dimension, a husband's (or a father's) love can lapse into a worldly concern for fashionable appearances. Fashionable “apparel,” appearances, is what we hear Borachio discoursing on in a key passage of the play (3.3), where he equates it with what is “nothing to a man” but deforms him. Fashion, says Borachio, turns its followers into giddy gentlemen. As examples he cites Pharaoh's soldiers (who drowned in the Red Sea), the god Bel's priests (who served thievish appetite in the guise of piety), and the shaven Hercules (when he lapsed from virtue). Each of these examples is an icon of moral faithlessness—two of them, let us note, from the Bible. All three illustrate moral manhood betrayed into an action of vanity. And is not this what Shakespeare lets us see Claudio and Don Pedro and Leonato fall into? It takes a faithful friar to rescue the faithless Leonato and turn him into a proper patriarch.

The contribution of the Friar, let me point out, is threefold. First, he persuades Leonato of Hero's innocence by pointing to testimony in her face and eye which he, by virtue of his calling in “divinity,” can read. Secondly, he proposes a remedy for rescuing the broken marriage through a strategy of funeral rites to awaken remorse in Claudio for the “death” he has caused. And thirdly, he comforts the lady with an adage that encapsulates the mystery of Christian wisdom: “Die to live.” On this basis he grounds his hope that “This wedding-day / Perhaps is but prolonged” (4.1.252-3)—that is, made longer so it may be more lasting. As later events reveal, the friar himself will preside at the wedding which fulfills this hope by bringing a resurrected Hero to a penitent Claudio. That outcome not only provides the joy and wonder proper to comedy; it also reveals the “gracious” context that underlies Christian marriage in contrast to (and in correction of) the unreliable “grace
of mortal men” which fashioned the match made in Act Two. (Cf. R3 3.4.96: “O momentary grace of mortal men, / Which we more hunt for than the grace of God!”) More than “male alliance” is involved in a Christian marriage. Leonato, by cooperation with a “holy friar” (5.4.57), has become a fatherly mediator of a heavenly grace.

Theological categories, unfortunately, are outside McEachern's realm. I think it significant that the _only_ reference she makes to the friar is to quote the lines in which he correctly interprets Hero's blushes as innocence. In McEachern's view, it is Benedick who prompts a change in Leonato. “As Benedick is part of the male world he [Leonato] wishes to join,” she explains, “his endorsement of Hero's innocence allows Leonato to retract his rejection of his daughter” and exchange the vocabulary of narcissism for that of a chivalric protector (279). “In the distant, idealizing stance of the chivalric champion, Leonato can love Hero and learn to release her,” while the “macho” aspect of the challenger allows him to recover social honor (279). He appropriates “a courtly rhetoric … in which fathers are made archaic.” Shakespeare thus “re-idealizes the patriarchal system,” yet “in terms so highly artificial that they make us conscious of their presence and of the emotional life they would dissemble” (280). Further,

Disguised, and given in marriage by her uncle, Hero is safely removed from Leonato; the father is doubly replaced: first by Antonio and finally by Claudio. Leonato is relegated to spectator, … and in the macabre fantasy of Hero's death Shakespeare insists upon the costs of constructing and maintaining the patriarchy. … Leonato's arrival at the posture of patriarch is labored and highly ironic, requiring a suggestion of tragedy that can never be fully dismissed by the high artifice of a happy ending.

I have quoted lengthily from McEachern in order to indicate the flavor of her analysis. Her precise meaning I find elusive. But what she seems to be saying is that Leonato's revised patriarchy becomes highly ironic because it is achieved at the cost of displacing himself. Also, that the symbolic death of Hero is a “macabre fantasy” of tragic cost, which makes the play's comedy problematic. McEachern does not perceive, evidently, that the only cost to Hero is that of suffering an adversity with patience (as does Hermione in _The Winter's Tale_), thereby demonstrating her hidden virtues of faith, hope, and charity, on which any lasting happy ending depends. Nor does this critic notice that Leonato is carrying out the friar's “Look for greater birth” (4.7.212) when he gives Claudio a “penance” to reeducate him as soon as the play's wise-fool watchmen have demolished Claudio's foolish trust in his own righteousness. For if the marriage is to be mended, Claudio must not merely feel remorse for the loss of “Sweet Hero” (as he does at 5.1.245); he must also undergo a symbolic death—in his case through contrition, confession, and satisfaction, stages paralleling the penance of church ritual, as R. G. Hunter noted in his chapter on _Much Ado_ in _Shakespeare and the Comedy of Forgiveness_ (1965). Claudio receives Leonato's forgiveness only when he accepts sight-unseen, as a final proof of good faith, the substitute bride Leonato grants him, namely, Hero's hidden self. McEachern's modern feminism apparently nullifies her ability to appreciate this kind of comedy.

I have noted deficiencies in McEachern's analysis in order to point up at the same time the Scriptural rootage of Shakespeare's sense of comedy. The gospel remedy of a penitential dying to an old or worldly self and the gospel “mystery” of a resurrection that overcomes slander inform the ending of _Much Ado_. Earlier, Claudio's and Leonato's absurd infidelity have as a glossing commentary the Bible's paradigms of Pharaoh's soldiers and Bel's priests. And then the untangling of this predicament involves St. Paul's paradox in 1 Corinthians, that the worldly-wise are fools who can become truly wise only by becoming holy fools. Chris Hassel's _Faith and Folly in Shakespeare's Romantic Comedies_ (1980) has explored the presence of this Pauline paradox in several of Shakespeare's comedies, and Barbara Lewalski in 1965 aptly cited 1 Corinthians 1:27 as pertinent to _Much Ado._
Nowadays Hassel's book, and R. G. Hunter's on the forgiveness motif, and Nevile Coghill's 1951 essay on “The Medieval Basis of Shakespearean Comedy,” emphasizing its Christian premises, seem routinely bypassed by researchers. Why? Perhaps because the Bible is too subtly pervasive a source to be easily noted, or perhaps because our attunement to Biblical allusions is disappearing. If we pay attention to religious dimensions, McEachern's reducing of the play to a critique of patriarchal power is somewhat askew. It is not the power of patriarchy that is on trial, but rather the good sense of Leonato. We see him become utterly ludicrous when he lets his love of reputation turn him into an unfatherly father, echoing thus Claudio's lapse into an unlovelier lover for the same shallow reason, an addiction to the fashions of the world which pass away, as Christians ought to know from 1 Corinthians 7:31. Providentially, these fools get rescued from their folly by the wisdom of Messina's clergyman, aided indirectly by the town's simpleton watchmen who can intuitively recognize evil on hearing its voice even though they fumble in naming it. The play as a whole is continually amusing by its exposure of human foibles, and a genuinely happy outcome is attained when, by a friar's counsel, Leonato grows into a self-effacing patriarch who fulfills fatherhood's true role. Whereas McEachern supposes the play's ending to be an ironic re-idealizing of patriarchy, readers capable of a traditional Christian sensibility either in Shakespeare's day or our own can recognize it as patriarchy's true actualization by a triumph of faith over fashion.

Notes

1. It is pertinent that Benedick is compared with Hercules by Beatrice when she is upbraiding him for lack of manhood, in 4.1.316: “… manhood is melted into cur’sies, valor into compliment, and men are turn’d into tongue, and trim ones too. He is now as valiant as Hercules that only tells a lie, and swears it.”

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Criticism: Order And Disorder: Karen Newman (essay date 1985)

Many readers of Much Ado about Nothing have remarked that its tragicomic pattern sets it apart from Shakespeare's other romantic plays and links it with the so-called problem comedies. I want to turn finally to Much Ado because it brings us full circle to Measure for Measure. Unlike the threatened tragedy of Measure for Measure, however, the tragedy of Much Ado is apparent rather than real. Things appear to happen; all the characters at one moment or another are seduced into believing in appearances, and its two plots are linked by this common theme of credulity and self-deception. Readers of both plays have been troubled by the uneasy union of vehement and lifelike passions with the conventions of comedy, in Much Ado in 4.1, and in Measure for Measure in the shift from the first three acts to the last two. Of Much Ado, J. R. Mulryne complains that "the unlovable Claudio is too vividly and realistically portrayed (in the manner of a figure in tragedy)." Tillyard argues of Measure for Measure that the change to the conventions of comedy from the "more lifelike passions is too violent" and that the bed trick is not "a case of modern prudery unaware of Elizabethan preconceptions but of an artistic breach of harmony." Shakespeare's persistent use of substitution, disguise and the language of mistaken identity in both plays establishes from the outset comic expectations in the audience which are ultimately fulfilled, but as Jean Howard has recently argued of Measure for Measure, the play strains and distorts a comic paradigm Shakespeare had used many times before, and in so doing calls attention to the way in which any set of conventions, generic or otherwise, can betray its basic function of mediating between audience and author to create lifelike illusions and becomes instead a sterile mechanism inadequate to its task.

She goes on to claim that Measure for Measure is an experiment in which Shakespeare attempts to escape from conventional comic formulas without losing his audience's "power to comprehend." Though I find this view persuasive, I would like to qualify it by suggesting that the "problem" of Measure, and that of Much Ado as well, is not so much the inadequacies of art and its conventions "to create a satisfactory illusion of lifelike complexity," but the uneasy union of the traditional comic plot designed to call attention to artifice, coincidence and wonder, with the conventions of realistic characterization, particularly the rhetoric of consciousness. In Much Ado, 4.1, and in Measure for Measure, Shakespeare uses such conventions so forcefully that our willingness to accept the artifice of their comic plots is undermined. Instead of extending the metaphorical power of mistaken identity by shifting its emphasis from plot to character, from external to psychological or internal mistaken identity, Shakespeare undermines our comic expectations by exaggerating the conventions of lifelike characterization in these plays. In Much Ado, Claudio is presented as a type common to Shakespeare's comedy, the courtly lover, but in 4.1, Shakespeare endows him with an inner life which conflicts with the type. So also in Measure for Measure the conventions of realistic characterization Shakespeare uses in portraying Angelo and Isabella conflict with the duke's intrigue plot. The "problem" of the two plays is not real passions versus comic conventions, as is so often claimed, but two kinds of opposing conventions, one which calls attention to itself and its artifice, the other which conceals itself by seeming "real."

There are, of course, obvious differences between the two plays which make the labels romantic comedy and problem play appropriate. Much Ado does, after all, have the strictly comic plot of Beatrice and Benedick, which embraces rather than disapproves of sexuality; it has Dogberry and the watch strategically placed to assure us that all will be well instead of the problematic Duke whom Lucio slanders and whose improvisations with Ragozine's head seem uncomfortably forced. And Much Ado ends with the marriage of its lovers, not with a judgment scene in which the Duke calls for and administers an Old Testament vengeance to Lucio and proposes marriage to the silent Isabella. But we need to look first at Shakespeare's portrayal of Claudio before we can compare Much Ado and Measure for Measure and assess their similarities and differences.
In *Much Ado*, Claudio mistakes Hero’s true nature, discovers his error, and believing it has caused Hero’s death, must atone for his “sin.” Mistaken identity provides the means whereby both the mistake and Claudio's subsequent development is communicated to the audience. Like so many comic heroes, Claudio must lose in order to find. This fundamental pattern, which we have seen elsewhere, is juxtaposed with Beatrice and Benedick's parallel discovery of their mutual love.

Claudio's character, like Angelo's, has always seemed to trouble readers of *Much Ado*. Cynics claim he woos Hero for her money; romantics counter that his query about Leonato's family stems from timidity and embarrassment. It is perhaps anachronistic to fault Claudio because he asks about Hero's financial expectations, for even the cynical Benedick believes his friend's devotion is real. But our discomfort with Claudio's repudiation of Hero in the church scene is less easily dismissed. Before we consider 4.1, however, we need to look at how Shakespeare introduces Claudio and establishes the romance plot.

The play's first lines present Claudio as the courtly ideal: “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” (1.1.12-15). His falling in love with Hero is equally conventional. Before she utters a word, he loves her, and though not at first sight, from the moment of seeing her after his return from the wars. His language is that of the courtly lover: “In mine eye, she is the sweetest lady that ever I looked on” (ll. 174-75). He asks “Can the world buy such a jewel?” (l. 168), and as his verb suggests, he betrays a mercantile attitude toward love. Claudio needs assurance that others value his “jewel of price” and seeks confirmation of his love from Benedick.

Don Pedro's offer to woo Hero for Claudio triggers the first “suppose” of the play. A servant overhears this conversation, reports it to Leonato, who then believes Pedro woos Hero for himself. Claudio in turn believes Don John's tale of Pedro's love for Hero so that the action of the masked ball, as many have noted, prepares for the villain's intrigue by demonstrating Claudio's credulity and lack of self-confidence. His excessive idealism, untempered by compassion or by the sense of play which characterizes Beatrice and Benedick, explains how he can be duped by Don John's disguise plot. Though he participates in the game of gulling the two would-be lovers, he hasn’t the imagination to include play in his own lovemaking.

John Anson argues that the balcony scene is a fantasy enactment of Claudio's own fears and subconscious desires which he displaces onto the object of his idealized passion. Just as Don Pedro indulges Beatrice and Benedick in a fiction which corresponds to his own secret wishes, so his brother Don John indulges Claudio in a vision of his ambiguous desires: a lustful Hero whose sexuality both attracts and repels. The vehemence of Claudio's public slander, his “public accusation” as Beatrice condemningsly calls it, testifies to that same excess of passion which made him idealize his beloved. Claudio has no sense of human weakness and therefore responds with selfish cruelty to the disappointment of his imagination. His world is an imaginative construct which has encompassed reality by halves—only its romance and none of its frail humanity. His sense of self is so dependent on his imagined ideal vision of love that when that vision is disappointed, his own identity is threatened. We in the audience are doubly aware of his lack of human compassion because we know Hero is falsely accused. Her “sin” endangers him because on some level it corresponds with his own repressed desire.

Neither the historical argument that the Elizabethans expected such a public repudiation, nor the attempts to excuse the count's behavior at the church on the grounds of a lofty idealism and disgust toward sexuality, exonerate Claudio. Most readers agree with Chambers that “Claudio stands revealed as the worm that he is.” His rejection of Hero is somewhat roundabout, a combination, it would seem, of his own desire for a shocking revelation and the bystanders', particularly Leonato's ignorance. Shakespeare casts the opening interchange into the “plain form of marriage” so that Claudio seems to comply with a code even in his repudiation. When the friar asks if he comes “to marry this lady,” the count says no, but he is interpreted by Leonato to be quibbling over the way in which Friar Francis poses the question. Claudio lets this interpretation stand. After another such exchange, he takes over from the friar and proceeds with the ritual forms himself, but his
questions are as misleading as his earlier responses. His ambiguous question at 4.1.26-27, with its ironic reference to Hero as “this rich and precious gift,” and Pedro's similarly deceptive response, allow Leonato once again to misinterpret his intentions. Finally, Claudio openly repudiates his bride, but his compliance with the ritual forms of the ceremonial occasion confirms our sense of the count's character as bounded by conventional codes.

Having returned Hero to her father, Claudio's anger and passion break forth. The emphasis shifts from the ceremonial occasion and its ordained participants—priest, father, bride and groom—to Hero herself. The demonstratives (“this rotten orange, that blood, these exterior shows”) and the appeals to the audience (“Behold,” “all you that see her”) bespeak the count's determination to achieve an effect. Again Leonato misinterprets Claudio's words, for he believes the young man himself to have “made defeat of her virginity.” Claudio's claim of bashful sincerity and comely love brings Hero's innocent but unfortunate reference to “seeming,” which prompts his passionate denunciation. Critics have noted the similarity between Claudio's language here and that of Hamlet and Othello:

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.

(4.1.56-61)

Claudio focuses in these lines on Hero rather than the assembled audience, a change which makes his feelings seem more intensely personal and less determined by forms and codes. Shakespeare uses the rhetoric of consciousness to endow Claudio with an inner life that breaks the confines of literary convention and ceremonial decorum. Instead of the courtly lover of the previous action, he becomes an individual of psychological complexity whom we both pity and despise. His description of Hero is based on the paradoxical contrast between what she seems and what he knows she is: “Her blush is guiltiness, not modesty” (4.1.41). The irony is that the opposite is true, for what “seems,” is, and what he “knows,” is false. As in earlier speeches in which we find such rhetoric creating an inner self, paradox and antithesis represent Claudio's divided mind. Though addressed to Leonato, the series of questions beginning at line 69 are rhetorical and establish the pronomial contrast between “I” and “you.” They also situate Claudio firmly in the moment and the real world, a necessary feature of dialogue. The count makes of Hero two persons, a Diana and a Venus, “most foul, most fair” (l. 103), and this divided Hero represents in language the poles of his own divided self. His lament, “O Hero! What a Hero hadst thou been” betrays genuine emotion. Here he is oblivious to family and friends, preoccupied with feelings, not forms. From an excess of idealism in love, Claudio is transformed into a suspicious misogynist who knows himself no better than before. Until he learns how he has been deceived, he cannot know himself, recognize his failures, and love properly.

Friar Francis restores sanity and reason to the impassioned scene of denunciation by recognizing Hero's honesty and by proposing still another “suppose,” her feigned death. He argues the fundamental comic perspective of losing to find:

for it so falls out
That what we have we prize not to the worth
Whiles we enjoy it, but being lack'd 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,
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 liv’d indeed: then shall he mourn—

(4.1.217-30)

The friar understands that Claudio has loved the idea of Hero; when the count learns of his mistake, he says “Sweet Hero! Now thy image doth appear / In the rare semblance that I lov’d it first” (5.1.245-46, emphasis added). Friar Francis expects to transform Claudio's imagination and lead him to a more just judgment of Hero, but the “idea of her life” never has time to “sweetly creep / Into his study of imagination.”

Immediately following the scene in which Claudio learns of Hero's death, Benedick gives his challenge. Critics have been disturbed by the jesting in this scene, but Claudio's callousness would not claim our attention had Shakespeare not set up expectations for his development which are never met. Friar Francis's prediction that the count will mourn Hero “though he thought his accusation true” leads us to expect a repentance like Flamminio's in Gl’Ingannati where Lelia's beloved condemns his past behavior even before he learns of her love and loyalty. Even more important, our sense of Claudio's inner life, of his passionate disappointment, genuine emotion and divided mind, leads us to expect a different, more feeling response to the news of Hero's death. Though there are sound theatrical reasons for delaying Claudio's response to the more dramatic moment of confrontation with Leonato after Borachio has confessed the crime, the count's heartlessness is troubling because it fails to fulfill our expectations for the comic plot.

If we compare Shakespeare's presentation of Claudio with that of Beatrice and Benedick, we can see how he extends the convention of mistaken identity to add depth and interest to their characters, but without transgressing the carefully defined limits of their comic plot. In Benedick's soliloquy in 2.3, immediately preceding the eavesdropping scene, Shakespeare presents a character already aware of love's transforming potential. Speculating on Claudio's transformation, Benedick remembers how his friend had once “no music with him but the drum and the fife, and now had he rather hear the tabor and the pipe” (ll. 13-15). He questions his own identity, wondering whether he may, “be so converted and see with these eyes?” “Yet I am well,” he repeats, trying to convince himself. The modal verbs he uses are shall and will, not should and would, future rather than subjunctive; his language betrays his openness to loving Beatrice.

Pedro, Leonato and Claudio present Benedick with the strong evidence of Beatrice's attachment he needs to admit his love. The deceivers spend very little time talking of Benedick's scorn. Instead, they recount the signs of Beatrice's love: she is up twenty times a night to write to him, beats her heart and tears her hair. Hero even fears she may do herself harm. They wish Benedick “would modestly examine himself, to see how much he is unworthy so good a lady” (2.3.200-201). And that is exactly what he does. The ease with which Benedick is “converted,” or in the language of the play, “caught,” makes it clear how close to the surface his love has been: “Love me? Why, it must be requited” (ll. 215-16). In his previous soliloquy he asks “can I be so converted”; here he has been converted indeed. Benedick is willing to change: “Happy are they that hear their detractions and can put them to mending.” His vision altered by knowledge of Beatrice's love, Benedick now begins to interpret her differently. What was once judged quarrelsome is now thought loving. His notion of himself and of her has changed, and consequently her words have different meanings.

Despite this change, his character still conforms to the broad outlines of a comic stereotype, the miles gloriosus. His boasting of success with women and his martial reputation connect him to the miles tradition just as Claudio's language and actions have connected him to the tradition of the courtly lover. After the slander of Hero, when he and Beatrice admit their love, Benedick's avowals imply his martial talents: “By my sword, Beatrice, thou lovest me,” (4.1.272) and “I will swear by it that you love me, and I will make him eat it that says I love not you.” But unlike the Plautine braggart, Benedick is truly a martial hero and his
engagement to Beatrice to fight Claudio is real. In Benedick Shakespeare has created an individual character who is also a comic type, a talent for which we should remember Donatus and other commentators praise Terence.

The deceit of Beatrice presents a very different fiction. Hero and Margaret emphasize not Benedick's love, but Beatrice's disdain. They exaggerate her scorn for the opposite sex, describe her derision of a man's love and compliment Benedick's worth and valor. Their fable portrays a Beatrice whose wit protects her from emotional involvement. The deceits perpetrated by the other characters satisfy the individual needs of each other: Benedick's fragile ego needs the safety of Beatrice's love in order to admit his own; Beatrice's fear of male domination makes her scorn love. Her soliloquy, like Benedick's, is filled with rhetorical questions, paradox, and the juxtaposition of past, present and future, all features of dialogue. But there are significant differences in the two lovers' speeches. Beatrice speaks in verse, and the shift to poetry, the first she uses in the play, marks the liberation of her desire. Whereas Benedick wonders whether he can change and love Beatrice, she questions whether or not he loves her. Their individual responses bear out the differences in the way they are gullied: Benedick through his self-love; Beatrice through her “wild heart” which makes her fear domination by men.

Even with these visions of the other's affections, however, it takes the heightened emotion of the church scene, an impossible moment for their usual self-protective repartee, for Beatrice and Benedick to let down their defenses and admit their mutual love. When Leonato tells them they were “lent eyes to see,” he telescopes the way in which the play juxtaposes mistaken identity with mistaken insight. Mistaken identity, role-playing and alternate identities are therapeutic instruments which lead the characters to self-knowledge, for these comic devices are not simply tools for developing plot, but springboards for experimentation whereby men and women escape from self-delusion to the self-understanding which enables them to live and love.

Comic decorum, which dictates the lovers' conversion to love, also prohibits Claudio's being made into a tragic figure who undergoes a psychologically “real” development. He cannot, argues M. C. Bradbrook, be “allowed more than a pretty lyric by way of remorse.” Critics have claimed that Claudio's behaviour can best be understood within the context of a Decameron-like story, but as we have seen in 4.1, Shakespeare endows him with a psychological complexity in excess of what such a plot requires. No reading of the play can excuse the brutality of his treatment of Hero, but the conventional comic action does demand that he be forgiven. When he learns of his mistake, Claudio asks of Leonato, “Impose me to what penance your invention / Can lay upon my sin; yet sinn’d I not / But in mistaking” (5.1.267-69). But for Shakespeare, mistaking is enough; the play asserts that the sins of ignorance and credulity have consequences as dire as Don John's sins of will. Claudio's explicitly religious penance at Hero's tomb, though only sketched, is a conventional means of dramatizing his movement through sin and confession to repentance and self-knowledge. Though certainly a “pretty lyric,” Claudio's lines also unite Much Ado with the dark comedies and late romances in their emphasis on ritual forgiveness.

Much Ado about Nothing richly deserves the frequently drawn comparison with Measure for Measure. Just as the intensity of Angelo's appetite for Isabella and her vehement rejection of her brother's plea to live threaten our sense that comic conventions are adequate to our experience of that play, so Claudio's repudiation of Hero in the church scene, and his untractable unwillingness to conform to Friar Francis's comic vision of losing to find, trouble our satisfaction with Much Ado's comic resolution.

In both Much Ado and Measure for Measure, the careful balance between the conventions of comic plotting and those of lifelike characterization which Shakespeare maintains in his earlier comedies is upset. The rhetoric of consciousness which he employs adds depth and complexity to his comic characters and to the convention of mistaken identity, extending it from a plot device to a means of representing character development on stage. This inner life receives an emphasis more characteristic of tragic than of comic drama.
In the criticism of tragedy, comic intrusions were once called “comic relief,” but both the pejorative term itself and its correspondingly reductive view of such scenes in tragedy have been rejected in favor of a larger claim for the tragic vision, its expansiveness and complexity. A similar prejudice has troubled the criticism of Shakespeare's comedies, and to a limited extent those of his predecessors. Too often, critics have judged his use of a deliberative mode of comic characterization as a kind of bumbling intrusion of the tragic into comedy, whether in terms of Renaissance readers and audiences such as Sidney and Johnson, who labeled such plays “mongrel tragicomedy,” or modern Shakespeareans who criticize Claudio's outburst in the church scene, or the problematic generic status of Measure for Measure.

Angelo is, of course, more interesting and complex a poetic creation than Claudio. In part this difference can be explained in simple quantitative terms—Angelo has a much greater portion of the lines and share in the action of Measure for Measure than Claudio has in Much Ado, in which the displacement of the main plot maintains our sense that the “ado” is about “nothing.” But there are more significant differences. Shakespeare's portrayal of Claudio as courtly lover is less interesting than that of Angelo as ascetic and judge. Angelo is not bound by the conventions of type character which Shakespeare found so useful in creating Claudio and making his gullibility believable. Most important, of course, is Angelo's self-consciousness, the recognition of his own shortcomings and failures which Shakespeare renders so vividly in the soliloquies in 2.2.167ff. and later in 2.4.1-30. By making Angelo self-conscious about his desire for Isabella, by having him debate its merits and consequences, Shakespeare creates a complex comic character who arrests our imaginations.

Generic complexity is a feature of Shakespeare's dramatic practice, and as Rosalie Colie has argued, of Renaissance habits of reading and writing generally. Many have remarked that the comedies and romances contain within them tragic actions; recently, Shakespeareans have identified comic matrices in the great tragedies. I have argued that the generic boundaries of characterization are as flexible in Shakespeare's dramaturgy as those of plot and structure; because he often uses deliberative strategies common to tragic characterization within the dramatic boundaries of his romantic comedies, we perceive his comic characters as complex and lifelike.

**Criticism: Order And Disorder: Gavin Edwards (essay date 1991)**


[In the essay that follows, Edwards considers Much Ado about Nothing as “a play much preoccupied with … the narrative ordering of human life.”]

The relationship between life and stories about life has exercised a number of philosophers, theologians, literary critics and experimental novelists in recent years. Barbara Hardy, who has already made an important contribution to these discussions, now draws our attention to Shakespeare's interest in the 'narrative motions' of the human mind (‘Shakespeare's Narrative: Acts of Memory’, E in C, XXXIX. ii. April 1989, pp. 93-115).¹

A leitmotif of Barbara Hardy's analyses has been that works of narrative art reflect and explore the everyday (and night) activities of the human mind: narrative form is derived from rather than imposed upon real life. With the intention of countering this view Louis Mink has argued that stories are not lived but told. Life has no beginnings, middles, or ends; there are meetings, but the start of an affair belongs to the story we tell ourselves later, and there are partings, but final partings only in the story. There are hopes, plans, battles, and ideas, but only in
retrospective stories are hopes unfulfilled, plans miscarried, battles decisive, and ideas seminal. Only in the story is it America which Columbus discovers.\(^2\)

Mink and Hardy would undoubtedly agree that the retrospectiveness of stories goes deeper than the fact that most of them happen to be told in the past tense. But Mink—like Sartre's Roquentin—wishes to identify an element of bad faith or sleight-of-hand at the heart of narrative. If beginnings only exist in retrospect then stories, which seem to begin at the beginning, can only do so by silently anticipating the retrospective view. The essence of narrative plotting, argues Peter Brooks, is 'the anticipation of retrospection'.\(^3\) Louis Mink is of course arguing, against Hardy, that life is one thing and story another; but it is clear from his examples that the processes he describes—the anticipation of retrospection, the retrospective construction of the past as prelude to the present—are endemic in human mental life even if (as he claims) they originate in our experience of storytelling.

Barbara Hardy's emphasis on Shakespeare's interest in retrospection, anticipation, and the anticipation of retrospection—'We look before and after, look before at looking after, and after at looking before'—prompts a fresh look at *Much Ado About Nothing*, a play much preoccupied with anticipation, retrospection, and the narrative ordering of human life.

Early on in the play Claudio tells Don Pedro how he has come to love Hero:

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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.
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To which Don Pedro replies:

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Thou wilt be like a lover presently
And tire the hearer with a book of words.
If thou dost 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 begans't to twist so fine a story?
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(I. i. 277-91)

Don Pedro's rhetorical question ('Was't not to this end … ?') echoes the bringing together of beginnings and endings in Claudio's ‘When you went onward on this ended action’. Of course by ‘end’ Don Pedro means purpose and anticipated consequence, rather than terminal point, but these meanings cannot be clearly separated since the anticipated consequence will be the terminal point of the autobiographical story Claudio has started to tell. In any case, part of Don Pedro's meaning is that Claudio's story constructs the past conveniently as prelude to the present and to the desired future: the story, Don Pedro suggests, is an essentially retrospective view of the events it describes.

One thing which makes it easy for Claudio to present his life as a story is that he thinks of it, in a wholly conventional way, as constituted by what Jacques in *As You Like It* calls ‘ages’: a human life is a finite sequence of distinct episodes or stages, with a beginning and an end.\(^4\)
What might lead Don Pedro to see Claudio’s story as indeed too much like a story to be wholly true is the way in which it repeats itself. Claudio starts by describing his early liking for Hero, a plain fact about his past that we have no reason to doubt. Then the fact of this past liking is repeated: Claudio is telling us that his present ‘desires’ are ‘saying I liked her’. There are two ways we can take this repetition. On the one hand what his new desires are telling him can be believed because it echoes what Claudio himself has already presented to us as a fact. On the other hand, since the whole story is being told by the man who is feeling these new desires, the repetition may damage the initial claim: perhaps it is only now, in retrospect, that he believes he used to like Hero, the story conveniently fabricating the past as antecedent to the present. Now that the audience and Don Pedro hear the end of Claudio’s autobiographical sentence do we all start to doubt, in retrospect, the beginning? Perhaps, as Mink says, ‘the beginning of an affair belongs to the story we tell ourselves later’, but we cannot be sure.

Don Pedro makes his point via a traditional association between story-telling and spinning (the association that gives us ‘yarn’ and the ‘thread’ of a story). What his use of this metaphor leaves tantalizingly open is whether all stories are deviously retrospective (that is to say, morally twisted) or only some are.

The play presents certain kinds of fairly uncomplicated anticipation. The schemes devised to cause Beatrice to love Benedick, Benedick to love Beatrice, Claudio to hate Hero, and Claudio to love Hero again, obviously involve an anticipation, on the part of the schemers, of the likely consequences of the deceptions practised on their fellows. Furthermore, Shakespeare is clearly interested in the variable relation between the expected results and the actual results when they arrive. The schemes to get Beatrice and Benedick in love with one another are successful; the anticipated and the actual outcomes co-incide. Similarly, Don John the Bastard is correct in his anticipation of the effect on Claudio of overhearing what the latter takes to be evidence of Hero's infidelity, but because the truth does eventually seep out via Dogberry and Verges his scheme is foiled.

The eventual failure of Don John's plan may also have something to do with the Friar's scheme to get Claudio back in love with Hero. It is this scheme of the Friar's which is in many respects the most interesting of all. The extent of its success is hard to assess, and partly for that reason it makes us think especially hard about the relation between anticipation and retrospection.

After the climactic episode in which Claudio ruthlessly throws his wedding into reverse by giving Hero back to her father, Leonato the Friar suggests the swift conversion of Hero's broken nuptials into her mock funeral. ‘Pause awhile’, he says to the despairing Leonato and Benedick,

And let my counsel sway you in this case.
Your daughter here the princes left for dead,
Let her awhile be secretly kept in,
And publish it that she is dead indeed;
Maintain a mourning ostentation,
And on your family's old monument
Hang mournful epitaphs, and do all rites
That appertain unto a burial.

‘What shall become of this? What will this do?’ asks Leonato. The Friar argues that this course of action

well carried shall on her behalf
Change slander to remorse; that is some good:
But not for that dream I on this strange course,
But on this travail look for greater birth.
She dying, as it must be so maintaine’d,
Upon the instant that she was accus’d,
Shall be lamented, pitied, and excus’d
Of every hearer; for it so falls out
That what we have we prize not to the worth
While we enjoy it, but being lack’d 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 apparell’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.
Let this be so, and doubt not but success
Will fashion the event in better shape
Than I can lay it down in likelihood.

(IV. i. 200-236)

What Barbara Hardy says of Shakespeare—‘As he imagines memorial, he looks ahead to contemplate recall’—is true here of Shakespeare's Friar, except that neither the memorial nor the recall are the Friar's own.

All the schemes in the play anticipate an alteration in the victims' feelings; but the Friar's scheme specifically anticipates the effect on Claudio's feelings of his seeing Hero's life in retrospect, as a remembered and ritually memorialised person. One consequence of this is that our own temporal experience, as readers or spectators of this dramatised story, can be drawn into the play's investigation of temporality in an especially complex and puzzling way. We are led to ponder what Hardy calls ‘the process through which events and persons are turned into narrative’.

Is the Friar's scheme successful? Is his anticipation of the effect on Claudio of retrospection accurate? There is no easy answer to these questions. In some respects the scheme works and in some respects it doesn’t, and our sense of where the balance lies will alter as we proceed through the play from Act IV, Scene 1. As the play unfolds we are surely prompted to remember the Friar's initial speech differently or to remember different parts of it, altering our recollection so as to make the past a plausible prelude to a changing present. These are processes in which all readers and spectators are always involved, but we may become unusually conscious of them when, as in this case, they are also the subject matter of what we are reading or watching.

The Friar anticipates that when Claudio hears of Hero's death he will not only feel remorse but, caught up in the public rituals of memorial, will come to idealise her life even 'though he [still] thought his accusation true'. But in fact when Claudio hears of Hero's death he does not change his feelings about her. At this point in the play therefore we must conclude that the Friar has anticipated the future incorrectly, although we may at the same time remind ourselves that the Friar did also seem to hedge his bets by allowing that things might not turn out as he anticipated. A few scenes later however, after he has learned that Hero is innocent as well as (he believes) dead, Claudio does come to do and feel exactly what the Friar anticipated. He goes to Hero's family monument, reads the 'mournful epitaph' hung upon it and engages in those 'rites of burial' which cause him to ponder and idealise 'the idea of her life' in precisely the way the Friar suggested that he would.

The Friar anticipated that Claudio would think well of Hero again because he would be affected by her supposed death; in fact he is affected by her supposed death because—discovering that his accusations against her were not true—he thinks well of her again. Nevertheless, as Claudio engages in rites of mourning at Hero's family monument readers and spectators are likely to revise their judgement both on the accuracy of the Friar's anticipation and on their own earlier assessment of that anticipation. We may at this point forget
that the Friar was ever wrong in any respect (forget that reality has reversed the sequence of cause and effect envisaged in his scheme), or we may consider that he was only partly wrong. We may also retrospectively revise our understanding of that later section of the Friar's speech in which he appeared to hedge his bets:

Let this be so, and doubt not but success
Will fashion the event in better shape
Than I can lay it down in likelihood.

This, we can now believe, is exactly what has happened. The degree to which the event has diverged from the anticipated event actually increases, in this later retrospect, our sense of the Friar's wisdom. After all, the Friar's scheme is based on his insight that things seem (are?) different after the event from how they seem before or during the event. And if this insight is to be taken seriously it must apply to the Friar himself just as much as to the other characters in the play. So to be really consistent and wise the Friar must say, as a correlative to his scheme, that it may well work out quite differently (better or worse) than anticipation can forecast.

As we have seen, none of the play's other schemes aim to alter feelings by forcing their victims to see things retrospectively. Nevertheless, the alteration of feelings which these other schemes successfully effect does itself prompt retrospection—on the part of the characters whose feelings have been altered, and on the part of readers and spectators.

When Beatrice is left alone after she has overheard the conversation between Hero and Ursula about Benedick—the conversation which Hero and Ursula plan she should overhear—she says:

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 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.

(III. i. 107-116)

By saying ‘maiden pride, adieu’ Beatrice is announcing that she is moving from one stage of the female life-cycle to the next stage, but she is doing more than that. She is acceding—in a way she has always aggressively refused to do before—to the notion that human life is indeed a cycle, a sequence of prescribed stages or episodes in which individuals play a succession of parts or characters with predictable characteristics. She now sums up her previous recalcitrance, her unconventionality, as merely one kind of conventional behaviour, ‘maiden pride’. This categorization of herself is explicitly retrospective; and this is not surprising since the notion that life is a sequence of prescribed stages is more congenial to people at some stages—later stages—of life than at others. Adolescents do not usually think of themselves as adolescents and young people do not normally start youth clubs. It is when Beatrice sees herself as a woman who will be married that she quickly defines her previous behaviour, in which she stood out against marriage, as characteristic of an earlier episode in a temporal schema, as the prelude to this very different next episode.

Benedick's response to overhearing the conversation between Leonato, Claudio and Don Pedro—a conversation he is meant to overhear—is rather more complex. Like Beatrice he reconciles what he now feels with what he used to feel by linking them as predictable episodes in a narrative sequence, but his retrospection also involves the memory of anticipation:
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. 227-35)

In railing against marriage Benedick had not in fact argued that he would die before he reached that stage of life: he had not spoken as if life was necessarily made up of such prescribed and obligatory stages. He had resisted his friends' anticipation of the title ‘Benedick the married man’. But he now explains his previous attitudes in just such terms and commits himself to a conventional narrative view according to which a person's life is made up of linked stages in which one plays the part of ‘bachelor’, ‘married man’, ‘youth’, ‘age’ and so on. Nevertheless, Benedick's final remark here—‘when I said I would die a bachelor, / I did not think I should live till I were married’—has an interestingly paradoxical air. Benedick's formulation somehow acknowledges that it may not now be possible even to understand the point of view from which he used to see life. His altered mental landscape has put the place he used to live quite out of sight. To reconcile his past and his present attitudes by allocating them to two contiguous stages in a necessary and universal process of growing up is perhaps a form of self-deception forced upon the world by those who conform to it.

As Beatrice and Benedick are pushed into falling in love with one another, we ourselves, as readers and spectators, may well find ourselves reinterpreting the protagonists' present affection as the inevitable and predictable outcome of their previous hostility. In the Introduction to his Penguin edition of the play, R. A. Foakes argues that ‘the tricks practiced on [Beatrice and Benedick] to make them fall in love merely bring into the open what is already implicit in their attention to each other’. Beatrice and Benedick do not claim this themselves of course; nevertheless Foakes is, like them, being drawn into interpreting the past as prelude to the present, interpretations more subtly retrospective than any of them realise.

The idea that the love between Beatrice and Benedick was latent in their previous mutual hostility is of course ethically convenient. The uncomfortable similarity between the benign deceit which brings Beatrice and Benedick together and the malign deceit of Don John which temporarily drives Claudio and Hero apart is easier to accept if you are convinced that the former only draws out a love latent in the relationship from the start. Some feeling of this kind is surely inevitable, for any reader or spectator, but so is a degree of scepticism about this feeling—a realization that their bantering hostility could, in other circumstances, have continued, or turned to indifference, or to hatred, or to friendship.

To speculate in this way about how a relationship might have turned out is itself bound to be problematic. As Stephen Greenblatt says,

> theatrical performance is distinct from most other social practices insofar as its character is predetermined and enclosed, as it forces its audience to grant that retrospective necessity was prospective: the formal necessity disclosed when one looks back on events that have already occurred was in fact the necessity disclosed in the existence, before the performance itself, of the script.

Some (though not all) of the feeling, shared by R. A. Foakes with many other critics, that Beatrice and Benedick were destined for one another from the start, must derive not from the particular character of their relationship but from the fact that it is a relationship in a story of a particular kind: a comedy. Correlatively, to say that ‘in other circumstances’ their relationship could have turned out differently can only mean ‘in another play’ or—as Greenblatt puts it—in a performance where the actors ‘forget their lines or blurt them out before their cue or altogether refuse to perform’.
Some people believe that the retrospective view has a privileged relation to truth and that the predetermined character of stories only reveals the narrative order that underlies the apparent confusion—or freedom—of real life. And we do not need to accept that philosophical position to see that there are some specific features of real life which resemble stories and which stories may be said to imitate and explore. This has been argued not only by Barbara Hardy, but in Shakespeare criticism by Anne Barton, Stephen Greenblatt and others who have noted Shakespeare’s preoccupation in his plays with play-like aspects of life outside the theatre. There is one species of play-like behaviour which is more prominent in Much Ado than in any of the other plays, and in which the narrative aspect of drama is especially prominent. Much Ado shows that this behaviour is an important part of the ‘process through which events and persons are turned into narrative’. This play-like behaviour is the ritual practice known as a rite of passage. Shakespeare brings such rites directly onto the stage in the two weddings of Claudio and Hero and in the memorial acts performed by Claudio at Hero’s supposed tomb.

Alasdair MacIntyre, in the course of an argument with Louis Mink’s contention that ‘in life there are no beginnings, middles, or ends’, asks ‘but have you never heard of death?’ It has frequently been suggested that it is death, more than anything else, that binds life and story together by enforcing that sense of an ending which generates the sense of beginnings and middles. But it is a moot point whether it is death alone or its ritual marking which generates the sense of an ending: even here culture may be required to supplement nature. In contemplating the effect on Claudio of Hero’s supposed death, the Friar puts considerable emphasis on ‘the rites / That appertain unto a burial’. Hero’s friends’ ‘mourning ostentation’ at the ‘family’s old monument’ is to lead Claudio himself to ‘mourn’ and Claudio’s eventual ritual acts at the monument are directly staged.

If it is the ritual marking of death as much as death itself which generates the sense of an ending, it is most certainly weddings which begin marriages, and do so partly by anticipating their end (‘till death do us part’). Louis Mink may be right to say that ‘the start of an affair belongs to the story we tell ourselves later’, but the same is not true of a marriage. A function of weddings, and of the marriages they bring into being, is to give life something of the shape of a story while it is still going on. Weddings, like baptisms, funerals and other rites of passage, work to divide the lives of individuals into distinct segments and link the segments together into a finite sequence, to give life a narrative order. When Beatrice bids ‘maiden pride, adieu’ she is saying goodbye to the role of maiden in order to greet the role of wife. Her speech articulates her sense of being in transit between ages. This transition will actually be effected by the event which her speech implicitly anticipates: the wedding ceremony in which her uncle Leonato will give her away to Benedick. This event does not appear on stage but the equivalent moment in the lives of Claudio and Hero does. The so-called ‘church scene’ at the start of Act IV shows Leonato giving his daughter to Claudio who then tries to throw the ritual sequence brutally into reverse, telling his almost-father-in-law to ‘take her back again’. It is a shocking moment, both for the other characters and for us, and for a number of critics the maimed rite of Hero’s wedding, together with the grief of her uncle and father which immediately follows it, moves the play to the borders of tragedy.

Claudio commits an act of great psychological violence against Hero, and it is a sacrilegious act (the subversion of a sacred event in a sacred place). But these factors do not in themselves explain the unsettling force of the scene, which derives from the ways in which it draws upon the relationship between the event which it is (a scene in a play) and the event which it represents (an episode in a—subverted—rite of passage).

In the first place we need to remind ourselves that the wedding rite does more than move a person from one stage of the life cycle to another (from daughter to wife, for instance). It also, in so doing, helps to establish life as a cycle, or sequence of stages. By making Claudio disrupt the rite, attempting to reverse the sequence of the rite and of Hero’s life, Shakespeare vividly emphasises its narrative function and the threat to life’s narrative order which its disruption involves.
Secondly, the church scene is as J. R. Mulryne has noted ‘consciously and overtly “theatrical”’\textsuperscript{8}, and the principal reason for its theatricality is that the rite which it represents on stage is—when performed in a real church by people really getting married—already a quasi-theatrical event, involving costumes, symbolic objects, the learning of parts, the following of a script. Shakespeare emphasises both the differences and the proximities between the on-stage and off-stage performances by using as part of his own script words that are (as the Arden editor puts it) ‘close to, but not exactly, the English marriage service’.\textsuperscript{9}

If a real wedding and its representation in a dramatic narrative are thus complicated in their relationship to one another, it is worth pondering the implications of defining the church scene’s impact by invoking the concept of ‘tragedy’. Tragedy is both a kind of human situation and a literary genre, the two meanings being neither identical nor easily separable. To describe the church scene as taking us to the borders of tragedy suggests that while it happens we wonder whether this is the kind of play in which an intensity of anguish and discord develops that, contrary to our previous expectations, will not be redeemable by any subsequent concord. The scene threatens that particular sense of anticipated retrospect which is essential to our sense of genre. I have suggested that to say the relationship between Beatrice and Benedick could have turned out differently ‘in other circumstances’ can only mean ‘in another play’: in the church scene we feel we may be in another play.

Of course, while we may be in a different play from the one we thought we were in, we are not in a different play from the one Shakespeare wrote. Nevertheless, the power of this scene may partly derive from a subliminal feeling that the actor playing Claudio has somehow refused to follow Shakespeare’s script. He has not really done so, and the feeling that he has could not survive for a moment if it became more than subliminal. But we should recall Greenblatt’s description of a hypothetical performance in which the actors ‘forget their lines or blurt them out before their cue or altogether refuse to perform’. That would describe quite well the way in which Leonato, the Friar, Claudio and Hero stumble through, and then in Claudio’s case reject, their parts in the rite of passage. In suddenly refusing to play the bridegroom’s part, the actor playing Claudio is still playing his part in \textit{Much Ado}, but the similarities between the on-stage and off-stage performances are so real that the former secretly borrows some of the emotional charge that would result if the actor were to destroy the narrative order of the play itself by ‘altogether refusing to perform’.

\textit{Notes}

4. Jacques’ speech makes it hard for us to use the word ‘stage’ in this modern sense without punning anachronistically on its theatrical sense.
7. ‘\textit{Much Ado} may be called a tragi-comedy … the clouds gather in the fourth Act and look like breaking into tragedy, only to pass away in the fifth’. J. Dover Wilson, \textit{Shakespeare’s Happy Comedies} (1962), p. 121.
Criticism: Order And Disorder: Phoebe S. Spinrad (essay date 1992)


In the following essay, Spinrad argues that the constables are reassuring figures—despite and due to their ineptitude—within the more sinister power dynamics in Much Ado about Nothing and Measure for Measure.

Dogberry and Elbow, Shakespeare's most famous comic constables, have long been recognized both as satiric commentary on the corruptions in Elizabethan local law-enforcement systems and as thematic commentary on the judicial or social systems within the larger scope of their plays. Of course, beyond their historico-thematic functions, the constables are also some of the choicest bits of Shakespearean humor, with their malapropisms, their inability to articulate what the charges against a malefactor are, and in general their bumbling, although well-meaning, inefficiency. And yet, even those critics who find the constables’ “inefficiency” the most endearing aspect of their comic effect must often admit that they are not all that inefficient; Dogberry and his minions do in fact break up Don John's plot in Much Ado, and in Measure for Measure Elbow does in fact break up whatever it is that is happening in Pompey's alehouse, as well as finally bringing Pompey to justice a second time, this time on charges that apparently stick. The constables, then, are not entirely ineffectual, although they may be inefficient. And I should like to suggest that their very inefficiency is part of their effectuality, as well as another level of satiric commentary on the over-efficiency of even good enforcement systems; that they represent, in fact, the substratum of at least pre-modern comedy which assures the audience that all things will work out well, both on the stage and in society, because it is in the nature of things to do so unless forcibly disrupted from outside.

One of the historical assumptions about these constables is that the Elizabethan constabulary system was riddled with corruption, the constables generally being taken from among the illiterate and therefore stupid commons, the minimally employable who gladly leaped at the chance to act as substitutes for the otherwise qualified who did not wish to be bothered with the task. To a certain extent, these statements have a bit of truth in them; like any system, the constabulary system was open to abuse. But Dogberry is by no means in abuse of his office, and although Elbow is apparently one of those paid substitutes, he is performing an important duty at great sacrifice to himself and his family—and he is performing at least as well as the person for whom he is acting might do.

It may be helpful to review who and what the constables of Elizabethan England were. The constable was normally elected by his (and sometimes her!) neighbors in a village, town, or ward (city sector). Eligibility was dependent not on income or class so much as residence in or attachment to a particular household or tenement, although such residence was of course a matter of class and income to a certain extent. When the population of a community was particularly mobile, the buying and selling of tenement holdings might result in constables who were virtual strangers; however, in stable populations, the constable was a neighbor, a settled member of the community whom one might have known from infancy. The term of office was usually for one year, and the office was supposed to be rotated among the eligible householders so that no one was subject to the hardships of the office for a ruinously long time. Elbow's tenure of seven and a half years, then, may indeed be an abuse of the system, as Escalus assumes:

Escalus: Alas, it hath been great pains to you; they do you wrong to put you so oft upon't. Are there not men in your ward sufficient to serve it? Elbow: Faith, sir, few of any wit in such matters. As they are chosen, they are glad to choose me for them; I do it for some piece of money, and go through with all.
Escalus: Look you bring me in the names of some six or seven, the most sufficient of your parish.

(2.1.251-57)

It is not clear whether Elbow is an officially appointed deputy, who would have been paid out of the constable’s own pocket, or whether he has simply had the position foisted off on him. Occasionally, as Joan Kent observes, “men and women who were considered personally exempt from serving … were ordered to find deputies for their tenements, and incumbents occasionally appointed a deputy if they were incapacitated or obliged to be absent from the community; but the records provide very little other evidence of substitutions.” The problem with Elbow’s service, then, is not his status as deputy but rather its duration; a series of neighbors, rather than just one, have hired him as substitute. This may indicate that the whole society is corrupt, in that too many eligible citizens are refusing their law-enforcement duty for one reason or another. It may also indicate corruption on a more personal level, in that the citizens are victimizing a neighbor whom they should protect—that is, they are luring him into impoverishing himself under the guise of paying him money “up front.” As I will note shortly, constabulary duty was expensive and time-consuming.

Dogberry appears to have been elected in the normal way; he is a man of some substance in Messina, as he indignantly informs Conrade:

Dogberry: 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.

(Much Ado 4.2.73-78)

Furthermore, his knowledge of the law is not as faulty as might appear on the surface. As O. Hood Phillips points out, he is careful in his choice of deputies for the watch, picking those who can read and write, and his caution to them to “keep your fellows’ counsel and your own” (3.3.79-80) is an actual phrase taken from the charge to the grand jury of the time. He is also conscientious in telling his deputies to call him out of bed if there is any “matter of weight.”

The fact that Dogberry himself is apparently unable to read and write is not in itself an abuse. We must remember that illiteracy is not necessarily synonymous with stupidity. Although Dogberry does not seem to be gifted with a high IQ, his illiteracy might not be unusual in a given community. The literacy level among constables varied, sometimes as low as 15 percent and sometimes as high as 80 percent, and illiterate constables usually had neighbors fill out paperwork for them, or, as Dogberry does, submitted all paperwork chores to their superiors. The occasional failure of a constable to find anyone to read his instructions to him or take down charges for him does not seem to be one of Dogberry's problems. Despite his poor memory for the nature of words, he is aware of the duties which the words signify. Nor does he seem to be liable to an unpopular constable's problem of having literate but malicious neighbors falsify what they are reading and writing for him. Dogberry's literate deputies obey his orders, and the Sexton (or Town Clerk) who transcribes the testimony in the examination of prisoners is careful to guide the testimony into the correct channels.

Phillips points out that “by English law [the examination of the prisoners] should have been conducted before two justices,” but here again I think we see conscientious rather than mistaken performance of duty on the part of Dogberry, especially since the Sexton does not protest the irregularity. The testimony is of immediate importance to the community, Leonato (who as governor of Messina may also be its Justice) is preoccupied with his daughter's wedding, and the traveling justices may not be available for days or even weeks. Indeed, the chain of command for a constable was a multiplex and sometimes confusing one. Petty constables such as
Dogberry reported variously to high constables, sheriffs, bailiffs, justices, and royal visitors, and often had to travel long distances to make their presentments at leet courts and assizes. Since Dogberry invokes “the Prince's name” when briefing his deputies, he is obviously aware of the bureaucratic channels to which he is responsible.

For what duties was a constable responsible? The list is almost too long to enumerate here, but it included the following: apprehending vagrants (about which more in a moment), whipping them, and passing them on to the next town's constable to be further whipped and passed on until they were returned to the parish of their birth; housing any vagrants whose home parishes could not be determined; arresting and jailing and/or punishing thieves, drunks, murderers, assault perpetrators, and other offenders; searching houses for stolen goods; issuing warrants; keeping watch and ward; breaking up fights; assessing and collecting fines and taxes; impressing soldiers as necessary; verifying and enforcing licenses of alehouses; disseminating government proclamations; appearing before leet courts and assizes to testify in criminal cases; and a host of other time-consuming (and money-consuming) duties.

A small stipend was allotted for the performance of these duties, but it was seldom enough to cover immediate expenses. The constable was responsible for hiring his own deputies and maintaining local jail facilities, or housing suspects where no jail facilities were available. When called to appear before assizes, he traveled at his own expense. Although he might be reimbursed for costs incurred while on duty, he still had to advance the money from his own pocket. And of course during the performance of constabulary duty he had to neglect his own business or hire assistants to carry on in his absence. We may almost begin to understand why the residents of Vienna might appreciate a tractable Elbow who will do the work for them.

Furthermore, constabulary duty could be dangerous. Criminals were not always as docile as Borachio, Conrade, Pompey, and Froth; a constable acting alone was subject to assault, and sometimes he could not get enough assistants to help him. In fact, his assistants might be the very people he had to arrest. There are many cases on record of a constable's being assailed by his own townspeople, particularly during his attempts to search a house, break up a fight, collect an unpopular assessment, close down an illegal alehouse, or stop a popular local crime such as smuggling.

Pity the poor constable. As a local resident, he was usually torn between loyalty to his own community and responsibility to his superiors and the central government. Animosity incurred during his time of office might injure his business afterward, either because he would lose his neighbors' custom or because they would crack down on him more heavily when they were in office. But failure to perform his duties as expected by the central government would involve him in additional trips to explain before the courts why he had been negligent, and might result in heavy fines. The conflicting pressures are aptly summed up in a ballad of 1626 cited by Joan Kent, which is attributed to a Surrey constable:

The Justices will set us by the heels
If we do not as we should;
Which if we perform, the townsmen will storm;
Some of them hang's if they could.(9)

Although Boorman points out that “to be merely a justice of the peace, even a churchwarden, gave a man a kind of local social immortality denied to the common man,” the job was by no means without its dangers to that immortality—both figuratively and literally.

In view of these pressures on local residents who were also the overseers of their own neighbors for a year or more at a time, Dogberry's laissez-faire attitude that Robert Ornstein so aptly calls his “Jeffersonian approach to keeping the peace” is understandable. But the nature of some of the “crimes” that Dogberry and Elbow are supposed to control may shed still more light on Dogberry's good nature—and Elbow's heroism. Both
Nevo and Ornstein, for example, almost instinctively take delight in Dogberry's instructions on dealing with town vagrants:

Dogberry: This is your charge: you shall comprehend all vagrom men; you are to bid any man stand, in the Prince's name.
2 Watch: How if 'a will not stand?
Dogberry: Why then, take no note of him, but let him go, and presently call the rest of the watch together and thank God you are rid of a knave.
Verges: If he will not stand when he is bidden, he is none of the Prince's subjects.

(Much Ado 3.3.22-30)

The vagrancy problem in England had grown progressively worse throughout the sixteenth century and was essentially a problem of poverty, of "masterless men" forced out on the roads or into the towns to beg. By statutory definition, according to Manning, "a vagrant was a person able to labour who possessed neither land nor master, who worked at no recognized trade, and who refused to accept such employment as might be offered to him. Almost invariably this meant working as a servant-in-husbandry or agricultural labourer." Many of these men had been made landless or masterless by land enclosures and the new centering of wage industries in the towns, and the very conditions of their unemployment guaranteed its continuance. Therefore, they traveled in order to find employment elsewhere but usually found only more of the same conditions. When employment was not available and begging failed to sustain them, they turned to assault and robbery.

The vagrants, then, were considered dangerous, both to the economy and to life and limb. They were also a drain on even those towns that had a system of poor relief, as some of the major cities did by the 1590s: "A category of deserving poor was discovered, but the deserving poor excluded all who could not establish a claim to residence." The Vagrancy Act of 1572 decreed that first offenders were to be imprisoned until the next quarter sessions; those who were convicted at the sessions were to be whipped and branded on the ear, while second offenders were adjudged as felons, and escapees were hanged. The next Vagrancy Act, of 1597, stipulated further that vagrants were to be whipped from town to town back to their legal parishes; if the legal parish of a vagrant could not be determined, the last town that failed to whip him had to assume the cost of his support.

Note that vagrants were not simply turned out of town but were literally whipped through the parish until they arrived at the border of the next parish, where the constable was responsible for whipping them in turn to his own border, and so on until the vagrants arrived at their own towns—where they would not, of course, have established residences and therefore could not receive poor relief, so that the whole cycle might begin again. Someone who had wandered a long way would thus receive a number of whippings before returning home—perhaps to face starvation or more whippings—and it is little wonder that vagrants about to be apprehended might turn ferocious enough to make Dogberry and his men chary of intercepting them. In addition, the costs involved in housing the vagrants, either until quarter sessions or permanently, could prove ruinous to a small businessman like Dogberry. If the knaves could find their own way home, all the better.

Although Dogberry's instructions to the Watch, including his caution that "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" (3.3.53-55), may be interpreted as simply cowardice or negligence, they may also be interpreted as good sense (a thief identified at night can be better apprehended by a large posse during the day) or even merciful, as Verges insists. Although Elizabethans in general did not share our squeamishness about physical punishment, Dogberry apparently does: "Truly, I would not hang a dog by my will, much more a man that hath any honesty in him" (3.3.58-59). In an age that enjoyed bull and bear baiting, and that skinned animals alive under the impression that such a
procedure improved the pelts, this is squeamishness indeed. Notably, even Queen Elizabeth showed no such squeamishness. Manning records the following incident, in which we should bear in mind that those who were arrested faced at least whipping and branding, if not hanging:

Early in January 1582, towards the end of Christmastide, the Queen was riding through Islington when her carriage was surrounded by a great crowd of beggars. The incident must have alarmed her, because William Fleetwood, recorder of London, was ordered to begin a sweep of masterless men the same day. The campaign lasted about ten days and netted several hundred vagrants—100 being taken in a single day.¹⁶

Nor is Dogberry alone in being more merciful than his superiors; of those constables who were charged with neglect of duty by the leet courts, most were accused of failing to apprehend vagrants or allowing the escape of prisoners. Their “live and let live” attitude, then, not only gave a more literal meaning to “letting live” than we are accustomed to assuming, but also cost them more literally, in the fines levied on them for negligence, than we might be willing to pay. However, when real trouble threatens the community, both Dogberry and Elbow do not hesitate to act.

Dogberry's men do “watch about Signior Leonato's door, for the wedding being there to-morrow, there is a great coil tonight,” as Dogberry instructs them (Much Ado 3.3.85-87); and when they overhear Borachio's and Conrade's admission of having caused harm to a neighbor, they make an immediate arrest. As for Elbow's apprehension of Pompey and Froth, we must remember that it is a single-handed taking of two men who might cause the constable grievous bodily harm. The “alehouse” in which they are taken is actually a brothel, in which Elizabethans knew ruffians and desperate men congregated—in fact, many of these alehouses were hiding places for the vagrants whom Elbow, too, is apparently unwilling to whip out of town. There has been a “Jeffersonian approach” to justice in Vienna as well as in Messina, on more levels than the Duke's; but perhaps Elbow's laxity is more excusable than the Duke's, and his justice more equitable than either the Duke's or Angelo's. To be sure, one of the constable's duties was inspecting and enforcing alehouse licenses, so Elbow has good reason to be checking them; however, although Manning cites “one in ten houses” functioning as illegal alehouses, he also notes that constables were “frequently lax” in suppressing them since “some alehouse keepers had no other source of income and might otherwise have become public charges.”¹⁷

If a tradeoff has to be made, then, between enforcing the alehouse laws and giving poor people a source of income and a refuge from the Vagrancy Acts, Elbow apparently takes the more charitable option. Note that this is not simply a question of “looking the other way” in matters of sexual corruption, which is the problem in the foreground of the play's opposition of mercy and justice, but a question of communal well-being: the alehouses, however suspect in sexual matters, are sources of income for the proprietors, safe haven for beggars, and neighborhood bars for the working people of the community. Only when the threat to the community outweighs other considerations does Elbow act. It is difficult, of course, to cut through the malapropisms of Elbow's charges in order to discover what has happened in Pompey's alehouse, but from the few things understandable, it appears that Elbow's pregnant wife entered in an innocent attempt to get some refreshment, including a dish of prunes. While there, she was accosted in some way by either Pompey or Froth and solicited to join Mistress Overdone's stable. Whatever was said or done to her, it was apparently coarse enough to cause her not just to leave but to spit in someone's face—perhaps as a way of pulling free from physical assault. We will never know; even Escalus cannot figure it out. But whatever happened, Elbow considered it harm to a citizen and accordingly risked danger and expense to himself in order to make the arrest.

It may be objected that Elbow has arrested Pompey and Froth only because his own wife has been harmed. However, as we see later, the prison of Vienna is quite full, so Elbow, as chief arresting officer, has been active in other cases as well. The significant point about the case that we do see is that much as we may laugh knowingly at Lucio's and Pompey's contempt for the law, an innocent citizen is not safe on the streets of
Vienna when such men are in control of public mores. There is more, then, to the problem of vice than is mentioned in the theorizing of the major characters. Even Angelo, who has given lip service to what we would now call “victims’ rights,” essentially does to Isabella, once he succumbs to the prevailing vice of Vienna, what Froth has done to Mistress Elbow. The difference between the two cases is one of degree, not of kind.

It may be objected, too, that the arrest leads to no punishment; because the charges are so incomprehensible, both Froth and Pompey are let off with warnings. But the point is that, as with Dogberry’s case, although the *bumbling* of a constable prevents immediate official measures, the *presence* of the constable insures the balking of a menace to individual citizens. Elbow’s wife is rescued; Froth is removed from the scene and perhaps scared into better behavior in the future; Pompey will be watched more carefully in the future; and Don John’s plot, however it may succeed for the moment, is doomed. Furthermore, in each case the official system has been ineffectual while the individual community system has worked.

This is a point often overlooked or at least glossed over too quickly: that as constables, Dogberry and Elbow may be washouts, but as people who are simply there, wandering around and seeing what is going on, they preserve the wellbeing of the community. We may draw an analogy here with small towns and crowded city neighborhoods of our own recent past. Before the advent of television, air conditioning, automobiles, backyard grills, and other technological marvels, people spent a good deal of time sitting outside or at least leaning out of windows, visibly minding each other’s business. Strangers were scrutinized and often questioned; odd behavior was noted and discussed and dangerous behavior interrupted on the spot; and if there was an annoying lack of privacy in all this, there was also much safety. Conversely, when a community felt that officialdom was being too harsh on a well-liked neighbor, it could become remarkably reticent and “ignorant” about the neighbor’s activities or whereabouts—until officialdom left, at which time the community’s eyes, memory, and voice miraculously recovered.18 We have tried to recapture this security with “block watches,” but there is a difference between signs posted on pillars and dozens of visible eyes watching one’s movements. Furthermore, once a living communal organism breaks down, even those who do watch are reluctant to act, since they do not know their neighbors well enough to depend on them for help (as in the Kitty Genovese case).

An editorial digression on our own society? Perhaps; but perhaps, too, with some relevance to Shakespeare’s society. Interestingly, Shakespeare presents this self-protecting nature of community as a counteragent against both too much and too little official enforcement in the two plays, just as it may have existed in his two residences and indeed in the changing sociopolitical climate in different parts of England. In Stratford, apparently, the Dogberrian method of enforcement was favored. F. W. Brownlow, speculating about John Shakespeare’s recusancy, notes that:

> [A] document such as the Warwickshire recusancy return of 1592 … is a record of the coercive power of the Tudor state, extending itself into every parish, affecting the lives of very ordinary subjects of the crown. One natural reaction to such governmental meddling was to find various ways of being as little affected as possible, and it is not surprising that in many parishes … there are signs that local officers did not like to push the penal laws too hard against their friends and neighbors. In Stratford in 1592, the wardens seem to have responded to the letter of the law and no more.19

Whether the Tudor state was more coercive than any other is disputable; however, its systems of investigation and enforcement were complex and multitudinous. We have already noted the numerous chains of command to which the constable had to report, each link of which had similarly complex chains of command above it. In addition, the religious network, now linked to the State by the Henrician centralization and Elizabethan settlement, had become similarly entangled. The “wardens” referred to by Brownlow were the local churchwardens who were commissioned to examine households for orthodoxy or heterodoxy, examinations which meant not only catechesis and keeping records of church attendance but also home visitation to check...
for immoral practices, illicit popish artifacts, and evidence of priest-harboring. Philip Hughes calls the churchwarden of the time “the unpaid constable and detective for parochial morality in its widest and in its narrowest sense,” and reminds us that churchwardens also inspected the orthodoxy of the schools, often deputizing the local schoolmaster into being yet another detective. As an additional entangling of the bureaucracy, churchwardens' reports were due both to the bishop and to the central government's secular authorities, and since papistry was considered a crime of treason rather than of heresy, male-factors of this sort were tried as civil offenders first in Church courts and then passed on to the central government. The churchwardens, in their turn, were subject to episcopal and governmental visitation to insure that they were reporting correctly.

In addition, as the anti-papist legislation increased in rigor and urgency throughout the 1580s and 1590s, and as more and more seminary priests arrived from the Continent, government pursuivants, who had previously been considered simply government inspectors, became virtually synonymous with priest-hunters, and their numbers were increased. Since many of the new pursuivants were free-lancers who were paid on the basis of their results, their visits became more frequent and more intense. Residents of a given town, then, considered simply as ordinary householders of whatever persuasion or class, were increasingly subject to the "meddling" that Brownlow cites: constables, churchwardens, episcopal visitors, justices, pursuivants, and a host of other representatives of officialdom.

It is important to note that most of the surveillance came from the outside, and that the old system of checks and balances, where the Church might provide protection from the State and vice versa, had disappeared with the consolidation of the two. As Clark and Slack point out, even such officials as now reported to the central government had once been merely local figures like the constable; and the craft guilds that had once been part of the religious and communal life of towns were now mostly run by the politically powerful and were "closely integrated with civic administration. In many communities they were little more than auxiliary weapons of the town oligarchy, as at Maidstone, where the guild wardens were employed to patrol the town, suppress disorder, and eject undesirables." In effect, there were now either parallel constabularies even at the local level, one empowered by the central government and one drawn by election from householders, or a single constabulary whose vested interests were more and more divorced from those of the common citizen.

If the bureaucracy had made Stratford's enforcement system too burdensome, however, it seems to have made that of London too slipshod. The central "old city" was as tightly run as a center of government might be expected to be, but as Clark and Slack observe, "the city fathers had made no attempt to extend their jurisdiction to cover the new suburbs to the north, east, and west." By the turn of the seventeenth century, then, "much of greater London was ruled by an impotent alliance of parish, manorial, and county authorities. Unlike the rest of the kingdom, ... the government of outer London steadily disintegrated, making it vulnerable to political agitation." These suburbs, then, perhaps like the suburbs of Vienna in Measure for Measure, were subject more to the anarchy of nonrule than to the tyranny of overenforcement, except (again as in Vienna) during government crackdowns on what was perceived to be dangerous to the State.

In addition, the influx of workers to these suburbs of London led to a new kind of communal network almost unknown in towns. Although the guilds had by now become political rather than trade or religious entities, people working the same crafts tended to live together in clusters, forming (we might say) craft ghettos where there had once been craft guilds. In these ghettos there developed the same kinds of self-protecting bonds that had once been formed by geographic or familial ties, but on a smaller and perhaps more desperate scale. Newcomers were closely scrutinized, strangers were suspect, and when danger threatened a member of the community, the community often responded by taking the law into its own hands, since it apparently could not depend on the chaotic enforcement system to act—or even care.

In both cases, that of the overly governed town and that of the insufficiently governed city suburb, figures such as Dogberry and Elbow are both necessary and reassuring. Dogberry's slipshod surveillance is evidence
that the local constabulary has local rather than central governmental interests at heart; and his actual capture of miscreants shows that the communal organism can protect itself without interference from outside. Conversely, Elbow's activism shows that the community can arrest danger to itself both when enforcement agencies are too lax and when they are witch-hunting outside the purview of what really threatens the well-being of local citizens.

Of Elbow's place in Vienna and his play, I will say more in a moment. In the case of Dogberry, we do not have quite so desperate a case, since he comes from the kind of community that protected John Shakespeare and therefore can be said to function well. However, even in Messina there are potential problems in trusting the government, problems that become darker in the story of Vienna. As S. C. Boorman points out, even the most benevolent rulers are subject to human flaws and follies, so that even in comedy the “wise fool” must be used as a check against hubris: “Dogberry's stupidity and complacent acceptance of his own little social importance … reminds us that the more ‘important’ figures of the play have their own stupidity and complacency, show an equally human confusion and inadequacy.”

Leonato, Benedick, Beatrice, and Claudio (not to mention Don John) are as concerned as is Dogberry not to be considered asses; but Dogberry, for all his asininity, performs his duty in spite of the insults to his dignity—and without the manipulative tricks that the other characters play to gain even their well-meant ends. Although Ornstein perhaps exaggerates in claiming that “Kindly himself, Dogberry inspires kindness in others”—Dogberry inspires as much exasperation as kindness—the point is that Dogberry muddles through when every supposedly intelligent and “expert” member of society is going to pieces. And in this sense, Ornstein's comment in another context captures the essence of Dogberry's status as hero: “the security of comedy depends on an assurance (or a hope) that top side is right side, that communal life is nurturing despite the blusterings of fathers. …”

Messina, of course, is a fairly stable society in which the communal structure needs only an occasional nudge to stay in good order. Vienna is another story. The laxity of the Duke has created danger in the streets, much as it did in suburban London, and the sudden cracking down on sexual offenses does little to correct the immediate problem for common citizens. The duration of Elbow's time in office, discussed earlier, indicates that external efforts to maintain the peace have collapsed, and that therefore whatever steps are now being taken to control crime are those originating in a narrowly defined estimate of the problem: one of sexuality rather than public safety. Notably, Rosalind Miles, who observes that Angelo's theories of government “bear so close a correspondence to Tudor theories … that an audience of 1604 would fully have appreciated their force,” also observes of the Duke that he shows “very little moral outrage” at the vices of the low-lives whom he meets. Both the strict Angelo and the merciful Duke, then, operate by theories rather than by the simple “moral outrage” shown by Elbow. And as with Dogberry, sometimes a simple-minded, instinctive outrage with wrong may work where the theorizers fail.

This is not to claim that theories are ineffectual and gut reactions the basis on which we should build society; nor is it to claim that Shakespeare would have claimed such a dangerous proposition. But as Boorman points out, Elizabethan discussions of reason and passion saw a danger in too divorced a reason as well as in too unbridled a passion. Reason must be in control, but it cannot stand alone, or it becomes nonhuman. Hence the dramatic convention of the “wise fool” who sees what the foolish wise have lost sight of, and hence the reassurance that while all the judicial supervisors are arguing out their theories of justice and mercy, someone will still be available to lose his temper and do something constructive when a woman who attempts to buy a dish of prunes is given insults or pinches on the posterior instead.

Two scenes in Measure for Measure may illustrate the point. Act 2, scene 1, in which Elbow brings his presentment against Froth and Pompey before Angelo and Escalus, is generally viewed as a contrast between the bad and good justice of Angelo and Escalus, respectively. Angelo loses patience early and walks out on the case, leaving the judgment to Escalus and closing with the hope that “you’ll find good cause to whip them all” (2.1.130). The departure and the intent to punish regardless of the results of a trial are quite rightly seen as
tyrannous justice, much in the nature of Pontius Pilate's: simultaneously lax in the performance of duty and
draconian in the imposition of punishment. Escalus is thus seen as the contrast to Angelo, and therefore his
judgments are cited as the via media between Angelo's rigor and the Duke's laxity, a standard against which
we measure all the characters' decisions at the end of the play. But Escalus himself has a contrast in this scene.
Although his judgments are just, they are undercut to a certain extent by Pompey's aside: “I thank your
worship for your good counsel; [aside] but I shall follow it as the flesh and fortune shall better determine”
(2.1.237-39). At least one of the corrections that he has attempted on human behavior has not had its intended
effect, nor, by implication, will the laws against the whorehouses be fully effective unless he intends, as
Pompey jokes, to “geld and splay” all the youth of Vienna (2.1.217-18). Escalus's counsel is wise and just, but
it does not reform Pompey. It is Elbow once again who persistently monitors Pompey's actions and hauls him
in again in act 3, scene 2, this time on charges that are more officially acceptable and therefore put Pompey in
jail.

The undercutting of Escalus's sage counsel has its parallel in the final Judgment scene (5.1), a scene much
debated by critics. Regardless of whether we view the Duke as an irresponsible ruler or a Christ-figure, we
cannot evade the issue of Lucio's running commentary during what should be the Duke's great moment of
justice. The scene can be played easily without the Duke's losing his dignity; but there is no way to eliminate
Lucio from it altogether without destroying the scene. And it must be Lucio who unveils the pseudo-Friar.
The Duke, in this scene, is just; the Duke is wise; the Duke reprieves and reforms at the same time—maybe.
But if he is too powerful in his wisdom and justice, if all things work the way he plans them, what is to
prevent him from becoming a tyrant-figure in his own right, at least in the perception of the audience?

In tragedy we generally expect a total collapse of a society, which is then put back together by a powerful
figure from the outside; omnipotence here is welcome. But in comedy we expect a society to put itself back
together from the inside; and omnipotence here is dangerous. In Measure for Measure, especially, most of the
trouble has come from rulers who think themselves above common humanity: Angelo, whose “blood / Is very
snow-broth” (Lucio, 1.4.57-58), and the Duke, who has “ever loved the life removed” (1.3.5) and who plays
espionage, bed-trick, and testing games with his suffering subjects. If the Duke's games were all successful, he
would be as dangerous as Angelo, because he too would be playing God and considering himself a highly
successful God. He must be “written down an ass” like Dogberry before the audience can be assured that his
resumed rule will be a better version than the first. At the very least, the audience must not class him with the
bureaucracy that they know too well in their own lives.

In this comedic sense, then, Dogberry and Elbow and all their bumbling kind are the true heroes of their
societies and the audience's. Notably, both of them are presented early enough in their plays to reassure us that
no matter how bad things get, someone who can do something will be watching, ready to step in when all else
fails. They can barely be understood by officialdom; but then, officialdom does not understand a number of
things about local conditions, things that Dogberry and Elbow understand very well. They are stupid enough
not to be frightening to us or to anyone else—the felons they arrest will not consider them dangerous enough
to assault—and yet not so stupid that they cannot tell when one of us is in trouble and needs help. When
government is oppressive, they defend us; when government is ineffectual, they watch over us; we may laugh
at them, indeed must laugh at them, but we cannot do without them. They are the eyes and hands of the
communal body, our assurance that when the world is collapsing, our neighborhood is safe.

Notes

2. I concentrate primarily on Dogberry and Elbow because they seem to epitomize the community’s response to two types of problems: too much and too little governmental surveillance and protection. There are, of course, many other law enforcement officials in Shakespeare: Constable Dull in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, Justice Shallow in *2 Henry IV* and *Merry Wives*, and the various sheriffs, bailiffs, arresting officers, justices, and King’s (or other ruler’s) men of the tragedies and histories.


4. Because the structure and duties of the constabulary system grew out of the parish system and therefore tended to be the same in different sizes of communities, with minor variations dependent more on local history than on size, I will normally use the generic term “community” for the constable's jurisdiction to avoid implying that what I am describing was typical only of a particular type of community. Where an author whom I cite uses a more specific term, it should be understood in this generic sense unless I indicate otherwise.


8. Phillips, 68.


13. Manning, 159.


17. Manning, 164.

18. I must add an autobiographical note here, lest I be accused of elitist and patronizing nostalgia for something that never existed. I grew up in the South Bronx of the 1940s, lived around the corner from a pickle factory, and attended a school past whose windows ran the Third Avenue “el” trains. It was not an affluent suburb by any means. But children were safe, even after dark; and no one, whether of European, African, or Puerto Rican origin, ever locked a door during the day. Nor has the phenomenon totally disappeared; in a neighborhood where I lived in Baton Rouge in the 1980s, children played in swarms in the street, gossiping in a manner that would put adults to shame. I felt quite secure in leaving my house unprotected when I was at work or traveling; in fact, I contemplated with glee the discomfiture of any burglar who attempted to break in and found himself surrounded by children inspecting his tools, regaling him with the details of the neighbors’ lives, and cross-examining him about his own.


and was intensified in the reign of Elizabeth I. Although G. R. Elton denies this allegation, the very evidence that he offers, which shows Cromwell’s ignorance of the network or dismissal of charges against persons brought to him, suggests at least an increase in the perception that people were more subject to surveillance. There was now a centralized point to which magistrates, busy-bodies, and vindictive neighbors could direct their charges against citizens. Since such charges involved the transportation of the accused to examination, possible torture, and possible execution for an ever-increasing list of treasonous offenses, the ordinary citizen might well feel dangerously spied upon. See Elton, *Policy and Police: The Enforcement of the Reformation in the Age of Thomas Cromwell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), esp. ch. 8.

21. John Bellamy points out that although technically the capture of priests did not come under the schedule of payments authorized for pursuivants, disclosure of “slanderous and traitorous books” did—books which, of course, could be found on the person of any priest as well as among those attending illegal Masses. The first such disclosure was worth £20 to the pursuivant, and the second and third “large rewards” plus half of the forfeitures incurred. See Bellamy’s *The Tudor Law of Treason* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), esp. 85 and 183. The proclamations offering the rewards are those of 1 July 1570 and 12 October 1584; see Paul L. Hughes and James F. Larkin, eds., *Tudor Royal Proclamations*, 3 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 2:577 and 2:672.

22. Clark and Slack, pp. 13 and 132.

23. Clark and Slack, 28-29.

24. Anthony Fletcher and John Stevenson, in their introduction to *Order and Disorder in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), note the gradual pulling away of the gentry from the lower classes during the course of the sixteenth century. Prior to mid-century, the two classes had participated together in both orderly and disorderly community activities (10-12). Philip Hughes locates the dichotomy more precisely in time: the failure of the Pilgrimage of Grace (1:307-8).

25. Clark and Slack, 71.

26. It is fascinating to note that the types of neighborhoods described in this way by Clark, Slack, and Manning are still evident in the descriptions of London working-class neighborhoods given by Charles Dickens in the nineteenth century.

27. Boorman, 87.


29. Ornstein, 17.


31. Boorman, passim.

**Criticism: Order And Disorder: Jonathan Hall (essay date 1995)**

In the essay that follows, Hall contends that both Much Ado about Nothing and Othello undermine—through their use and treatment of language—the establishment of any single interpretation of the texts.

The opening witty dialogue in *Much Ado About Nothing* between Beatrice and Benedick consists in a deadlocked rivalry, which seeks to deny that there is a relationship between them:

Beatrice. I wonder you will still be talking, Signor Benedick. Nobody marks you.

Benedick. What, my dear Lady Disdain! Are you still living?

(*1.1.107ff.*)

This is a rivalry of indifferences. Now, real indifference is impossible in dialogue, since it would then not be a sign but a natural state unengaged with the other. Proclaimed “indifference” is a weapon of attack and/or defense, but as soon as it is used as such, it reveals its nature as a dialogically charged sign. Like all the signs of wit, “indifference” is deployed in a power struggle, and its meanings cannot be fixed in advance. All that is certain is that “indifference” (as sign) is not really indifference.

The theater is made of signs. Nothing is what it seems, and yet there is a strong desire that things and people should either be what they seem, or reveal their being from behind their seeming. This desire also arises from the sign, and is intensified in the theatrical deployment of signs. One should therefore always beware of the pressure towards interpretive synthesis in much academic criticism, which aims above all at the production of determinate characters through unacknowledged extrapolation from the contradictory movement of the dramatic discourse. It is typical of such critical accounts to translate the hostility and combat of Beatrice and Benedick into an appearance, beneath which is to be found the essential reality of their love. For example, Northrop Frye writes:

Benedick and Beatrice in *Much Ado* are [similarly] mechanical comic humors, prisoners of their own wit, until a benevolent practical joke enables their real feelings to break free of their verbal straitjackets.¹

One consequence is that the plot becomes one of revelation: “The action of a comedy often leads to a kind of self-knowledge which releases a character from the bondage of his humor.”¹² The difficulty in thinking against the strong tide of presuppositions guiding such interpretations is that they are not entirely wrong. That would be too simple. But in their rewriting of plot and its discursive clashes as dramatic strategies of revelation, they write the integrations brought about by the ending back into the whole of the dramatic text, abolishing thereby all suggestion of a real constitutive instability, with its attendant anxieties, in the first place. Actually, the strength of such criticism, (its rhetorical persuasiveness is seductive), is that such a regressive stabilization of the text gratifies us, its readership, by the removal of uncertainty, repeating with a certain deceptive accuracy the strategies of closure in the plays themselves. The critical loss is the denial of the textual process as one of the production of alternative possibilities for desire.

It is in this sense that Terry Eagleton is surely right, when he writes of *Much Ado About Nothing*:

The love between Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado* is the effect of elaborately fictitious information fed to each partner, so that it is impossible to decide whether this groundless discourse uncovers a love which was “naturally” there, or actually constructs it.³

This undecidability is important. What happens is that Don Pedro and Claudio, supported by Margaret and Ursula, take over the plot-producing trickster function assigned exclusively to Petruchio in *The Taming of the*
Their “construction” of love is actually an interpretation of each of the partners which is offered, through the contrived overhearings, to the other, who accepts it as true.

At first, the comic effect is straightforward. Benedick alone has accepted the interpretation of Beatrice's hostile demeanor as a cover for love (like a mystified Petruchio), and the plotters have not yet suggested this hermeneutic strategy to Beatrice. Here the audience laughs, “knowing,” for the moment, that Benedick is mistaken:

Benedick. By this day, she's a fair lady. I do spy some marks of love in her.
Beatrice. Against my will I am sent to bid you come in to dinner.
Benedick. Fair Beatrice, I thank you for your pains.
Beatrice. I took no more pains for those thanks than you took pains to thank me. If it had been painful I would not have come.
Benedick. You take pleasure, then, in the message?
Beatrice. Yea, just so much as you may take upon a knife’s point and choke a daw withal.

(Much Ado About Nothing, 2.3.236ff.)

Actually, Beatrice's words are capable of being interpreted in opposing senses but, seeing the benevolent plot in action, the audience can still feel able to separate the “real” meaning from Benedick's comically mistaken interpretation that follows:

Benedick. 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.”—If I do not take pity of her I am a villain. If I do not love her I am a Jew. I will go get her picture.

(2.3.248ff.)

The contrived overhearing is an example of a play enclosing another play, which is common in the Shakespearean opus as a whole. It is particularly striking in Much Ado About Nothing, for the benevolent plot of Claudio and Don Pedro is set against the malevolent plot of Don John, and Don John's staged machinations are reversed in their turn by the quasi-providential plotting of the friar. This play, then, consists largely of plays within plays, and the real audience is interested in the effect of these inner plays on their fictional audience. What we witness is the benevolent plotters' construction of a fictional theater for Benedick. I call it a fictional theater (and not an example of theatrical self-referentiality or mise-en-abîme) because it is addressed to Benedick's desire for clarification and hidden truth. It is a voyeuristic fantasy theater where, for him alone, the ambiguities of the real theater cease. It constrains him to regress to an infantile state of narcissism, anterior to the duplicity of signs where the real theater persists. This regression is dependent upon the “realist” illusion, in which the spectacle is supposed (by the deluded subject) to be free from the duplicity of the sign. But the audience sees that its realist simplicity is an illusion addressed to his desire. If they partly identify with that desire for clarification, they are nonetheless also held at a distance from it.

When the same interpretive strategy is foisted upon Beatrice, the effect is cumulative. The mistake (or “fiction,” since it is constructed) becomes the truth, because it is confirmed by the other, but at the same time
it remains a fictional construct. The conclusion of Claudio's and Don Pedro's benevolent plot organizes this fiction-become-truth into a hierarchy in which the hostility is appearance and love is the reality. At the same time, however, Shakespeare's play does not endorse this simple closure. What is actually restored is not this regressive idealist illusion, but the duplicity of signs, however paradoxical this may sound.

Terry Eagleton comments that the marriages which close the comedies are "the organic society in miniature, a solution to sexual and political dilemmas so ludicrously implausible that even Shakespeare himself seems to have had difficulty in believing it." I would argue that this depends upon the larger critical myth of "recognition" with its structural re-writing of plot. Eagleton's summary of the marriage as myth makes the point that it re-writes desire in essentialist terms:

Marriage is not an arbitrary force which coercively hems in desire, but reveals its very inward structure—what desire, if only it had known, had wanted all the time. When you discover your appropriate marriage partner you can look back, rewrite your autobiography and recognize that all your previously coveted objects were in fact treacherous, displaced parodies of the real thing, shadows of the true substance. This, broadly speaking, is the moment of the end of the comedies. Marriage is natural, in the sense of being the outward sign or social role which expresses your authentic inward being, as opposed to those deceitful idioms which belie it. It is the true language of the erotic self, the point at which the spontaneity of individual feeling and the stability of public institutions harmoniously interlock.

The retroactive function of marriage is to act as the disclosure of the "truth" of desire in the service of social order. The sense of the ending which rewrites the middle in terms of appearance and essence is the crucial activity of the myth. Eagleton's passing appeal to Shakespeare's "difficulty in believing" is best understood as a self-deconstructive property of the comic text, whereby the dramatic discourse undoes its own myths of closure. For me, the main interest is that this deconstruction of the monological plot and its closure can be related to the complex relations of anxiety and pleasure. The Beatrice-Benedick plot in Much Ado About Nothing ends with less stress on the socialized libido (marriage) than on the corresponding socialization of hostile rivalry within the language of desire. This is what makes the marriage possible. The agency for this is the restoration of mutual joking, with its ambiguities that allow hostility to be misrecognized as mere appearance. Since Beatrice and Benedick at the end mutually agree to interpret verbal aggression as a cover for love, aggression is allowed to continue in the form of joking banter. The jokes with which this play ends resemble the opening but they are not absolutely the same. Their hostility, which runs momentarily wild in the middle of the play, is recontained in the end. The recontainment of violence, via a joking misrecognition, seems to me the main point. The comic plot transforms violence into harmony, but the harmony is shot through with anxiety over the possible alternative resolution. Love is precariously close to hostility. Only the joke holds this disastrous "clarification" in abeyance.

The witty engagement with the other person is certainly a desire to please that person, and it can be construed as a verbal act of "love." But it is never free from narcissistic self-assertion, and rival narcissisms imply a state of war. That is to say, when the very act of pleasing the other through the seductive language of wit is also an act of power, the individual seeks the euphoric gratification of mastery in the other's admission of a vulnerable interiority set up by the speaker. This is the opening situation between Beatrice and Benedick. It is not a stable hierarchy in which real love is waiting to be released from the constraints of a surface hostility. It is a degree of rivalry within wit itself, unexplored even in the formal combats of Love's Labour's Lost. It is as though Beatrice had watched the process of Katherina's interpellation, and was now playing from a position of equality, or at least a bid for it. The result is a deadlock of wills. Only the intervention of a set of tricksters, Don Pedro and Claudio with their plot, can resolve it by setting up a mutual "recognition" which stabilizes the combat into an interiorized hierarchy, where hostility can be (mis)recognized as an appearance covering the reality of love. Before the intervention of Don Pedro and Claudio, the play shows the opening situation of mutual joking descending towards disaster. Through their intervention, Don Pedro and Claudio rescue the
relationship from mutual destruction, but the perceptibly fictional nature of the rescue places the audience in a
divided position vis à vis their own pleasure. It hovers on the edge of a critical awareness of the means by
which its own gratifications in the stabilizing closure have been achieved.

In formal terms the Beatrice-Benedick relationship undergoes a process of disastrous disambiguation, before
ambiguity is restored, by mutual consent, at the end. In the closing jokes, the old hostility is rehearsed, but
harmlessly now, within an acceptance of the plot as truthful revelation which has brought the recalcitrant
couple together:

Benedick. Do not you love
me?
Beatrice. Why no, no more than reason.
Benedick. Why then, your uncle and
the Prince 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.

(5.4.74ff.)

They still do not have the precise knowledge that the others' words which they cite here are fictional. They
have become the truth. Artifice has become nature. When the other characters go on to produce sonnets which
Beatrice and Benedick have written, as proof of their love against what they are now saying, a joyfully
schizoid Benedick exclaims:

A miracle! Here's our own hands against our hearts.

(5.4.91)

At the macro level too, the artifice of plotting which has virtually written the love into Beatrice and Benedick,
has now become the expression of a “nature” from which it cannot be disentangled. The installation of
harmony at the end of this plot is achieved, in all its precariousness, not through disambiguation of signs (i.e.,
“clarification”) but through the restoration of the ambiguities of wit. It is a triumph of writing, or artifice, for it
was the drive to clarification that threatened the disaster that is finally averted.

It might seem paradoxical that it is the masque scene that precipitates the disastrous disambiguation. The
masque scene in act 2 resembles the Muscovite masque in Love's Labour's Lost, in the way that it sets up
illusions, not in the female beholders to whom it is addressed, but in the male producers. Only Claudio and
Benedick believe that their masque disguises are impenetrable. They think they are “unseen” and are therefore
in control of the other. Such simplicity in Claudio enables Don John to trap him into jealousy, by pretending
to address him as Benedick and asking him to get Don Pedro to desist in his attentions to Hero. Benedick is
more subtly, but similarly, trapped by his own disguise. His belief in the impenetrability of the mask functions
almost magically as a narcissistic regression. He knows, of course, that he is being duplicitous, but he thinks
that his little “theater” will induce others into direct speech, and that they will not perceive his duplicity.
Although he is staging the theater here, he behaves in exactly the same way as when Claudio and Don Pedro
stage the overhearing scene for him.

The narcissistic regression to childish simplicity actually makes him vulnerable in the world of signs, because
he never questions his assumption that Beatrice does not know that she is talking to him when she describes
him as the Prince’s fool. Therefore, uncharacteristically (if we consider his wit to be characteristic) he disambiguates her speech when he repeats it to Don Pedro:

Benedick. 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. ... I would not marry her though she were endowed with all that Adam had left him before he transgressed. She would have made Hercules have turned spit, yea, and have cleft his club to make the fire, too.

(2.1.226ff.)

He ends his lament with the locus classicus of the impotent warrior and the castrating female. Then, still not seeing Beatrice’s speech as a joke, he blames her for a slander on himself, and sets out to run her down in public, fulfilling his promise of revenge. If we are unwilling to essentialize Benedick as simply vicious beneath his jesting, we must attend to the dynamics of the discourse here. The masque scene places Benedick in the position of the fool who cannot see Beatrice’s joke (an unusual posture for him). In this scene the joking relationship between Beatrice and Benedick undergoes a process of disambiguation, brought about by Benedick’s failure to meet joke with joke. But the disambiguation of signs is not the same as simply being wrong. The reproach to someone that they “cannot see a joke” is often an evasion itself, a way of failing to acknowledge that he or she has correctly estimated the aggression which the joke normally both conveys and denies. In other words, the “misunderstanding” of a joke is also an undeniably accurate way of understanding it.

The disturbing point is that Benedick’s failure brings out a truth of the witty discourse: the love is not more essential than the aggression. The hostility, no longer restrained by the mutual consent which should conventionally contain it within the established norms of the war of wit, threatens to run riot. When Don Pedro proposes to achieve “one of Hercules’ labours” and bring the pair “into a mountain of affection th’one with th’other” (2.1.342), his proposal amounts to reversing this process of disambiguation in the opposite direction. My argument is not that the aggression is more essential than the love, which would be a mere inversion of the more common essentializing interpretation. It is that the witty exchange at the beginning contains both potentials. When Leonato says to the messenger: “You must not, sir, mistake my niece. There is a kind of merry war betwixt Signor Benedick and her” (1.1.55ff.), he is trying to account for the excessive acerbity of her tone. His explanation is not, as it were, the voice of analytic truth. It is a response to the breach of decorum in Beatrice’s excess, which it explains away, more or less successfully. Both Beatrice and Benedick have been compared to Lady Emilia Pia and Lord Gaspar Pallavicino, representatives of decorous courtly wit in the immensely influential translation of Castiglione’s Il Libro del Cortegiano, but actually the most striking feature of their wit, even at the beginning, is the way in which it hovers at the point of the breakdown of decorum. This is not to deny the Castiglione connection. The point is that the Beatrice-Benedick plot enacts a breakdown, which is where it explores the language of wit instead of merely representing it.

The drive to clarification is in perpetual conflict with the duplicity of signs. (In this sense, clarification contradicts theatricality.) Even before Benedick’s appearance at the beginning of the play, there is a debate between Beatrice and the messenger over Benedick’s nature. The messenger defends him as “a good soldier,” and Beatrice reproaches “signor Mountanto” (“upthrust” in sword-play) for being a verbal braggart, and by the same token sexually untrustworthy, a man who changes his faith “as the fashion of his hat” (1.1.68). She makes other hints about a previous broken engagement, and some critics are satisfied by references to an earlier narrative as the key to some kind of truth. Actually, we are confronted with the same issue as in Love’s Labour’s Lost. The witty sexual war is accompanied by extreme distrust on the part of the witty lady. As in the
earlier play, the “merry war” is situated just at the termination of a real war of arms, and the nature of the male warrior identity is put into question by the shift from deeds into language.

However, the outcome is totally different; so much so, that this play almost seems like a rejoinder to the closure proposed in *Love's Labour's Lost*. As a wit, Benedick has an undecidable mobility associated with duplicity:

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 troths, my lord, I spoke mine.

(1.1.207ff.)

As in *Love's Labour's Lost*, the mistrusting witty lady, Beatrice, offers to the witty and wordy lord, Benedick, the partly unwelcome but irresistible opportunity to prove his faith in deeds. The feudal test here is simple: “Kill Claudio!” The archaic regression to the warrior romance, where being is underwritten by deed, is more disturbing than the stylized feudal test at the end of *Love's Labour's Lost*. The witty Beatrice is swept up in a barbaric desire for revenge by the public insult to her “kinswoman,” and she challenges Benedick to prove that ultimately he is a man of his word. Overtaken by the regressive fantasy which shapes the whole of Don John's plot, she defines men (i.e., “real” men) by the directness of deed instead of shilly-shallying verbal evasion: “O God that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the marketplace” (4.1.305). She cannot be a man, but she can challenge Benedick to show that he is not just words:

Beatrice. 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.

(4.1.317ff.)

Benedick, for his part, is trapped. He meets Beatrice’s challenge, and he will prove his faith in the archaic manner, but the display of faith is totally separate from belief in the rightness of what he is doing. He will act because Beatrice thinks “in her [your] soul” that Claudio has wronged Hero. But it is still roleplaying.

Beatrice's regression to an archaic or nostalgic version of manhood makes her appear somewhat like Lady Macbeth “unsexing” herself as a challenge to her husband to act. Her desire to be a “man” is inseparable from her reproach to Benedick that he is not one. When Benedick rapidly yields to the force of Beatrice's challenging reference to a general lack of manhood in the present age of signs, when “manhood is melted into curtsies …,” their shared nostalgia for the lost epoch of manhood is much more significant than the gender difference between them. Fortunately, unlike *Love's Labour's Lost*, the ending restores wit and ambiguity in place of the disaster which the desired proof of male selfhood threatens to bring about. Nonetheless, the symbiotic relationship between Beatrice and Benedick, which ensures that both share the anxiety that is the obverse of wit, means that they are jointly vulnerable to the lure of a lost phallocentrism.

**THE DESIRE FOR SINGLE VISION**

The drive to clarification, the desire to get behind appearances to a supposed truth, is a violent desire. My comparison with the ending of *Love's Labour's Lost* has shown that, at least in the Beatrice-Benedick plot, this death wish, which is also a phallocentric and a historical regression, is averted by a restoration of the
ambiguity of signs. The violence which overtakes Beatrice and Benedick also arises from their involvement in the romance plot of Claudio and Hero. In turning to this now, I want to discuss its striking similarity with the plot of *Othello*, because in both the comic romance and the tragedy, patriarchal murder of the beloved is a desire organized through the lure of the visible.

The point that I wish to establish is not the commonplace that appearances are deceptive. That implies that there is a truth which is not deceptive; both Othello and Claudio “know” this and passionately desire to see it. My point, then, is quite other. It is that looking is a libidinal drive. It informs Benedick’s regressive narcissism in the masque scene, where he seeks to look upon the women but to be impenetrable to their gaze. It is the same voyeuristic drive that makes him vulnerable to the benevolent plotters’ staged seduction, for he is alert to the duplicities of language but blind to the fact that the visible is also a series of signs through which he is vulnerable. Towards the end of the play, when he “recognizes” his true nature, the audience sees this recognition as a dramatic joke: he is in fact being constructed by the plotters, even at the level of his desires. This is more problematic than mere deceit, for “deceit” implies an alternative truth that is being concealed. But, at the end, Benedick is actually saved from further anxiety, and potential violence, through his lack of suspicion towards the visible:

*Benedick.* Signor Leonato,  
truth it is, good signor,  
Your niece regards me with an eye of favour.  
*Leonato.* That eye my daughter lent  
hers, ’tis most true.  
*Benedick.* And I do with an eye of  
love requite her.  
*Leonato.* The sight whereof I think  
you had from me,  
From Claudio, and the Prince. But what’s your will?  
*Benedick.* Your answer, sir, is enigmatical.  
But for my will, my will is your good will  
May stand with ours this day to be conjoined  
In the state of honourable marriage …

(5.4.21ff.)

For Benedick, the idea that his desiring eyes are borrowed is “enigmatical,” since visuality is for him beyond the play of signs. He does not know that he has been trapped into love in the same way that Claudio was trapped into hatred. But the audience, which knows better, is also more deeply perplexed by the joke which gives it pleasure. For the closing harmony of “wills” or desires is also constructed out of signs. This constructed satisfaction of the ocular drive is worth comparing with the address of Iago and Don John to their male victims, for they concern the same anxiety.

In the case of Othello and Claudio, the scopic drive is constructed by the malevolent plotters and turns to a murderous violence, of which they are also the victims. The common name for that violence is jealousy, but naming something should not be considered the end of enquiry. As we are dealing with a desire, it is necessary to understand the satisfaction which it seeks, and the anxiety which it tries to overcome. My argument is that, within a patriarchal discourse, the scopic drive promises a gratifying certainty and recentering of the dominant (male) subject, and that this is exacerbated by the very perception of the unreliability of signs. *Othello* is an exploration of the crisis of the sign within the patriarchy, where the scopic drive seeks stabilization through murder. I turn to *Othello* first, because my argument is that the tragedy takes to extremes what the comic romance precariously averts, but only through a benevolent counterplot which relies equally on the scopic drive. The tragedy and the comedy both employ malevolent plotters, whose seductive address to the anxieties of their respective warrior figures throws into relief the peculiar gratifications which they offer.
Through Iago's leading rhetorical question: “Did Michael Cassio, when you wooed my lady, / Know of your love?” (Othello, 3.3.96ff.), the anxiety and the desire to know are simultaneously constructed in Othello. (Indeed they are the same desire.) Iago does not need to pretend that his question is innocent. He presents himself to Othello as a tantalizing site, rivaling Desdemona herself as the keeper of a desired knowledge, where truth could be separated from appearance. He suggests an absent content behind his words, thereby provoking a desire for immediate (visible) presence. Othello responds with this desire for visibility:

Othello. 'Think, my lord?'
By heaven, thou echo'st me
As if there were some monster in thy thought
Too hideous to be shown! Thou dost mean something.

If thou dost love me,

Show me thy thought [emphases added]

(3.3.110ff.)

Iago's verbal seduction actually flaunts language as a veil. That which is feared, the ‘monstrous’, is also desired, because it is presented as concealed knowledge, which, if visibly possessed, would put an end to the concealments of language. From this point on, the desire for disambiguation, with its promise (which is also a threat) for a final separation of essence and appearance, takes over. Iago focuses its violence on Desdemona's body. She is the site of an equivocation, an enigmatic body that must be destroyed in order to arrive at a clarification. This clarification will take the form of the compelled confession prior to execution, for that particular exercise of royal power as the theater of truth is also part of Othello's fantasy. Such is the force of the desire set up by Iago's seduction that if Desdemona's body does not satisfy it through “ocular proof,” Iago's will:

Othello. (taking Iago by the throat)
Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore.
Be sure of it. Give me the ocular proof,
Or, by the worth of mine eternal soul,
Thou hadst better have been born a dog
Than answer my naked wrath. [emphasis added]

(3.3.364ff.)

The fantasy which Iago offers Othello is the role of a judge whose gaze would be able to penetrate the duplicity of signs, separate essence from appearance, and compel confession. It is a fantasy of the power to effect transcendental stabilization, and it is an interpretive desire for order which only comes into being because of the anxieties which besiege patriarchal possession.

Iago subtly strengthens the desire for the dreaded proof by meditating aloud on the unfulfillable nature of ocular “satisfaction,” at least for “mortal eyes.” “Satisfaction” becomes a key word which links punishment with desire:

Iago. You would be satisfied?
Othello. Would? Nay, and I will.
Iago. And may. But how, how satisfied my lord?
Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on,
Behold her topped?
Othello. Death and damnation! O!
Iago. It were a tedious difficulty,
Iago taunts Othello with the impossibility for “mortal eyes” to see what language can suggest. The secrets of others can only be perceived by God, and it is in achieving such transcendental vision that true “satisfaction” is also achieved. Iago offers the closest approximation, not quite to the inaccessible truth, but to “the door of truth,” to glimpse it voyeuristically from outside. Jealousy here is a desire for the “prospect” or vision of the elusive object, which is named “satisfaction.”

The visual satisfaction, which turns to murder, involves the deferral of bodily sexual consummation. For some psychoanalytical critics this deferral is actually a horror of consummation focussed on the white handkerchief, “spotted” with strawberries, which Othello inherited from his mother and passed to the virginal Desdemona, only to see it reappear in the hands of Bianca. It seems to me that there is no need to invoke the primal scene of parental intercourse as a textual absence, when Othello himself names the handkerchief as a talisman of his mother’s hymen received from the Egyptian “charmer”:

Othello. She told her, while
she kept it
‘Twould make her amiable, and subdue my father
Entirely to her love; but if she lost it,
Or made a gift of it, my father's eye
Should hold her loathed, and his spirit should hunt
After new fancies.

Here Othello tells Desdemona that the magic of the hymen, which subdues him as it has his father, depends on it being neither lost nor given to anyone. If it is lost, his “father's eye” (i.e., his own now) would turn to hatred and seek “new fancies.” The common meaning of “new loves” is doubled by the more pertinent threat of new satisfactions. That is why the murder itself has appeared to so many critics as a deferred and displaced consummation of their marriage. The numerous associations of the bridal bed with the death bed utilize a common poetic association of consummation with death. But Othello carefully notes how he will eschew the phallic knife and the blood involved, so as to keep her body as a spectacle of visual purity in death. In some part of his fantasy, he considers her inviolate still; or rather, the consummation/death is not merely delayed but staged by the patriarch as a restoration of virginity that will enable the voyeuristic love to persist beyond death. The murder, therefore is a sublimated sexuality, offering a pleasurable spectacle to Othello himself. The fact that murder as sublimation of bodily desire implies a horrifying visual “aesthetics” makes Shakespeare’s discourse non-complicit with this pleasure.

The horror arises from the constraining power of the fantasy over Othello, which is such that it offers him gratification in the spectacle of himself as “Justice” personified, even while it breaks him. His fantasized restoration of order (“she must die, else she’ll betray more men”), is a necrophilic desire whose gratification is
the feeling of heavenly sorrow, as though Othello were the spectator at his own and Desdemona's tragedy:

Othello. O balmy breath, that
dost almost persuade
Justice to break her sword! One more, one more.
Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee
And love thee after. One more, and that’s the last.
(He kisses her)
So sweet was ne’er so fatal. I must weep,
But they are cruel tears. This sorrow’s heavenly,
It strikes where it doth love.

(5.2.16ff.)

In order to play the fantasy role of the divine Judge, and enjoy thereby the “heavenly sorrow,” this hero has overstepped the bounds of traditional patriarchy. In his fantasy, which is a kind of tragic hubris, he has become God. I would argue that this should be linked, not simply to traditional patriarchy, but to the complex historical moment of its crisis when the threat to possession is such that the male hero enacts for himself on the stage the powerful compensating fantasy of a traditionally forbidden transcendental role. He sees himself performing the divine role, and derives narcissistic pleasure from the spectacle. Shakespeare's drama, therefore, also enables a critical encounter with the patriarchal fantasies that it represents. It provokes in the audience a horrified encounter with the pleasure that the destructive desire for order brings with it. This pleasure is produced by Iago's address to patriarchal anxieties, and this is what makes Iago a figure of contemporary decentering of power. Othello's pain is obvious. What is less obvious is the satisfaction. But without at least the promise of pleasure, in the form of a kind of gratification to fill the gaps opened by the anxieties which he provokes, the trickster could not seduce. The pleasure or “satisfaction” that Iago offers to Othello is the patriarchal fantasy of himself as the almighty Judge, the ultimate interpreter of signs, and disambiguator of appearance and essence.

Stephen Greenblatt has argued persuasively that the desires set in motion in Desdemona by Othello's seductive narration of himself, become a threat to him because he is aware that Desdemona has not been attracted by a real self, i.e., a “natural” self, but by a narrative fiction. Greenblatt glosses Othello's “narrative self-fashioning” as similar to Lacan's version of the endlessly frustrating construction of the self in analysis. The connection between Othello's anxiety and Iago's manipulation of it is brought about by Iago's exploitative, quasi-imperialist “empathy.” Throughout the play, the socially impossible status of the racial misalliance, points back to the bewitching power of Othello's wooing narrative which overthrew that social normality, conventionally called “nature.” Iago's rhetorical triumph really consists in the way that he brings Othello himself to share the metropolitan discourse of the “natural,” because then Desdemona's love for him must be the most violent decentering of “nature.” In this respect, the dialogue between Iago and Othello is an astonishing representation of the discourse of cultural imperialism interpellating its subject, so that Othello's induced destruction of Desdemona is preceded by an acquiescence in the conquest of himself:

Othello. And yet how nature,
erring from itself—
Iago. Ay, there’s the point;
as, to be bold with you,
Not to affect many proposed matches
Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,
Whereeto we see in all things nature tends.
Foh, one may smell in such a will most rank
Foul disproportions, thoughts unnatural!

(3.3.232ff.)
Thus Iago is able to speak for Othello's anxieties, and to suggest that if Desdemona loved Cassio, that would actually be a return to “nature” and to “better judgement”:

_Iago. But pardon me. I do not in position  
Distinctly speak of her, though I may fear  
Her will, recoiling to her better judgement,  
May fall to match you with her country forms  
And happily repent.  
Othello Farewell, farewell.  
If more thou dost perceive, let me know more._

(3.3.239ff.)

When Othello accepts the dominant discourse that casts him out on the grounds of deviance from the “natural,” he goes on to allow Iago’s eyes to see for him too. Iago's plot will depend crucially on the manipulation of Othello's desire to see.

However, Othello's anxieties are not just those of an alien but of the European patriarch, whose place he has recently come to occupy. He occupies a patriarchal position, but without _being_ a patriarch, since the position is usurped. It is this very decenteredness that makes him the representative figure of patriarchal anxiety. A further implication of Greenblatt's Lacanian argument would have to be that the drive to construct a stable self beyond the displacements of narrative is also a regressive drive to return to the “mirror phase,” that is to get back to the mythical visual image of a whole self, constructed in the Imaginary prior to the decentralings at the level of the Symbolic. Presumably, this mythical other self would not conquer Desdemona through the dark sorcery of language (Othello agrees with this charge of Brabantio’s, for he too is now a patriarch fearing betrayal), but would have a “naturally” prettier, i.e., more socially acceptable, face. Obviously, Cassio has a socially endorsed visible presence that Othello lacks, but Iago selects him also because of their joint wooing in the past. Othello’s “love” for Cassio goes back to their joint wooing, and this very identification of Cassio as alterego makes Iago's charge irresistible. Cassio is the self that Othello desires to be and to see himself being, and which Desdemona could love without violating “nature” and betraying her father, with whom Othello also identifies. Thus Iago's plot gets fully under way within the same topos as the initiation of Claudio's anxiety in _Much Ado About Nothing_. The topos of the double wooing is a major figure for an inward fissure, and Othello's racial/cultural marginality actually functions to make him more representative of the crisis of patriarchy than the more comfortably assured Venetian patriarchs themselves.

It is not uncommon to find critics of _Much Ado About Nothing_ paying scant attention to Don Pedro's early proxy wooing of Hero, because Don John's opportunist construction of jealousy in Claudio is short-lived, a failure preceding his more successful, because _visually_ staged, deception. The short-lived episode seems to have little dramatic function within the larger whole. But it introduces the same problems as Othello's wooing: _viz._ what is the self who speaks and seduces, if the fruits of victory are transferable? Initially Don Pedro makes a promise concerning the power of his wooing discourse:

_Don Pedro. 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._

(1.1.30ff.)
What can “thine” mean, under such conditions? Don Pedro simply assumes the transferability of the woman conquered in verbal engagement. But that transferability has become a problem to the “possessor.” It is not simply a matter of Don Pedro popping the question in disguise. Hero's response would then be unequivocally addressed to the man she took to be Claudio. But if Don Pedro is right, and her self-surrender is her response to the power of language, then language threatens the very possession which it enables, because there is no unique self to do the possessing. Another may do it as well. Don Pedro's restitution of Hero to her rightful owner is an incomplete resolution to the anxieties evoked by this episode.

Don Pedro protests to the mocking Benedick that it is only because Claudio lacks a voice that he has spoken for him:

I will but teach them to sing, and restore them to the owner.

(2.1.216)

But Claudio is not literally dumb or incoherent. In fact he is often verbally dexterous when the plot requires it. Nonetheless, he represents an attitude of impatience and suspicion towards language, which is extremely important because it is a desire to get beyond it. That desire, born of suspicion towards all speech including his own, is what Don John exploits. Claudio is from the aristocracy of the sword, and wishes that language would be nothing but a reliable means to achieve an end. When Don Pedro cuts him short with “Thou wilt be like a lover presently, / And tire the hearer with a book of words” (2.1.289ff.), Claudio is relieved to let Don Pedro do the talking for him. Yet he is aware that as a lover he ought to do it for himself. Don Pedro supplies his inadequacy, as Claudio admits:

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.

(1.1.292ff.)

It is immediately after this that Don Pedro talks of the military power of his own discourse that will capture Hero for Claudio. So Don Pedro's very success enables Don John to precipitate the jealous anxiety in Claudio.

Claudio's lack of a voice is often commented on, mostly in contrast to Beatrice and Benedick, who have an excess in that respect. In contemporary terms, Claudio is the warrior who has not yet fully become a court wit. It might seem that the direct honesty of the soldier, combined with “sincerity” of feeling, would spare the innocent couple from the deviousness of language and signs. But, of course, the play tells a different story. Those who cannot manipulate signs, and even those who regard them with suspicion, can nevertheless be manipulated by them. The simple warrior has his violent romance literature of deeds, which structures his feudal imagination. And Claudio was not alone, since romance plots were largely relatively recent, idealizing reinventions of the feudal past. Nostalgia for a supposed time when virtue could guarantee that word match deed, has the force of a regressive desire for stability in an age sensitive to the political power and duplicity of discourse. The visual is the agency of a desire to regress to the stability of what Lacan labels the Imaginary, prior to the untrustworthiness of signs.

From the standpoint of concepts of consistent characterization, there is an inconsistency when Benedick reflects on the power of love and its transformation of Claudio:

Benedick. 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.

(2.3.18ff.)

The audience never hears this transformed Claudio. But Benedick's talk of a transformation here mobilizes the common discursive contrast between love and war, in which letters, wit, and femininity are associated with the former term, and masculinity, deeds, and directness, with the latter. (Beatrice too thinks within these terms.) This discursive structuring is so pervasive in Shakespeare and the Renaissance generally, that it would be merely tedious to accumulate references. However, this play is concerned with the way in which the warrior's essentialist and suspicious scorn of signs lays him open to a manipulation of his corresponding desire for truth behind its supposed appearances. Don John's plot, like Iago's, is an address to a desire to get behind language as appearance in order to make final judgments. Its seductive appeal is that its offer of ocular proof claims to bypass language, and is therefore the nearest approximation to certainty that one can get.

Neither Claudio nor Othello actually state that they prefer the disasters of “ocular” clarification to the pleasures of consummation. And yet it is only that preference which can account for their seduction by paltry proofs. They desire to see what they fear. This constructs their sexuality as scopic drive. The commonsense opposition of fear and desire disappears within the overwhelming desire engendered by this discourse, the desire for scopic “satisfaction.” Satisfaction, even today, is a term in which sexual gratification is interchangeable with destructive vengeance. In both cases it names a mythical equilibrium at the end of a desire. The obviousness of the window trick in Much Ado About Nothing has often been observed; indeed Shakespeare does not even trouble to motivate it as well as Ariosto. Quite a number in the audience of the time might well have recognized its actual provenance, from their reading of Harington's translation of Book 5 of Orlando Furioso. But of course, that is not necessary. What is required is nothing more than recognition of the kind of romance plot that it is. There is no need to suppose a uniformly sophisticated audience to advance the view that Shakespeare's play “defamiliarizes” (and paradoxically renews at a more complex level) the somewhat outworn discourse by displaying the desires which it sets in motion. The strategies by which those desires are constructed by Don John cannot entirely escape the attention of the least critically aware. This means that the romance drama of honor and revenge can no longer be naively consumed. The display of its rhetorical production and its power upsets uncritical consumption. 8

The obviousness of Don John's plot is dramatically meaningful in that it suggests a desire in Claudio to be seduced, which is satisfied by the most perfunctory gestures towards verisimilitude. That is to say, greater Aristotelian probability, whose absence is sometimes deplored, would in fact obscure the workings of desire. Don John partly presents his plot to Claudio and Don Pedro in the guise of a simple test of objective truth. But he also knowingly makes it a challenge to their will to see that truth:

Don John. If you dare not trust that you see, confess not that you know. If you follow me, I will show you enough, and when you have seen more and heard more, proceed accordingly.

(3.2.108ff.)

The fanatical “certainty” with which Claudio follows Don John's lesson in the disambiguation of signs, itself testifies to the violence of the desire to know. In the service of the will to power, Claudio becomes a passionate and murderous interpreter:

She’s but the sign and semblance of her honour. 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.

(4.1.32ff.)

There is a fierce joy in the release of this anger. Claudio's sense of serving the revelation of truth, in church appropriately enough, blinds him to his own proceeding but not to the duplicity of signs per se. Indeed, that duplicity becomes the target of his anger, because its evil is displaced onto Hero. It is in that displacement that he is truly unconscious.

Where the marriage ceremony calls for the acknowledgement of desire, Claudio finds a new satisfaction in thrusting the desired object away. In his fantasy, the lover has become the judge. But to focus upon this, as though it were the revelation of an essential malevolence of character, would be to miss the way in which the joy is also pain, and the disambiguation of Hero's signs is also self-destruction. Here he resembles Othello. When he exclaims, “Out on thee, seeming! I will write against it” (4.1.56), he adds in the next lines, “You seem to me as Dian in her orb, / As chaste as the bud ere it be blown.” This is a recognition that he is “writing” against himself, and is still caught up in signs. Accordingly, he concludes that Hero's destruction is a destruction of himself, within a generalized misogyny:

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 more shall it be gracious.

(4.1.105ff.)

Don John's plot, it should be stressed, is conceived as an attack on the whole of the ruling order, from which he is excluded by his illegitimacy. What he engineers is a tragedy along the lines of a Spanish honor play. In accordance with the feudal code of honor, the destruction of the honor of the “weaker vessel” is in reality an attack on the patriarch, whose honor is exposed by any inability to defend it in the dependent female. The locus classicus, at least within comedy, is Tirso de Molina's famous Don Juan play, El Burlador de Sevilla (c. 1625?). Patriarchal honor provides the whole dramatic logic of Don Juan Tenorio's assault on the fathers and rulers through the seduction of daughters and wives. It is an assault which provokes violent closure in the form of the revenge of the Supreme Patriarch himself. It is the ultimate revenge play, because the vengeance by God through a reincarnated Father/statue, rescues the whole patriarchal ideology from the mockery of the false son. The latter is even more marked as a traitor to the “blood” because he is not actually a bastard by birth. (The extent to which Tirso's play endorses its own ideology must be left aside here. Certainly the vengeful phallic statue teeters on the edge of the more obviously comic vocation of its later imitators like Molière. But even these have a serious subtext, as the more disturbing aspects of Mozart's opera attest.)

To consider Leonato's or Claudio's condemnation of Hero outside the discourse of honor, in which they are also at stake, would be to miss the whole point. Leonato's paternal curse of Hero is also an act of despair and confession of vulnerability:

Leonato. ... mine, and
mine I loved, and mine I praised,
And mine that I was proud on, mine so much
That I to myself was not mine,
Valuing of her—why she, O she
is fallen
Into a pit of ink, that the wide sea
Hath drops too few to wash her clean again. [emphasis added]

(4.1.137ff.)

There is certainly a critique of this value system in Shakespeare's play, but it is not adequately described by attributing an individualistic moralizing judgment of Leonato or Don Claudio to the playwright or his text. The play is more radical (but not necessarily satirical), because the critique bears upon the collective code, and not upon a somewhat sketchy individuality. Shakespeare's play makes the audience witness the patriarchs themselves being manipulated by a trickster figure, who is master of the plot. They are therefore partly victims of a discourse of which they only seem to be the masters. Furthermore it sweeps up others, like Beatrice and Benedick, in its power. This power is only finally arrested by the benevolent counterplot of the friar.

Don John's plot, which threatens to destroy them all in a revenge tragedy, is checked by a benevolent trickster figure whose power over others' desires has a transcendental, ultimately stabilizing effect. The friar begins by addressing Claudio's interpretation of the “exterior shows” of Hero's blushing as “guiltiness, not modesty,” and her father's translation of this signified into the fear of “tainted blood” that haunts him. He replies by transforming her in his speech into a field of conflict, in which the white of innocence and truth triumphs over the tainted red of blood. Then he goes on:

Friar. 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.

(4.1.158ff.)

His language borrows Claudio's and Leonato's metaphors, and transforms them into those of the church militant, even down to the inquisitorial fires that burn errors to preserve the purity of truth. Like them, the friar links judgment and violence, and he too talks within essentialist presuppositions. Aware that his “reading” of Hero's signs can be challenged as equally arbitrary as theirs, he immediately grounds it rhetorically in every form of transcendental authority that he can muster:

Friar. 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.

(4.1.164ff.)

He then proposes the counterplot of the fictional death of Hero, to put this authority to the test. The friar's reading of the signs (which the audience knows to be circumstantially correct), is to be transcendentally grounded, and his plot will be a test and revelation of Hero's true nature. But at the same time it is also a way of quickening Claudio's regret for a lost object. That, however, means that it is not a revelation of Hero's essence, but an appeal to Claudio's desire. He counts upon a manipulation of Claudio's desire as a means to bring about the happy outcome:

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.

(4.1.217ff.)

This worldly knowledge informs the strategic address to Claudio's desire, which is the counterplot. Don John's plot is countered on its own grounds (for want of a better word), the manipulation of signs to structure another's desire. Like Claudio and Don Pedro, when they fulfill their dramatic function as benevolent plotters who manipulate Beatrice and Benedick, the friar too converts Claudio's hatred back to love through his socializing plot. The reversibility of the signs of desire and hatred operates in both plots. It has to be said that the friar, in his capacity as theatrical plotter, is a true expert in the power of the inward “eye and prospect of [his] soul” in the construction of desire for the lost object:

Friar. 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 apparelled in more precious habit,
More moving-delicate, and full of life,
Into the eye and prospect of his soul
Than when she lived indeed.

(4.1.223ff.)

He also relies on the persuasive power of the erotic imagination over all convictions of truth:

Friar. 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.

(4.1.230ff.)

The friar is an expert seducer, like Don John and Iago, relying on the power of signs. He is a good therapist, but a very equivocal good man. Nonetheless, his worldly expertise is legitimated by his insight into Hero's “true” nature. His engagement in battle against Don John's slander guarantees that his production of plot, which, like Don John's and Iago's, is the furtive production of desire through the creation of a lack, shall nonetheless function as a revelation. Given this closure, his manipulative seduction affords gratification to the audience, but not without inviting a certain critical awareness of its own procedure. As in the case of the plots mounted by Prospero in The Tempest, and the Duke in Measure for Measure, the revelation of the artifice places the closure in abeyance.

Notes

5. Baldassar Castiglione, *Il Libro del Cortegiano* [1528]. This work had immense influence all over Europe, and was translated into English as *The Book of the Courtier* [1561] by Sir Thomas Hoby (London: Dent, 1944).

6. See Peter L. Rudnytsky, “The Purloined Handkerchief in *Othello*,” *The Psychoanalytic Study of Literature*, ed. Joseph Reppen and Maurice Charney (Hillsdale, New Jersey: The Analytic Press, 1985), 169-190. André Green, in *The Tragic Effect* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 125-127, writes of the “dual origin of the handkerchief,” since Othello talks of it as a gift from his father to his mother. Thus Desdemona is the site of the feared lack, deriving from the castration complex, and the handkerchief functions as a Lacanian “veil” over a lack of the penis, provoking a desire to see. I am more concerned with the provocation to see than with arriving always at the same missing object.


8. For an alternative, more rationalistic reading of the romance connection between *Othello* and *Much Ado About Nothing*, see John Traugott, “Creating a Rational Rinaldo: a Study in the Mixture of the Genres of Comedy and Romance in *Much Ado*,” *The Power of Forms in the English Renaissance* edited by Stephen Greenblatt (Norman, Oklahoma: Pilgrim Books, 1982) 157-81. There is much to agree with here. However, Traugott is mainly concerned with questions of genre and parodic defamiliarization, explicitly arguing that Beatrice is in control of everything, leader of “the game-playing rationalists” who drive away the violence of romance through wit. There is no interest in the duplicity of wit itself or with its relationship to the anxious politics of regressive desire, which are central to my argument.

Criticism: Triviality And “Nothing”-Ness: David Ormerod (essay date 1972)


*[In the following essay, 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.”]*

Most critics who have written on the subject of *Much Ado about Nothing* seem agreed that the play must take its place in Shakespeare's incessant debate about the conflict between appearance and reality, and the difficulties which beset an individual when he attempts to make a right choice, particularly in love, between superficial seeming and inner truth. Few readers, I imagine, would quarrel with the following verdict:

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 realization of beauty, and the distinctions between inward and outward beauty, appearance and reality, and fancy and true affection—all are 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 judgment upon love's truth.¹

I agree with this reading, and would like to attempt to amplify it by using a methodology pioneered by Miss Dorothy Hockey.² Taking her stand upon Helge Kökeritz's treatment of Richard Grant White's suggestion that the play's title may contain a pun upon 'Nothing' and 'noting',³ Miss Hockey reads the play as an extended
treatment of the implications of this pun, and examines in detail all the occasions during the play when attention to the act of ‘noting’, of eavesdropping and observing, enhances our understanding of the play's structure and morality.\textsuperscript{4} I do not wish to quarrel with Miss Hockey's conclusions.\textsuperscript{5} Rather, I would like to draw attention to an occasion in the play when Shakespeare makes an explicit identification of the word ‘Nothing’, and then to follow the appearances of ‘Nothing’s’ alias throughout the play. Here, in a scene of central importance for the resolution of the story, and at almost the exact centre of the play's extent in time, we hear Conrade and Borachio in earnest discussion. They are talking about the conspiracy directed against Hero and Claudio; they are also choosing to talk about it, very incongruously, in terms 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? (2 Watchman. I know that Deformed, a' has been a vile thief this seven year, a' goes up and down like a gentleman: I remember his name ... Borachio. Seest thou not, I say, what a deformed thief this fashion is? how giddily a' turns about all the hotbloods 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, 114-39)\textsuperscript{6}

Several facts strike us. Borachio insists that the plot against Hero is intimately linked with the idea of fashion, and firmly repudiates Conrade's suggestion that, by invoking the machinations of fashion, he is digressing. We note, in passing, that fashion is associated with the decline of Hercules (see below, pp. 96-7, 99-100, 104-5). And, again, the Watch, in its own fumbling way, immediately recognises the villainous role which fashion plays in society, and elevates it to the stature of some Spenserian allegorical figure. An attentive reading of the play fully confirms Borachio and the Watch in the importance they attach to fashion. This essay contends that fashion, in its guise of Deformed, the vile thief, 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.

According to Bartlett, Spevack, and the Oxford Concordance, the word ‘fashion’ occurs nineteen times in \textit{Much Ado About Nothing}; ‘fashions’, ‘fashioned’, and ‘fashioning’ each occur once. The only other plays in which the word figures at all prominently are \textit{Hamlet} and \textit{Julius Caesar}, with seven occurrences each. In \textit{Much Ado}, Shakespeare has used the word in a number of senses, all of which are pejorative, and which seem to encompass the following meanings, as given by the \textit{OED}.

As a noun—

1. The action or process of making. Hence, the ‘making’ or workmanship as an element in the value of plate or jewellery.
2. Make, build, shape. Hence, in wider sense, visible characteristics, appearance.

7. Conventional usage in dress, mode of life, etc., *esp.* as observed in the upper circles of society; conformity to this usage. Often personified, or quasi-personified.

10. *The fashion:* a. The mode of dress, etiquette, furniture, style of speech, etc., adopted in a society for the time being.

And, in a verbal sense—

3b. To counterfeit, pervert.

*[OED here cites Much Ado, I, iii, 27]*

Just as Othello's Venice (and Shylock's Venice, too) provides us with an icon of a society totally given up to gross commercial criteria, a society which assess human beings in terms of money, jewels, and outward appearance, so Messina is ruled by fashion, and the individual must learn to distinguish between externals, which are misleading and often downright vicious, and the internal truth. So, Beatrice, in her search for a husband, is in a dilemma—how is she to see through the fashionable exterior in order to attain a true assessment of the real man beneath? In antithesis to ‘fashion’, which must be recognised and shunned as a corrupting force, the play establishes the opposing entity of ‘faith’. This is, of course, but one aspect of Shakespeare's perennial love-ethic, which relies closely on the faculty of independent choice.

"Things base and vile, holding no quantity
Love can transpose to form and dignity.
Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind …"

*(MND, I, i, 232-4)*

In *Much Ado*, faith and mind seem to be synonymous, in contrast to appearance, which deceives. This motif is too well recognised to need elaborate development, but we will immediately think of Desdemona's unselfish and virtuous love (she 'saw Othello's visage in his mind' (I, iii, 253)), of Cressida's lament upon the fickleness of women, easily led astray by the evidence of their eyes, and of the aphoristic treatment of the doctrine in *The Merchant of Venice*—

"So may the outward show be least ourselves
The world is still deceived with ornament."

*(III, ii, 73-4)*

Faith is judgement and eyesight supplemented by imagination, so that we can ‘apprehend / More than cool reason ever comprehends’ (v, i, 5-6). The opposite, romantic love, is ultimately bestial: Venus urges Adonis to adopt the ethic of his horse, and Titania becomes a sort of Pasiphae—in the midst of a labyrinthine wood (there is even a character called Theseus) we encounter a monster with a human body and an animal's head.

So, ‘the fashion of a doublet … is nothing to a man’—appearances don’t count. The man, not his clothes, is what matters. But Claudio is deceived by Margaret's disguise, for fashion, which deforms, is a thief, and Margaret disguises herself to steal Hero's honour. As Hero is deceived by Don Pedro's disguise, Claudio is deceived by the disguises which the ladies adopt at the end of the play. Don John, in accordance with his role of ‘plain-dealing villain’, is not fooled by disguise, but rather, he employs disguise—hence he pretends to be duped by Claudio's disguise at the masked ball, in order to confide a secret to him. Fashion is a sinister conspiracy. Don Pedro's plot to bring Beatrice and Benedick together—'I would fain have it a match—and
doubt not but to fashion it’ (II, i, 344-5)—counterpoints Borachio's plot to alienate Claudio and Hero—‘… I shall 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’ (II, ii, 43-6). The sinister aspect of the word is amply conveyed by Don John, for ‘… it better fits my blood to be disdained of all than to fashion a carriage to rob love from any …’ (I, iii, 27-8)—yet, in a sense, this is just what he does.

To step outside the criteria of the fashionable world is to invite its censure. So, for instance, Hero speaks critically of Beatrice's contempt for her foppish suitors—

Ursula. Sure, sure, such carping
is not commendable.
Hero. No, nor to be so odd and from
all fashions,
As Beatrice is, cannot be commendable.

(III, i, 71-3)

It is most appropriate that the bride Hero should condemn the unfashionable Beatrice in such jargon, for, to the frivolous characters of the play, marriage is equated with a fashionable garment. Leonato wishes to see Beatrice ‘one day fitted with a husband’, which, if we discount the lewd joke, is tantamount to saying that a man is no more than the clothes he wears. Beatrice peremptorily dismisses this attitude when she rejects Don Pedro's jocular offer of marriage—‘your grace is too costly to wear every day’ (II, i, 307-8). This discussion is paralleled quite soon by the discussion which Hero and her attendants have on the subject of her approaching marriage, for their attention is concentrated, not upon the institution itself, but upon an external—

Margaret. I like the new tire
within excellently if the hair were a thought browner: and your gown's
a most rare fashion i'faith. I saw the Duchess of Milan's gown
that they praise so—
Hero. O, that exceeds, they say.
Margaret. By my troth's but
a night-gown in respect of yours—cloth o'gold and cuts, and laced
with silver, set with pearls down sleeves, side sleeves, and skirts, round
underborne with a bluish tinsel—but for a fine quaint graceful and excellent
fashion, yours is worth ten on’t.

(III, iv, 12-22)

Hero's wedding preparations (‘… I'll show thee some attires, and have thy counsel / Which is the best to furnish me tomorrow’ (III, i, 102-3)) should prepare us for the tragic and violent outcome of the wedding day, as should the words of Don Pedro to Claudio when the latter offers to escort him to Aragon immediately after the ceremony, for Pedro, too, speaks of marriage as a garment: 'Nay, that would be as great a soil in the gloss of your marriage, as to show a child his new coat and forbid him to wear it’ (III, ii, 5-7). Claudio and Hero are entirely creatures of the eye, not of the mind. Claudio can mistake Margaret for Hero because the latter is only a dressed-up nothing, identifiable only by her clothes. Hero's name (which does not occur in any of the sources) is pathetic—the devoted Leander is contrasted with the fickle Claudio. As we might expect, Claudio is a slave to fashion, and Benedick elaborates on this:

… I have known when he would have walked ten miles 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 he is turned orthography—his words are a very fantastical banquet, just so many strange dishes. (II, iii, 12-21)
In the terminology of the play, this is very strong condemnation indeed, and serves to lead us to a discussion of a minor but insistent motif—the function of the frequent allusions to Hercules and Blind Cupid, whom I take to be the tutelary deities associated with faith and fashion respectively. Hercules is, of course, synonymous with courage, manliness, and honesty, and Beatrice laments that the society of Messina will not tolerate the Herculean virtues, but speedily corrupts them. The virtuous Hercules was, of course, an iconographical figure which was instantly recognisable to Shakespeare's audience. 'In the Renaissance Hercules was one of the two or three best-known mythological personages, the subject of paintings, tapestries, engravings, drawings, sculptures, plays, poems, learned treatises, emblems, adages, schoolboy essays, and countless incidental allusions.'12 The immediate significance of the Hercules allusions is obvious, and springs from his association with the Twelve Labours.13 So, when the characters of Much Ado point out that Hercules is an unpopular deity in Messina, they are also indicating that the values associated with him are in desuetude. Borachio has pointed out that in Messina the cod-piece of 'shaven Hercules' takes precedence over his club, but it is Beatrice who indicates the reason for this decline.

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!14 or that I had any friend would be a man for my sake! But manhood is melted into curtsies, valour into complement, 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 …

(IV, i, 314-21)

The speech is crucial. Perhaps, as Benedick indicates, Claudio was once a Hercules—at the beginning of the play, after all, we hear of him ‘doing in the figure of a lamb the feats of a lion’ (I, i, 14-15)—but Messina has proved his Omphale. Dressed in elegant, fashionable clothes, the young men of Messina have been metaphorically castrated, their former valour metamorphosed into trivial social accomplishments; fashion, the thief, has deformed them. As Omphale clad Hercules in feminine garments and set him to spin amongst her women, so has Messina unmanned her warriors, and Beatrice in search of a husband finds herself surrounded by effeminate boys.15 Such a one is of no use to her—‘What should I do with him? dress him in my apparel and make him my waiting gentlewoman?’ (II, i, 31-2). She has no desire herself to play Omphale,16 for ‘he who has no beard is less than a man,’ and such a one is Claudio. Benedick so taunts him to his face—‘My Lord Lackbeard’ (IV, i, 187). We note that when the plan, conceived by Pedro and Claudio, to bring Beatrice and Benedick into ‘a mountain of affection’ seems to be succeeding, the conspirators discuss Benedick's alleged symptoms in terms of appearance, clothes, fashion, disguises, and the shaving off of beards (III, ii, 29-45).

But effeminacy and fashionableness are not just trivial lapses from grace—they are heinous sins, and from the fashionable syndrome can come bloody events. In the play, this is conveyed partly by the antagonism between generations. While Leonato and Antonio share in the general moral decline, there is yet a sense in which they are not as far gone in triviality as is Claudio himself; it is the younger generation which has most completely succumbed to the temptation to pursue the fashionable, which is, by definition, ephemeral and mutable. Leonato, for instance, sees himself, however waywardly, as embodying older, simpler, and more virtuous modes of conduct. Hence, when he challenges Claudio to a duel, and derides his ‘nice fence’, he is not only being contemptuous of the new-fangled rapier (a young man's weapon), but is taking the two contrasting styles of fencing to embody a moral antithesis. Antonio develops this line of thought:

Leonato. If thou kill'st
me, boy, thou shalt kill a man.
Antonio. He shall kill two of us,
and men indeed—
... Win me and wear me! Let him answer me.
Come follow me, boy, come sir boy, come follow me.
Sir boy, I'll whip you from your foiling fence …
Content yourself, God knows I loved my niece,
And she is dead, slandered to death by villains,
That dare as well answer a man indeed
As I dare take a serpent by the tongue.
Boys, apes, braggarts, Jacks, milksops! …
Hold you content. What, man! I know them, yea,
And what they weigh, even to the utmost scruple—
Scambling, out-facing, fashion-monging boys,
That lie, and cog, and flout, deprave and slander,
Go anticly, and show outward hideousness,
How they might hurt their enemies, if they durst,
And this is all.

(V, i, 79-99)

It is significant that Antonio identifies Claudio's treachery directly with his subservience to fashion; he is capable of slandering a woman to death in this cowardly way, but loth to fight real men, precisely because he is a 'fashion-monging boy'. The same phrase is used to identify moral turpitude with fashion among the young when Mercutio denounces Tybalt in *Romeo and Juliet*:

The pox of such antic lisping affecting fantasticoes, these new tuners of accent! By Jesu a very good blade—a very tall man—a very good whore! Why, is not this a lamentable thing, grandsire, that we should thus be afflicted with these strange flies, these fashion-mongers, these pardon-me's, who stand so much on the new form that they cannot sit at ease on the old bench?

(II, iv, 28-35)

And the fashionable fantasticoes are ubiquitous—Claudio has many of their accomplishments. Challenged to a duel by Benedick, Claudio paraphrases his acceptance in a peculiar jargon ‘… 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 nought’ (V, i, 151-3)—for presumably he prides himself on his ability to carve intricately at table, another fashionable accomplishment. The orchard, in which so much of the eavesdropping and conspiring takes place, is ‘pleached’, recalling the Spenserian and Shakespearian commonplace of the moral antagonism embodied in the nature versus art antithesis, almost as if we can see, in the pleached branches, a faint analogy to the Bower of Bliss, with its rejection of nature for artifice; to the artificial court of Leontes rejecting the pastoral simplicity of Bohemia, and so on. Don Pedro says something in much the same vein when he commends Leonato for his hospitality, for ‘… the fashion of the world is to avoid cost, and you encounter it’ (I, i, 92-3), and the fashion of the world (presumably at least in part the dictates of contemporary social mores) is opposed to hospitality and solicitousness. Don Pedro continues to harp on the difference between seeming and being when he asserts his belief in the sincerity of Leonato's wish that something should occur to prolong the visit to Messina—'I dare say he is no hypocrite, but prays from his heart’ (I, i, 144-5).

Yet the play provides a polar opposite to the vices of shallowness, triviality, pettiness, volatility, and wrong choice embodied by fashion. This antithesis is contained in the word ‘faith’. To distinguish between faith and fashion is the task which Beatrice has imposed upon herself, and her initial inquiries about Benedick indicate that she is seriously concerned to discover whether he is a man of fashion or a man of faith, for, if he is the latter, he is worthy of her regard and her love. The deep commitment with which she undertakes this dialectical search contrasts dramatically with the opportunistic and trivial questions with which Claudio initiates his own courtship. Thus she questions the Messenger concerning Benedick in the following way: ‘… 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. … He is a very valiant trencherman, he hath an excellent stomach’ (I, i,
She wishes to know if Benedick is a braggart soldier, a fashionable fop who only pretends to be manly. How is one to know the real man from his words? She goes on to accuse Benedick of fickleness in friendship, and introduces the fashion image in one of its most important guises by making it synonymous with inconstancy:

Beatrice. ... Who is his companion now? he hath every month a new sworn brother.
Messenger. Is’t possible?
Beatrice. Very easily possible. He wears his faith but as the fashion of his hat, it ever changes with the next block.

(I, i, 67-72)

This is obviously an important passage. Benedick, she alleges, equates faith and fashion. This he should not do. In the play's moral framework, it is a very grave offence. A man of faith is a moral Hercules; so, when Benedick professes his friendship for Beatrice after the church scene, she is quick to turn the conversation into the channel already discussed:

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.

(IV, i, 262-5)

For manhood is melted into curtsies; by her gibes, Beatrice attempts to spur Benedick into manly action—to prove he is no Count Comfect. Benedick himself seems to realise the import of Beatrice's order to 'Kill Claudio', for when events absolve him of his promise to fight Claudio, he regards the challenge, in retrospect, as a very basic test:

Antonio. Well, I am glad that all things sort so well.
Benedick. And so am I, being else by faith enforced to call young Claudio to a reckoning for it.

(V, iv, 7-9)

Fashion implies wrong choice; faith implies the ability to thread one's way through the moral labyrinth and to attain to right choice. The process, though, is a difficult one. It is hence doubly appropriate that the party of faith should owe allegiance to Hercules, for, although Hercules was important to the Renaissance as a result of the moral glosses traditionally applied to the Twelve Labours, his main importance stems from the story of Hercules's Choice (The Hero at the Fork in the Road). The tale was a commonplace in Shakespeare's day; Cicero's popular De Officiis contains a reference to Xenophon's version of the Choice (I, 118), and was a widespread school Latin text. Nicholas Grimald's translation was printed nine times between 1553 and 1600. Geoffrey Whitney's A Choice of Emblems represents Hercules's dilemma graphically, and 'The plainness of Lady Virtue and the gaudiness of Lady Vice led to allegorical interpretations of the two figures beyond their obvious significances'. The story was originally derived from Hesiod's Works and Days, which adumbrates the idea of two roads in life. The addition of making the roads cross, placing the hero at their intersection, and providing each road with its advocate, was effected by the sophist Prodicus, and Socrates's
account in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* presents Vice and Virtue in contrasting robes. Athenaeus goes so far as to elevate the choice of Hercules to the level of the most famous of such dilemmas. But the most appropriate version of the story for our purposes, emphasising the garb of Hercules's suppliants, is provided in the third century by Philostratus. ‘You have seen in picture-books the representation of Hercules by Prodicus; in it Hercules is represented as a youth, who has not yet chosen the life he will lead; and vice and virtue stand on each side of him plucking his garments and trying to draw him to themselves. Vice is adorned with gold and necklaces and with purple raiment, and her cheeks are painted and her hair delicately plaited and her eyes underlined with henna; and she also wears golden slippers, for she is pictured strutting about in these; but virtue in the picture resembles a woman worn out with toil, with a pinched look; and she has chosen for her adornment rough squalor, and she goes without shoes and in the plainest of raiment, and she would have appeared naked if she had not too much regard for feminine decency.’ Ben Jonson, in *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue*, presents the demi-god's choice simply and didactically—

First, figure out the doubtfull way,
at which, a while all youth shold stay,
where she [i.e., Pleasure] and Vertue did contend,
which should haue Hercules to frend.(26)

The issue of making a correct choice in such complex matters is hence central to the play's morality; Beatrice, for instance, initiates her courtship by denigrating Benedick with the object of finding out what inner qualities he possesses. Claudio opens his courtship of Hero by inquiring after, and remarking upon, her external qualities. For instance, he has ‘noted’ the daughter of Leonato. Benedick ‘noted her not, but I looked on her’ (I, i, 155-6)—a reproach, which he amplifies in answer to Claudio's further queries: ‘Would you buy her, that you inquire after her’ (I, i, 171). Claudio significantly betrays his materialism in his reply, ‘Can the world buy such a jewel?’ (I, i, 172). He goes on to praise Hero in sinister language—‘In mine eye, she is the sweetest lady that ever I looked on’ (I, i, 178-9)—an outrageous remark in Shakespeare's world, where love should look not with the eyes but with the mind. Since Claudio is the acme of fashion, which, by definition, stands for all that is ephemeral, then his love will be subject to Time's ravages, and he confesses as much—‘If my passion change not shortly’ (I, i, 207). Again, in the same vein, Claudio announces ‘That I love her I feel’ (I, i, 216), but this is inadequate. He should know, not feel. Don Pedro replies ‘That she is worthy I know’ (I, i, 217), but Benedick reproves them both when he implicitly points out that neither is as yet in any position to make such sweeping statements: ‘That I neither feel how she should be loved, nor know how she should be worthy, is an opinion that fire cannot melt out of me—I will die in it at the stake’ (I, i, 218-20). In other words this opinion is, metaphorically, an article of faith for which he is prepared to suffer martyrdom. Claudio, Leonato, and Don Pedro all lack faith in Hero, and can therefore believe her to be unfaithful to Claudio. Beatrice and the Friar, on the contrary, are paragons of faith, and adhere to a belief in Hero's innocence when the evidence points to the opposite. Claudio, too, easily loses faith in his leader over the business of the courtship, for he is a creature who knows only the outward appearances of things. He can talk of Hero's 'show of truth'—‘you seemed to me as Dian …’ or ‘If half the outward graces had been placed …’ Claudio often mixes semblance and reality. Hero was fair and virtuous ‘in my semblance’; from this she can speedily degenerate to ‘but the sign and semblance of her honour’. Claudio's remark to the effect that ‘I love her I feel’ is a great self-indictment. A man who makes such a remark asks others to confirm his judgement and to act for him; appropriate in view of the man of fashion's subservience to the dictates of society. He provides a great contrast to Benedick, who requires no official imprimatur from society to sanctify his intentions:

... since I do purpose to marry, I will think nothing to any purpose that the world can say against it.

(V, iv, 103-5)

Against this sturdy pronouncement we might set Claudio's vacillatory and crab-wise approach to the same truth:
Let every eye negotiate for itself,
And trust no agent: for beauty is a witch
Against whose charms faith melteth into blood

(II, i, 165-7)

culminating in his eventual determination to honour his vow to marry an unknown bride: ‘I’ll hold my mind, were she an Ethiope’ (V, iv, 38—my italics).

The Shakespearian virtues do not reside in princes' courts. Guiderius and Arviragus grow up in naive but robust innocence in the harsh pastoral of the Welsh hills; the exiled Duke of As You Like It finds the winter pastoral of Arden more conducive to virtue than the court he has lost, and Sicily, the traditional home of pastoral, is blighted by the suspicions of Leontes and becomes a wasteland, only to be renewed by the Bohemian pastoral figures of Perdita and Florizel. There is no pastoral scene in Much Ado to provide an antidote to the sterile and fashionable court, no setting for the vita contemplativa to which the characters can retire in order to understand themselves better. Instead, we have the laughable but laudable simplicity of the Watch. These people may be unlettered, but their unfashionable uncouthness, their upside-down euphuism, ensures that they keep the basic virtues intact. As Borachio realises bitterly: ‘What your wisdoms could not discover, these shallow fools have brought to light’ (V, i, 226-9). Fashionable people are less perspicacious than the Watch, who are fully informed of the machinations of Deformed, the fashionable thief, and who are introduced at the first line of their appearance by Dogberry's question, ‘Are you good men and true?’ and by Verges's affirmative ‘Yea’ (III, iii, 1-2). Their simplicity is echoed by the Friar, who is a visual icon of faith, refusing to be deceived by appearances. In his home-spun raiment, the Friar provides a simple visible exemplum of the abjuration of fashion, and his religious faith parallels the more secular faith of Beatrice. We think of the Duke-as-Friar of Measure for Measure, repairing Angelo's broken faith with Mariana. The Friar and Claudio, faith and fashion, stand over the prostrate Hero like some emblem graphically representing sagacity and credulity. The whole image is a fitting culmination to the plot which Borachio concocted, a plot held together by the recurring words ‘appear … paint … show … seem … seeming truth’. The very language of the play embodies this urgent dichotomy. ‘The body of your discourse is sometime guarded with fragments …’ (I, i, 268-9), for truth is disguised with elegant rhetorical fol-de-rols, just as Claudio is ‘turned orthography’. Hence the often noticed contrast between the masculine strength of the play's prose, and the strained, feeble nature of the verse.

We have constantly attempted to identify faith and its attendant values with the mythological figure of Hercules. Fashion also has its patron deity, and it is hardly surprising for the student of Renaissance iconology that this should be Blind Cupid. Don Pedro and Claudio at one point taunt Benedick that he will one day be in love, despite his protests. But they predicate of love all the symptoms of the Petrarchan madness: ‘I shall see thee, ere I die, look pale with love’ (I, i, 233). Benedick retorts that if ever he is in such a state, then ‘hang me up at the door of a brothel house for the sign of Blind Cupid’, for to him the passion they champion is associated with brothels and Blind Cupid. ‘According to the standards of traditional iconography … the blindness of Cupid puts him definitely on the wrong side of the moral world.’

The love which Claudio and Don Pedro recommend must therefore be accorded its place in the whole Renaissance pageant of illicit love for which Blind Cupid is the patron, and which is most vividly represented by Spenser's ‘Masque of Cupid’. The debate is a constant one in Shakespeare; Claudio and Don Pedro are the allies of one of the poet's earliest creations, the Venus who attempts to convert the chaste Adonis to her metaphysic of lust. Don Pedro even seems to give a grudging approval to Benedick's stand: ‘… if ever thou dost fall from this faith, thou wilt prove a notable argument’ (I, i, 240-1). It is appropriate that Claudio should ask if Leonato has a son. He is told that Hero is Leonato's only heir, and indulges in words reminiscent of Gloucester (who was literally deformed) at the beginning of Richard III: ‘War thoughts / Have left their places vacant … in their rooms /
Come thronging soft and delicate desires, / All prompting me how fair young Hero is …’ (I, i, 279-89). We do not hear the lascivious pleasings of a lute, but Claudio has unconsciously elaborated on Benedick's gentle denunciation. He lusts after Hero's body, and will marry her for her fortune—lust and money, Blind Cupid and brothels. Soon Claudio is the embodiment of the state which has been maliciously predicted for Benedick, and in his Petrarcan attitudinising he remarks that Don Pedro is one of those ‘that know love’s grief by his complexion!’ (I, i, 296). And Don Pedro is as blind as his protégé. ‘If Cupid have not spent all his quiver in Venice, thou wilt quake for this shortly’ (I, i, 255-6), he threatens Benedick, locating his deity firmly in the city of commerce and courtesans. Don Pedro's matchmaking is a fashionable pastime—Blind Cupid's love-in-idleness, to borrow an attitude from Venus and Adonis—and he wishes to bring Beatrice and Benedick into ‘a mountain of affection’ (II, i, 343), just as Claudio ‘affects’ Hero. Indeed, Don Pedro goes so far as to hope that he surpasses his deity—‘If we can do this, Cupid is no longer an archer … for we are the only love gods’ (II, i, 361-3).

Claudio's headlong and precipitate rush into a fashionable marriage is the sort of conduct we would expect from a devotee of Blind Cupid:

And therefore is wing’d Cupid painted blind
Nor hath love's mind of any judgment taste;
Wings and no eyes figure unheedy haste:
And therefore is love said to be a child,
Because in choice he is so oft beguil’d …

(MND, I, i, 235-9)

Cupid is traditionally alatus et caecus, and Claudio and Benedick must be associated with ‘blind’ and ‘clear-sighted’ love respectively, with Eros and Anteros.28

Yet Eros and Anteros are aspects of the same personality. Panofsky cites a representation (by Lucius Cranach the Elder) of Blind Cupid removing his own blindfold—passing from moral blindness to enlightenment. In this representation, Cupid is standing, very significantly, upon a large volume labelled Platonis Opera.29

Platonic thought was familiar with the concept of two loves, one base, the other admirable, and in the Symposium Plato, through the words of Pausanias, describes these under the guise of two Venuses. ‘The elder one, having no mother, who is called the heavenly Aphrodite—she is the daughter of Uranus; the younger, who is the daughter of Zeus and Dione—her we call common, and the love who is her fellow-worker is rightly named common, as the other love is called heavenly.’30 Iconologically, there was a precedent for depicting the higher goddess as nude, to denote not eroticism, but freedom from vanity.31 The lower goddess could be depicted as clothed in opulent, fashionable garments, to denote her involvement with the passing vanities of this world. ‘… the clothed Venus is the Venere vulgare or Aphrodite Pandemos, whom Plato and the Platonists opposed to the Aphrodite Urania (Venere celeste) …’32 Yet the two goddesses are not polar opposites. Rather, man can ascend to the higher love through the agency of the lower. Being distracted by the beauty of garments is itself a Platonic metaphor denoting preoccupation with the body (the soul's garment) at the expense of the soul. Hence Claudio, who must rise above considerations of flesh and fashion, pursues within the confines of the play a process of initiation commonplace in Platonic thought, and most accessibly described in Castiglione's The Courtier or Spenser's Platonic Hymns. The aspiring lover must learn to spurn amore bestiale, transcend amore umano, and attain the heights of amore celeste (to borrow the terminology of Pico della Mirandola). So, the first two steps up the Platonic ladder, as described by Bembo, constitute a transition from the purely physical craving for the beloved object, to a realisation of the beloved's image in the mind's eye:

To avoide therefore the torment of his absence, and to enjoy beautie without passion, the Courtier by the helpe of reason must full and wholly call backe againe the coveting of the
bodie to beautie alone, and (in what he can) beholde it in it selfe simple and pure, and frame it within in his imagination sundred from all matter, and so make it friendly and loving to his soule, and there enjoy it, and having it with him day and night, in every time and place, without mistrust ever to lose it: keeping alwaies fast in minde, that the bodie is a most diverse thing from beautie, and not onely not encreaseth, but diminisheth the perfection of it … And beside, through the vertue of imagination, hee shall fashion with himselfe that beautie much more faire than it is in deede. 33

Hence, the Friar's plan takes on a new significance:

When he [i.e. Claudio] 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 apparelled in more precious habit,
More moving-delicate and full of life,
Into the eye and prospect of his soul,
Than when she lived indeed …
Let this be so, and doubt not but success
Will fashion the event in better shape …

(IV, i, 222-34)

Thus the play's scheme proposes that out of the evil of fashion should be brought forth the good of a higher faith, and the two entities whose antagonism we have scrutinised eventually meet to work in conjunction. We reached this synthesis through an examination of the forces accumulating around the figure of Blind Cupid, but we could perhaps equally well have done so by examining the Hercules-motif in greater detail, for as Wind observes,

Voluptas is appointed to tempt the hero with her specious allurements, while Virtue acquaints him in all her austerity with the arduous prospect of heroic labours: and it may be expected of a reliable Hercules that he will not remain suspended between them. The choice is clear because the two opposites, having been introduced in a complete disjunction, obey the logical principle of the excluded middle: tertium non datur. It is the absence of any transcendent alternative which renders the moral so respectable; but although the humanists used it profusely in their exoteric instruction, they left no doubt that, for a Platonic initiate, it was but the crust, and not the marrow … In Ben Jonson's Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue, a sequence of ‘knots’ is introduced by the dancing master Daedalus, who interweaves the two opposites in a perfect maze; and his labyrinthian designs are accompanied by a warning that while the ‘first figure’ should suggest the contrast of Virtue and Pleasure as in the Choice of Hercules, it is the purpose of the dance to ‘entwine’ Pleasure and Virtue beyond recognition:

Come on, come on! and where you go,
So interweave the curious knot,
As ev’n the observer scarce may know
Which lines are Pleasure's, and which not.(34)

I am not necessarily trying to contend that Much Ado is a neo-Platonic homily. I would simply like to suggest that the play may be profitably examined against the background of such modes of thought. In this way the faith-fashion antithesis may be seen as one aspect of the age's preoccupation with the conflict between eternity and mutability, and with the right resolution of this conflict, a resolution which Spenser has mapped in detail in Epithalamion, the ‘Garden of Adonis’, and the ‘Mutability Cantos’. This solution argues that, by loving chastely and wisely, man can conquer time, flux and mutability, and transcend them to attain a state wherein
he will be, like Spenser's Adonis, ‘eterne in mutability’. Shakespeare's Ulysses, of course, has asserted that the arch-villain of the age, time, the Saturnian edax rerum, is ‘like a fashionable host’, but our investigation can perhaps be most suitably concluded by Hallett Smith's oddly apt assertion that, in the heroic poetry of the Renaissance, ‘the guiding and predominating motive was that of Virtue, pictured symbolically as the lady whose path Hercules chose to follow, as a kind of Venus-Beatrice of a neo-Platonic scheme’.35

Notes

4. For a detailed examination of the ‘Nothing’ of the play’s title, see P. A. Jorgensen, Redeeming Shakespeare’s Words (Berkeley, 1962), pp. 22-42.
5. Her verdict that ‘The play … is a dramatization of mis-noting—a sort of dramatized, rather than verbal, pun’ (‘Notes, notes, forsooth …’, p. 354), seems to me impeccable.
7. This semantic antithesis, upon which the remaining analysis of the play rests, was pointed out to me more than ten years ago by Mr E. L. Jones, of Magdalen College, Oxford, and I most gratefully acknowledge my debt to him. I would also like to thank Professor Jay L. Halio and Mr John Ingledew, who have read the manuscript with friendly severity.
8. Ah poor our sex, this fault in us I find,
   The error of our eye directs our mind.
   What error leads, must err. O then conclude
   Minds swayed by eyes are full of turpitude.

   (V, ii, 109-12)

9. I employ the term as it is understood, passim, by Denis de Rougemont in Love in the Western World (New York, 1956).
10. There is a slight parallel with The Winter's Tale. Hermione and Hero feign death in order to awaken shame in the lovers who suspected them unjustly; Leontes and Claudio find reborn love and greater self-knowledge when they have supposedly learnt their lesson, and the awakening of Hermione's statue parallels the removal of Hero's mask.
13. ‘In the Renaissance Hercules’ physical power came to symbolize any other kind of heroic strength, whether moral, religious, or intellectual. This wide range of symbolic meanings had grown within the medieval tradition of allegorical commentary on pagan myths that culminated in the encyclopedic Ovide Moralisé and Pierre Bersuire's Ovidius Moralizatus. In the Renaissance, Ovidian commentaries by Raphael Regius and Georgius Sabinus, mythographical compendia by Alexander ab Alexandro, Lilio Giraldo, Natalis Comes, Vincenzo Cartari, and Cesare Ripa, and treatises like Coluccio Salutati's De Laboribus Herculis and Giraldo's Herculis Vita, not to mention the countless artistic treatments that these helped engender, represented Hercules as the supreme exemplar of moral fortitude … and of virtuous works, as typified by his twelve or more Labors' (ibid., pp. 14-15).
14. In Ovid's Ninth Heroic Epistle, Deianira upbraids Hercules for allowing Omphale to steal his arms and masquerade as a man. ‘To her passes the full measure of your exploits—yield up what you possess; your mistress is heir to your praise. O shame, that the rough skin stripped from the flanks of the shaggy lion has covered a woman's delicate side!’ (Ovid, Heroides and Amores, trans. Grant Showerman [Harvard, 1921], p. 117.)
15. ‘Largely because of Ovid's Ninth Heroic Epistle, well known in George Turberville's translation, Hercules brought from club to distaff … had become the proverbial example of the power and folly of love’ (Knowles, ‘Myth and Type’, p. 8).

16. Unlike Cleopatra, who clothed Antony in her own garments at one juncture (II, v, 17-21), Antony, of course, is closely identified with Hercules (I, iii, 84; IV, iii, 16; IV, xii, 43-4). See Eugene M. Waith, *The Herculean Hero* (London, 1962), pp. 113-21. However, Benedick at one point fears that Beatrice, because of her shrewishness, may prove a very dynamic Omphale: ‘She would have made Hercules have turned spit, yea, and have cleft his club to make the fire too … You shall find her the infernal Ate in good apparel’ (II, i, 235-8).


23. See Xenophon, *Memorabilia and Oeconomicus*, trans. E. C. Marchant (London, 1923), p. 95: ‘And there appeared two women of great stature making towards him. The one was fair to see and of high bearing; and her limbs were adorned with purity, her eyes with modesty; sober was her figure, and her robe was white. The other was plump and soft, with high feeding. Her face was made up to heighten its natural white and pink, her figure to exaggerate her height. Open-eyed was she; and dressed so as to disclose all her charms.’

24. See Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists*, trans. C. B. Gulick (Harvard, 1933), V, 295: ‘And I for one affirm also that the Judgement of Paris, as told in poetry by the writers of an older time, is really a trial of pleasure against virtue … I think, too, that our noble Xenophon invented the story of Heracles and Virtue with the same motive.’


31. Cf. Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, p. 155: ‘*Nuda virtus* is the real virtue appreciated in the good old days when wealth and social distinction did not count, and Horace speaks already of *nuda Veritas*, though the Greek writers, characteristically enough, rather imagined Truth as dressed in simple garments.’


33. Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. Sir Thomas Hoby (London, 1928), p. 317. Hoby's translation first appeared in 1561, and was re-issued during Shakespeare's lifetime in the editions of 1577 and 1588, of which the latter edition is trilingual in Italian, French, and English. It has, incidentally, been suggested (somewhat implausibly) that Benedick and Beatrice are modelled on two of Castiglione's characters, the Lord Gaspare Pallavicino and the Lady Emilia Pia. See Mary Augusta Scott, *The Book of the Courtier: a Possible Source of Benedick and Beatrice*, *PMLA*, XVI (1901), 475-502. Since the initial composition of this current essay, however, an important and convincing article on the relationship between *The Courtier* and *Much Ado* has appeared in the form of B. K. Lewalski's ‘Love, Appearance and Reality: Much Ado about Something’ (*Studies in English Literature*, VIII (1968), 235-51). Lewalski's conclusions substantially parallel (and, in my opinion, vindicate) my own, although she arrives at them by a different route. Noting the ostensible absence of the pastoral element in the play, Lewalski locates it in the higher area of consciousness described by
Bembo in Book VI of The Courtier, and not, as I do, in the Watch, for whose activities she invokes I Cor. i 27 (‘God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise’). Lewalski identifies Claudio with Bembo's ‘young lover’ misled in love-judgments by ‘judgement of sense’ (p. 240), one who ‘acts primarily in terms of sense knowledge rather than reason, and is moved by desire and passion rather than the higher love’ (p. 246). Hero's epic death-and-rebirth pattern is seen as an image of Christ's passion and resurrection—the archetype of sacrificial love for the restoration of others' (p. 251), and the neo-Platonism is almost explicitly Christianised in the well-observed words of the Friar: ‘But on this travail look for greater birth’ and ‘Come, lady, die to live’ (idem). Lewalski’s conclusion seems to me wholly admirable: ‘Only because of these new terms—love as redemptive sacrifice and knowledge as faith—is the Platonic ascent possible for such as Claudio.’

34. Wind, Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance, pp. 168-9. For our own purposes, an alternative passage from Jonson's masque (Herford and Simpson, Works of Ben Jonson, VII, 486-7, ll. 200-13) might be even more appropriate:

Pleasure, for his [i.e. Hesperus'] delight
is reconcild to Vertue: and this Night
Vertue brings forth twelve Princes haue byn bred
in this rough Mountaine …
Theis now she trusts with Pleasure, and to theis
she gives an entranuce to the Hesperides,
faire Beuties gardens: Neither can she feare
they should grow soft, or wax effeminat here,
Since in hir sight, and by hir charge all's don,
Pleasure the Servant, Vertue looking on.

35. Smith, Elizabethan Poetry, p. 324. Don Pedro, the play's most ambivalent character, speaks with unconscious irony when he pronounces what might serve us as an alternative epigraph: ‘What a pretty thing man is, when he goes in his doublet and hose and leaves off his wit’ (V, i, 194-5).

Criticism: Triviality And “Nothing”-Ness: Stephen B. Dobranski (essay date 1998)


[In the following essay, Dobranski traces the “undeveloped, fragmentary history” of the relationship between Benedick and Beatrice, which inflects the light mood of the comedy with tragic elements.]

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” (I.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 (I.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 toothpicker 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.

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 Keep-down 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 world. 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). This passage suggests that Beatrice, too, has experienced such pain. 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 re-creates 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 juice 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?” (II.i.304)—Benedick intimates that he and Beatrice know a great deal about each other. Referring to Beatrice's “base (though bitter) disposition” (II.i.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.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."

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. 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. 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).

Benedick most consistently embodies the play’s strategy of fleeing from serious consequences. He wears a mask to speak with Beatrice, for example, and cowards 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 furtively 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 metaphorical 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.36

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 ado about Nothing
(London, 1600), at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at
Austin (STC 22304; Pforz 819).

2. This and all subsequent information regarding the myth of Hercules is taken from Edward Tripp, The
have also consulted Douglas Bush, Mythology and the Renaissance Tradition in English Poetry (New
York: Pagent Book, 1957); and Jean Seznec, The Survival of the Pagan Gods: The Mythological
Tradition and Its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Art, trans. Barbara F. Sessions (New York:
Pantheon Books, 1953).

3. 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).

4. 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 smirched 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.

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

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

8. 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]ttitudes 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).

9. 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).

10. 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.i.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)

11. 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.

12. In *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 adoe 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 Kynge of Frauuce* (1485; STC 5013), William Caxton writes “And made no more a-doo to bere hym, than dooth a wulf to bere a lytel lambe.”

13. 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.
14. 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 she feeleth her selfe stirred and prouoked with throwes and paines,” ought to “walke vp and down the chamber, and then lay herselfe down warm in her bed,” repeating this action until “the water bee gathered, and the Matrice be opened” (L4).


16. 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 principall partes of the bodie” (see Thomas Cogan, Haven of Health [London, 1584; STC 5478], G3-G4; and William Langham, The Garden of Health [London, 1597; STC 15195], E8-F3).

17. Langham, E8, F2; Rueff, N6).

18. See II.1.268, 296, 317.

19. 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.

20. I am following the punctuation of the first quarto, C1. In the Arden Edition of Much Ado about Nothing, Humphreys uses commas to set off the phrase “though bitter.”

21. 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), B8: “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.”

22. 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 Mountjoy—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.


24. 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).

28. Ibid.
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

> Margaret was in some fault for this,
> Although against her will, as it appears
> In the true course of all the question.

(V.i.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 Mallin, Shannon Prosser, and John Rumrich.

**Much Ado about Nothing (Vol. 55): Further Reading**


*Reads Dogberry's plea to be ‘writ down an ass’ as an echo of Job's serious request that his ‘wordes were now written.’*


*Discusses the staging issues surrounding Claudio's rejection of Hero and subsequent redemption.*


*Examines the characterization of Claudio as an erring hero.*

*Argues that the continuing success of Shakespeare's comedies lies at least in part with what she calls “preparation.”*


*Analyzes the rhetorical techniques Hero uses to convince Beatrice to look more kindly on Benedick's anticipated courtship of her.*


*Discusses a problematic passage in the play, in the scene depicting Hero's “funeral.”*


*Studies the sexual significance of the attribution of horns to Beatrice.*


*Notes Shakespeare's manipulation of timing to intensify the tragic or comic impact of the dramatic action.*


*Emphasizes the strong connection between deception and love in Much Ado about Nothing.*


*Examines the political commentary within the play.*


*Discusses what the play “chooses not to represent” by examining the play’s gaps and silences, specifically Don Pedro’s wooing of Hero and the chamber-window scene.*

**Much Ado about Nothing (Vol. 67): Introduction**

*Much Ado about Nothing*
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 Slight (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, Slight 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 Slight, 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.

**Much Ado about Nothing (Vol. 67): 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'altra una città imaginaria'.¹ 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 overture 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 prudently 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 curtsey and act as it pleases her father—adding however, that if the man chosen for her is not handsome, Hero should curtsey 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 unmarriageable 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 Frauen Dienst 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.7
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,8 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 Ethiope 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’. 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 boarded 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-deprecatations—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 submissiveness. 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 attractively 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 Rossiter observes, ‘It is a notable point in Shakespeare's contrivance that he gives both wits their off-day, as soon as love 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.26 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
called-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 ordinarness 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*. 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.

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

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.

Criticism: Character Studies: John Wain (essay date 1967)


*[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.]*
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:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{let but Beatrice} \\
&\text{And Benedick be seen, lo in a trice} \\
&\text{The cockpit, galleries, boxes, all are full.}
\end{align*}
\]

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,
ever—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 donnée. 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.

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 flimsiness 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* and the post-Symbolist poets. 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 o
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.

Criticism: Character Studies: 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 love\(^6\) or the significance of nothing\(^7\)), 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” and “reacting true to type in trying circumstances.” 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.” Francis G. Schoff, going further than most in salvaging Claudio’s character, finds Claudio “conclusively and steadily an admirable hero on the evidence of the play itself, with no other witness needed, then or now.”

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,¹⁸ 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.i.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.i.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 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?

(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 your life, for I was told you were in a consumption.

(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).  
17. “*Much Ado About Something*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, XV (Summer, 1964), 150.
Criticism: Character Studies: 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:

... I never yet saw man,
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)\(^1\)

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.\(^2\)

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\(^3\)) 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:

“… Glaucion,” 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 suprisingly, 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 “unadorned”, 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.  

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.

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 chiepest 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 woman leanness can be made a reproach. If she is not simple, she can be called pert: if she is honest, she can be called simple.

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 Euphuues, 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.\(^\text{11}\)

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;\(^\text{12}\) 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,\(^\text{13}\) 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.\(^\text{14}\)

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.

4. Quotations are from *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit. Euphues and His England*, ed. Morris William Croll and Harry Clemons (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964), pp. 95-96 and 102. Other instances of the motif of the “inversion of values” are found on pp. 26 and 103 (the latter reflects the influence of Ovid's *Remedia Amoris*).

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 (*Areopagiticus*, 20; *Antidosis*, 283-84), Plato (*The Republic*, VIII, 560 D), Cicero (*Partitions 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 scurrility wit” [*The Collected Works of Erasmus* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1988), Vol. 66, *Spiritualia*, ed. John W. O'Malley, p. 45]).

The subject is deserving of a monograph (one is surprised not to find it in Ernst Curtius's excellent *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* [New York: Harper, 1963]), but the task is rendered awesome by the topos's very ubiquity throughout more than two thousand years of European historiography, philosophy, and literature. Besides the scattered cross-references recorded below (nn. 6-9), I am aware of no studies in English. More attention has been paid to the motif in the field of Spanish literature; for documentation, see my edition of Lope de Vega's *Fuente Ovejuna* (Barcelona: Crítica, 1993), II. 292-347 nn.


10. II. 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.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Kenneth Branagh (essay date 1993)**


In the following essay, Branagh describes his approach to filming Much Ado about Nothing. Branagh discusses his focus on character, comments on the film's casting and his adaptation of the text, and notes that most of the cuts he made were for the purpose of eliminating plot repetition.

Why make a new film of Much Ado About Nothing? In this century, Shakespeare's play has been produced as a feature film on four occasions. The first was an American silent version in 1926; an East German version was made in 1963, and two Russian films appeared in 1956 and 1973. There have also been television versions, often of notable stage productions like Franco Zeffirelli's in 1967 and Joseph Papp's in 1973. But why no modern cinema version?

Certainly the movie world's financiers have always evinced suspicion about the commercial possibilities of Shakespeare on film. Yet ‘popular’ plays like Romeo and Juliet or Hamlet have not only worked spectacularly in film versions by Zeffirelli and Sir Laurence Olivier but have proved commercial enough to be repeated on film many times. There are sixty movie versions of Hamlet.

It seems odd that Much Ado About Nothing has not fallen into this category. Since Shakespeare wrote the play, in the mid to latter part of 1598, it has been an enduring success. The 1600 edition tells us that by then it had been 'sundrie times publikely acted.' The play was certainly a crowd pleaser and puller. The poet Leonard Digges observed,

Let but Beatrice
And Benedick be seen, lo, in a trice
The cockpit, galleries, boxes, all are full.

The role of Dogberry was an enormous success for the first great clown of Shakespeare's company, Will Kempe. Down the centuries since, the leading roles have attracted many notable actors: David Garrick, Henry Irving, Ellen Terry, and, in our own time, John Gielgud, Peggy Ashcroft, and Maggie Smith. But does this play rest too completely on the 'kind of merry war twixt Signior Benedick and her' [Beatrice]? And can the expression of this conflict, in puns, courtly wit, verbal conceits, translate into the medium of film? Can its identity-defining wordplay be dramatic in a screenplay?
Well, yes, I believe it can, but more than that, I believe a film of *Much Ado* allows us to see in unique focus the breadth of a play that goes much further than the celebration of one gloriously witty couple. Beatrice and Benedick are, after all, the subplot.

The challenge for a new film of *Much Ado* is not to resist Beatrice and Benedick's dominance but, through the choices made by the camera, to bring to vivid life all the other characters. To take on the play as a whole and realize fully-fleshed lives, for characters like the Friar, the Watch, and Leonato's household in a realistic background and an evocative landscape. Against this detail the Beatrice and Benedick sequences do not sit merely as star turns. Perhaps most importantly, there is room in a movie to give a different kind of space to the Claudio/Hero plot.

My first thoughts about a film version occurred in 1988. At that time I had not yet directed my first feature film (Shakespeare's *Henry V*), but I found that often after seeing a play, filmic images suggested by the play would haunt me. The ‘movie’ would start to run in my imagination. All the more vividly, perhaps, because at that stage I had no real idea that I would ever have the opportunity to make the movies in my mind translate to celluloid.

The opening images for this film of *Much Ado About Nothing* came to me during an actual stage performance of the play when I have to confess my concentration wandered. I was playing Benedick in a beautiful production directed by Dame Judi Dench on a U.K. tour. One night during Balthasar's song ‘Sigh No More, Ladies,’ the title sequence of this film played over and over in my mind: heat haze and dust, grapes and horseflesh, and a nod to *The Magnificent Seven*. The men's sexy arrival, the atmosphere of rural Messina, the vigour and sensuality of the women, possessed me in the weeks, months, and years that followed. This long-term marination process was vital in convincing me that a film of *Much Ado* could work. Opening the story for the cinema, I thought, should not mean drowning the words and characters in endless vistas and ‘production value.’ Yet the play seemed to beg to live outside, in a vivid, lush countryside. Making the right stylistic connection between word and picture took me four years and three more films to achieve.

During that time I'd become even more convinced of the necessity of doing the film. There were many reasons. The experience of putting Shakespeare on screen as in *Henry V* had been an extraordinary lesson. A continuous and consistent stream of mail from around the world confirmed the huge appetite for affordable, truly modern accounts of this man's work. Our *Henry V* had encouraged many (including vast numbers of children) to develop their own, healthily critical view of Shakespeare. This, in a medium with which they were already familiar and to which they had far greater access than to the theatre.

Many of those who wrote had enjoyed the apparent ‘naturalness’ of the acting (which I think is depressing testament to the usual expectation of incomprehensible booming and fruity-voiced declamation). My continued desire in *Much Ado* was for an absolute clarity that would enable a modern audience to respond to Shakespeare on film, in the same way that they would respond to any other movie. Our concern was to do this without losing his unique poetry.

Ironically, three-quarters of *Much Ado* is in prose. But if there is such a thing as 'poetic prose,' then Shakespeare achieves it in this play. It has a double effect. It can give us the poetic melancholy of Beatrice's 'No, sure, my lord, my mother cried. But then there was a star danced and under that was I born.' But at the same time much of the dialogue has a realistic, conversational tone that renders it most easy on the ear.

The prose wooing scene between Henry and Katherine at the end of *Henry V* prompted many viewers to say that we had made up the dialogue. When we played *Much Ado* in the theatre, this charge was made regularly by backstage visitors. The accusation was not true, but it did say much about the realistic quality of the play. It hinted also at the style our Renaissance Theatre Company had begun to develop, a style on which the acting in the films of *Henry V* and *Much Ado* would be based.
During our theatre company's short life we have tackled several of Shakespeare's comedies. In each case the productions have, in broad terms, sought out the particular quality that has spoken most loudly to the directors and actors involved. In the case of Twelfth Night it was the bitter melancholy of the piece that attracted us. That sense of irony and regret, shot through the comedy, made our rendition closer to Chekhov than is perhaps usual. With As You Like It, the sheer joy of its pastoral lyricism was emphasised; the acting was playful and delicate. Much Ado About Nothing seemed much more robust in tone, rougher and sexier than our Forest of Arden in As You Like It. Its hot-tempered Italianate qualities distinguish it from the more obvious ‘Englishness’ of the other plays.

But in the case of each of these stage productions, our intent was to disarm the audience with the ‘reality’ of the playing. Our troupe was young and often inexperienced. But the actors were cast for their talent and for the freshness they brought to the roles. Like me, many of the actors were coming to the plays for the first time. They were relatively free of actory mannerisms and the baggage of strutting and bellowing that accompanies the least effective Shakespearean performances.

Ours was a style that wished to be in tune with our audience. We were touring around the United Kingdom and Ireland to places and audiences that were also relatively unfamiliar with these plays. Our great joy was to set and tell the story with the utmost clarity and simplicity and let the particular directorial inflexion, or interpretation, be seen through the characterisations. In effect, we assumed that no one had seen the play before. We wanted audiences to react to the story as if it were in the here and now and important to them. We did not want them to feel they were in some cultural church.

We made the same attempt in film. The goal was utter reality of characterisation. Shakespeare accomplishes this as a matter of course. The difficulty for actors lies in not putting things in between themselves and this reality—a funny voice, a walk, an unconscious treatment of the character that suggests he or she is from another planet. The film medium resists such artifice completely. The camera in a film of Much Ado would ruthlessly sniff out any artificial ‘witty’ acting—flutey voiced young gallants with false laughs and thighs made for slapping.

Indeed, I required absolutely the opposite. This film would be based on character. In the absence of an eventful plot (the irony of the title is not lost on us), it is the detail of humanity amongst the participants that helps make Much Ado one of Shakespeare's most accessible works.

The film presented a rare opportunity to utilise the skills of marvellous film actors who would embrace this naturalistic challenge. I was determined, however, not to cast only British actors. I wanted a combination of elements that would exploit the novelty of doing Shakespeare on film. Unlike the plays performed on our theatrical tours, this film would be seen mostly by people coming fresh to Shakespeare in movie form. I wanted something of that atmosphere on the set.

In crude terms, the challenge was to find experienced Shakespearean actors who were unpracticed on screen and team them with highly experienced film actors who were much less familiar with Shakespeare. Different accents, different looks. An excitement borne out of complementary styles and approaches would produce a Shakespeare film that belonged to the world. As a longtime admirer of American screen acting, I naturally wished to include some U.S. actors. In place of events, much of the action in this piece comes from the characters' emotional volatility. The best American film acting has always had this emotional fearlessness.

Making this work called for the appropriate casting chemistry and a formal rehearsal period prior to shooting. The casting of the British actors was relatively straightforward. Richard Briers, Emma Thompson, Brian Blessed et al., had spent much of the previous five years working with Renaissance and being part of the developing style I've tried to describe. I had no set number of American actors that I tried to cast. Indeed, I was also interested in one or two Italian and French actors. My aim was to be as international as possible. In
the end the choices became simple. I asked film actors whom I admired and whose career choices had been adventurous enough to suggest they would not be intimidated. In all cases I explained that I did not want artificial ‘Shakespeare voices,’ that they must perform in their own accents, and that they must be prepared to study the text technically, as well as carry out their absolute obligation to be truthful.

The rehearsal process was designed to accommodate these tasks. One of the people in attendance was Russell Jackson of the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford-Upon-Avon. His special responsibility was to make each actor aware of when a character was speaking in verse and when in prose, and to make him aware, in either case, of the rhythm of the text. Russell pointed out places where particular words were repeated for effect, places where a character's vocabulary gave a clue to personality, and devices such as onomatopoeia and alliteration—in short, any appreciation of where the music of the language breathed, stopped, paused, etc. All this to ensure that the spontaneity, freshness, and naturalism that we were after were achieved with a bedrock of structural understanding. Realistic Shakespearean acting on film or on stage cannot be achieved fully without this understanding. Whatever the effect we strive for, we must remember at all times that we are speaking the words of a great dramatic poet. His poetry, of whatever kind, must be observed.

Also present at rehearsal was Hugh Cruttwell, former director and principal of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London. Hugh had two roles on the production. One was to ensure that in the midst of other responsibilities my performance as Benedick did not suffer. He was my other eye. A secondary function was to be a help to the actors in establishing their characters. These were arrived at in a variety of ways. I had solo sessions with each of the actors, and we held group discussions/improvisation sessions to explore the background to our world.

How long had the soldiers been away? What kind of war had it been? How violent? Which of our men had been killers? How often had they visited Leonato prior to this? How well did they all know one another? How old were they? How long did these soldiers expect to live?

And then, of course, we probed the detail of the relationships. This filling in of the ‘back story’ for each of the characters is one of the most necessary and interesting elements in preparing a characterisation, particularly for the screen. The audience won't know specifically my off-screen history for Benedick—his upbringing, his family, his likes and dislikes—but I hope that with this history firmly in my mind, they will at least intuit part of it, feel a depth to the character beyond what he says and does.

With Benedick and Beatrice, a shared understanding between the actors of their mutual history was essential. They are both described as ‘merry.’ Leonato says of Beatrice,

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.

Yet many productions interestingly choose to mine that part of Beatrice and Benedick's history which, if not tinged by melancholy, is at least spoken of with some regret by Beatrice, who when charged with losing the heart of Benedick 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.

Emma Thompson and I both wanted to suggest former lovers who had been genuinely hurt by their first encounter, which perhaps occurred at the tender age of Hero and Claudio in the play. (For our purposes we deliberately made the younger lovers around twenty years of age and Beatrice and Benedick a significant ten
years or so older.) In our version, both characters are at that point where they might well develop into confirmed spinster and bachelor. Both are staunchly anti-marriage and very resistant to the way in which that institution mutes the personalities of such as themselves. But the foundation of the performance was the idea of two people who had broken each other's hearts and who had developed personalities that attempted to prevent the same thing ever happening again. Their wit, irony, and apparent lack of feeling covers only superficially two of the most romantic, generous, and emotional of Shakespeare's characters.

This emotional volatility was a key to the whole film. We wished to involve the audience's hearts as well as their minds and their laughter muscles.

Robert Sean Leonard (Claudio), Denzel Washington (Don Pedro), and Keanu Reeves (Don John) all wished to stress the full-blooded nature of their respective characters. These men are soldiers for whom time spent away from war is precious. Love is seized. The instantaneousness of Claudio's love for Hero, its intensity, is not unusual amongst men for whom death is an equal reality. Hence the swiftness and the delight with which Don Pedro takes up his young charge's case. There is a zeal to the Don's playfulness that is almost too intense. We enjoy his fun but at the same time cannot fail to be worryingly aware of Don John's malevolent, equally passionate presence. The atmosphere in the early part of the play recalls Juliet's reservations before her fateful date with Romeo.

I have no joy of this contract tonight.  
It is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden;  
Too like the lightning, which doth cease to be  
Ere one can say it lightens.

There is much rashness in Much Ado. The speed of the plot allows people to abandon rationality in the face of often incredible events.

As in much of Shakespeare, a strong suspension of disbelief is necessary when it comes to the plot of Much Ado. Lewis Carroll is very funny about it in a letter to Ellen Terry:

My difficulty is this: Why in the world did not Hero (or at any rate Beatrice when speaking on her behalf) prove an 'alibi', in answer to the charge? It seems certain she did not sleep in her own room that night: for how could Margaret venture to open the window and talk from it, with her mistress asleep in the room? It would be sure to wake her. Besides, 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 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? When Claudio asks her, 'What man was he talked with you yesterday out at your window betwixt twelve and one?' why doesn't she reply, 'I talked with no man at that hour, my lord: Nor was I in my chamber yesternight, but in another, far from it remote.' And this she could prove by the evidence of the housemaid, who must have known that she had 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 has her wits about her? And when an arrangement was made, by which she was to lose, for that 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.

That this whole story should be resolved by the comic intervention of a ludicrous constable lends to *Much Ado* a warmly bizarre quality that does much to amend the ugliness inherent in the wedding scene and in Claudio's behaviour afterwards. Michael Keaton and I were agreed that Dogberry should be not only a verbal but a physical malaprop. I suspect I am not alone in finding the character's play on words less funny today than the character himself—instantly recognisable, a universal type, beautifully pompous, and, in our version, dangerous too. A modern cinema audience, ready to scream at Dogberry for his inability to inform Leonato of the plot against Hero in time, needed to know exactly why he does not.

In our version this is quite clear. Dogberry combines an awe and envy of authority that renders him barely able to speak in the presence of someone like Leonato or Don Pedro. When he does speak, it is with the confused confidence of the psychopath. In our film Dogberry and Verges are charismatically, indomitably mad. The Watch, who are featured throughout the film, are awed and frightened by him. This element of danger allows the audience to feel uncertain about whether the plot will ever truly resolve itself. That unbalancing of expectations, a useful doubt about what would happen next, was something we actively sought.

For a film of Shakespeare should have no empty moments. As in *Henry V*, where we featured the faces of an otherwise anonymous English army that became known to us, in *Much Ado* Leonato's household are present throughout. Their reaction at the wedding becomes that much more powerful, their joy at the end that much more intense. In the theatre when there is a palpable sense of ‘company,’ the audience is aware of it in a very satisfying way. Our rehearsals did as much to promote this sense of one Messinian community as possible.

On the production side we made sure that the costumes and period setting did everything they could to release the audience's imagination. We consciously avoided setting this version in a specific time but instead went for a look that worked within itself, where clothes, props, architecture, all belonged to the same world. This imaginary world could have existed almost anytime between 1700 and 1900. It was distant enough to allow the language to work without the clash of period anachronisms and for a certain fairy tale quality to emerge. This fairy tale idea seemed to spring naturally out of the countryside in which we were working. We were in Tuscany, central Italy, a magical landscape of vines and olives that seems untouched by much of modern life. Lusher and more verdant than Sicily (Shakespeare's setting), it allowed us to create a visual idyll in which this cautionary tale might be told.

If there is a single moral to be taken from this story, it is one that I chose to find in the song that begins the film.

*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.*

*Sigh no more ditties, sing no more,*
*Of dumps so dull and heavy;*  
*The fraud of men was ever so,*  
*Since summer first was leafy.*
Then sigh not so, but let them go,
And be you blithe and bonny,
Converting all your sounds of woe
Into Hey nonny, nonny.

We hear the song three times in the film. Once in Beatrice's wry, ironic voice at the beginning, again at the centre of the film, in an idealised garden setting where it appeals to Claudio's high romanticism, and finally at the end where it becomes a hard-won confirmation of a certain reality in the relationships between men and women. The idea of seeing the words and hearing them spoken right at the beginning of the film was a determined attempt to show how they could be dramatic in themselves. It allows the audience to ‘tune in’ to the new language they are about to experience and to realise (I hope) that they will easily understand the simplicity, gravity, and beauty of the song lyrics.

Purists may be offended; the play does not begin in this way. But this decision does raise the issue of what one means exactly by ‘adapting’ Shakespeare. I think that in film terms, it means giving a strong sense of the interpretive line. In the comedies this is crucial. They must be inflected. They do not lay themselves out with the same strong narrative, historical frame that the history plays do. The very titles themselves invite us to be bold: Twelfth Night, or What You Will. As You Like It.

In the case of this screenplay (whose planned mise-en-scène was adhered to far more strictly than in any other film on which I've worked) there is a great deal of description. Particularly at the beginning much is made of atmosphere and characters states of mind. This seemed necessary for a play like Much Ado, which has been set in every conceivable period and country, with young, old, and middle-aged casting of every permutation. We did cut lines and occasionally scenes where the plot (such as it is) was not advanced. We did transpose some scenes in order to create a movie pace (quite different from that of the theatre).

For example, in the very first scene, it seemed to me important to get to the men's arrival as soon as possible. We would shortly see them riding to Leonato's. Excessive description of what Benedick and Claudio were like therefore seemed unnecessary.

The Beatrice and Benedick gulling scenes were trimmed in such a way as to make one big scene of continuous action in the same garden. We wanted to lose any sense of the formal ending of one scene and beginning of another as in the play. This helped the believability of the two characters' falling for each other so swiftly. It also took acting pressure off the women in the second of the scenes. In the theatre this is often a difficult scene, as it has to in some way ‘top’ the boys' gulling scene. This is impossible, as the second scene's tone is quite different, less obviously funny.

The deception of Claudio was most important in this screen adaptation. In theatrical versions this character is often dismissed for his gullibility. Hero's alleged infidelity (her ‘talking’ to a man at a window) is described as happening offstage. It seemed that if we saw this occur on screen, it would add a new dimension to our understanding of Claudio. This proof of her disloyalty is one of a number of crucial events that take place on the night before the wedding. To extract maximum drama (and comedy) from this night, we made some transpositions. Don John's scene with Borachio where they plot the deception was moved from before the gulling scenes (as in the play) to afterwards, as if at the beginning of this one terrible night. This had the side effect of distributing Don John's appearances more evenly and satisfyingly through the film. We broke up the first Watch scene, bringing Dogberry into the story earlier and cutting after his first exit, allowing the dastardly events of this night to occur with greater film logic. Time passes while the deception occurs, and then we come back to the sleeping constabulary ready to arrest Borachio and Conrade.

In the Dogberry scenes we cut the unfunniest lines. (I realise this is an entirely subjective issue, but having played one of the great unfunny Shakespearean clowns—Touchstone in As You Like It—I speak from bitter
experience.) The wedding morning scene between the women, where Beatrice's love-induced ‘cold’ is made much fun of by Margaret, was shot. But although beautifully acted it was cut on the grounds that the dramatic way in which the previous nighttime sequence had played made the audience alive with expectation for the events of the wedding itself. This scene with the girls seemed finally to frustrate.

Elsewhere the cuts mainly involved the repetition of plot. In the play, characters constantly restate the current shape of events and repeat what's just happened and what's about to happen. But nothing ‘difficult’ was changed. No words were altered for easier understanding. The adaptation was at the service of our attempt to find an essence in the piece, to find the spirit of the play itself.

This brings me back to my first question. Why film *Much Ado About Nothing*? And why now?

When I was training to be an actor at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, this question of *why*? was something Hugh Cruttwell constantly urged me to consider. The *how* of creating a piece of art always comes second. It's the *why* that will get you to the truth of a character. Why does Benedick love Beatrice? Not how—that's easy. Answering *why* always takes forever when creating a character, but it's a necessary journey. An actor has to apply the same question to himself when creating a film, or when performing a play. With the luxury of a degree of choice, a proper answer has to go beyond ‘So I can earn a living’ or ‘It's a lovely part’ or ‘I like Italy.’ One has to ask why one is communicating this particular story at this particular time.

So, once again, why *Much Ado About Nothing*? Well, for me, because it speaks loudly and gloriously about love, one of humankind's permanent obsessions. The cruelty of it, the joy of it. The question of tolerance in love and the danger of judging others. The cost of the ambiguous maturity that people like Hero and Claudio enjoy. The loss of innocence; the power of lust; our obsession with sex and the flesh. The persistent presence of sheer, unmotivated evil in the world as provided by the Iago prototype Don John.

In short, the play presents a whole series of emotional and spiritual challenges that we—young, old, male, female—continue to face when we love. And all throughout this comic debate about everything and nothing, there is life-giving, wisdom-bearing humour and warmth. The piece is harsh and cruel as people can be. It is generous and kind as they can also be. It is uplifting but never sentimental. It ‘holds the mirror up to nature’ and allows us inside its wonderful warts-and-all world of human nature, to understand and perhaps even to forgive ourselves for some of our oft-repeated follies.

That's why I interpreted *Much Ado About Nothing* on film in 1993. The attempt to achieve all this and any degree of success is due to a massive team effort. My thanks to producers, production team, cast, and crew for making it all possible.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Celestino Deleyto (review date 1997)**


*[In the following review, Deleyto studies Branagh's treatment of genre and gender issues in his 1993 film adaptation of Much Ado about Nothing.]*

Recent writing on romantic comedy has taken the view that the genre has died, been reborn, and reached a peak of popularity in the course of the last fifteen to twenty years. Reacting to Brian Henderson's well-known article on the “agony” of contemporary romantic comedy, Bruce Babington and Peter Evans, for example, affirm the ongoing validity of the genre's basic discourse of celebration of heterosexual love, even while they
acknowledge that it has undergone important transformations because it “involves specifics that are in a state of flux in advanced Western cultures.”

Referring to comedy in general, Andrew Horton likewise notes the consistent popularity of Hollywood comedies in the late eighties, while Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik not only speak of a “current revival of romantic comedies” but have more specifically distinguished between the “nervous romances” of the late seventies and early eighties—romantic comedies whose uncertainties about the continuing applicability of the genre’s conventions often express themselves in a fragmentary narrative form—and the “new romances” that emerged in the mid-eighties and were characterized by a return to the old-fashioned values of traditional heterosexual romance.

More recently, Kathleen Rowe has used *Moonstruck* (Norman Jewison, 1987) as an illustration of the lasting validity of comedy as a narrative genre, in part, she states, “because it speaks to powerful needs to believe in the utopian possibilities condensed on the image of the couple.” With the exception of Henderson, all these writers share the belief that romantic comedy can and will survive by adapting to changing historical circumstances and that this will not necessarily entail much modification in its basic form and ideology.

Any attempt to historicize the romantic comedy of the eighties and nineties must, consequently, address the ways in which the “specifics” mentioned by these authors have influenced the genre’s basic structure, while at the same time acknowledging its powerful tendency to hold cultural transformations in place. The films do not openly lend themselves to an analysis of the impact of social change in them. Rather, they privilege the eternal, unchanging nature of romantic love and tend to gloss over those aspects from the surrounding culture which threaten to deconstruct their underlying sexual ideology. According to Babington and Evans, the most relevant social changes that have affected the genre recently are the growing divorce rate, single parenting, feminism, gay rights, and the “rise of the working woman,” all of which they see as the outcome of the “post-feminist, gay revolutions.” Compulsory heterosexuality and the subjugation of women seem to be, then, the two central ideological tenets of classical romantic comedy and also those which have come under greatest pressure in contemporary films. Yet, in my view, the effects of this pressure are rather uneven: whereas the problematics of the foregrounding of female desire and the creation of a female space—what Rowe calls “women on top”—have apparently become a primary concern of most recent Hollywood romantic comedies, the existence of alternative sexualities has remained significantly underdeveloped in them.

In other words, it seems that, while the genre has gradually adapted to reflect changes in gender relationships, it is proving to be much slower and less flexible to incorporate homoerotic desire. This unbalanced situation is, to a great extent, reproduced in the literature on the subject. While evidently aware of the compulsion to heterosexuality in the genre, neither Neale and Krutnik nor Rowe investigate the films’ possible anxieties over this issue. Babington and Evans’s analysis does partly focus on two films whose subject is precisely this anxiety (*Tootsie* and *Victor/Victoria*), but for them the basic tension in contemporary examples of the genre remains that between a “cultural differentiation of the sexes based upon the passivity and subordination of women” and a “mutual delight in differences that are not necessarily hierarchical.”

Hence, even at this early stage, Kenneth Branagh’s *Much Ado about Nothing* (1992) can be seen as an interesting case study for several reasons. First, as a contemporary adaptation of a Shakespearean comedy, the film is an ideal space for the exploration of the changes undergone by the genre in the last four centuries. In historical terms, *Much Ado* occupies an uneasy position, both bearing witness to the birth of modern romantic comedy and standing side by side with the most recent manifestations of the genre. It is precisely this ambiguous position that renders the film an illuminating example of the state of the genre in the nineties.

Secondly, *Much Ado* continues a general trend in Shakespearean romantic comedy in that it overtly hinges on Beatrice, the female protagonist, as the main point of identification for the audience, especially in her “merry war” with Benedick. Third, the plot of *Much Ado* also allows Branagh to deal at length with the threat that homoerotic desire may pose to the central heterosexual romance. In other words, by adapting this particular play, Branagh is able to tap into the two elements whose presence/absence defines the contemporary stage of development of the genre. The film is, therefore, a special case within the genre because it almost brings into the open what other romantic comedies—both classical and contemporary—for the most part keep well hidden: the pressure of homoerotic desire on a generic and social structure based on heterosexuality.
For the Shakespearean critic Richard A. Levin, the key to the action of *Much Ado* is the recognition that “the time to marry has arrived in Messina.” Yet, instead of producing harmony, 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. With the exception of Beatrice's initial hostility to men, it is mostly the young men that present the fiercest opposition to marriage. In fact, the film could be described as the story of a group of men who are confronted with the social reality of marriage and who 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. In the rest of this essay, I propose a reading of Branagh's *Much Ado* as a film of the nineties and, more specifically, as a culturally prestigious arena in which contemporary questions of sexual politics and gender ideology are explored. My analysis will first focus on the specific terms of the relationship between optimistic heterosexual romance and gender tensions in the film. After a brief account of the play's discourse on heterosexuality—a discourse which is still understandable at the end of the twentieth century—I will concentrate on three different but interrelated aspects of the film: Balthasar's song, the precredit and credit sequences, and, finally, the treatment of the male characters, especially Don Pedro (Denzel Washington) and Don John (Keanu Reeves). In order to explore the film's delineation of heterosexual relationships and the threats to romance posed by these two characters I will draw, among others, on Susan Lurie's work on pornography and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's on homosocial desire. Starting from very different theoretical positions, both authors coincide in positing the male fear of woman and the threat she poses as the founding mechanism of patriarchal culture. The proud group of men in leather who dominate the first few minutes of *Much Ado* soon starts crumbling under the influence of the “female space” of Messina. The culturally ingrained male fear of women is used and reversed by the film in order to produce a happy ending which, while acceptable to contemporary audiences, ensures the continuity of the genre's traditional structure. It is this process of adaptation to both the laws of the genre and contemporary society that I try to map in the following pages.

Although Benedick ultimately proves to be the most compromising of the male characters and ripe for a heterosexual union in which an egalitarian relationship between the sexes may at least be envisaged, it is precisely through him that the play articulates the patriarchal view that falling in love affects manliness and turns men into effeminate posers. What is ironic about his famous soliloquy in scene 2.3 of the play is that it comes immediately before Don Pedro's plot to get Benedick and Beatrice to fall in love with each other, and, consequently, immediately before Benedick starts behaving in the exact manner he so vehemently criticizes. Among other things, his friend Claudio is blamed for changing his preferences from military to festive music, from armor to fashionable clothes, from plain discourse to rhetorical embellishment. There follows a list of the qualities that an eligible woman should have in order to “convert” Benedick. These are, of course, the very qualities that Beatrice possesses, and the spectator is aware that with this hypothetical enumeration he is really describing her and anticipating their future compatibility. This kind of double play, which both glorifies and parodies heterosexual harmony, partakes of Shakespeare's ambivalent attitude toward the tradition of courtly love, a tradition that had, by the 1590s, become clichéd in English literature but which served, at the same time, as the culturally prestigious basis for the new Protestant concept of marriage based on love. Despite the parodic attitude that this and other texts of the same period show toward the medieval conventions, “true love” cannot be imagined and, therefore, represented without reference to them.

However, while the relationship between Claudio and Hero provides the clearest example in the play of a love according to courtly conventions, the ideal heterosexual relationship, that between Beatrice and Benedick, incorporates yet another ingredient: gender confrontation. This element of Shakespeare's romantic comedies has best been discussed by Stephen Greenblatt through the concepts of heat and chafing. Starting from a discussion of Elizabethan medical theories of sexuality, which explained sex and reproduction as a matter of erotic heat (the literal increase of bodily temperature produced by friction as a precondition for the proper functioning of the sexual organs), Greenblatt contends that, since erotic heat could not be directly represented on the Elizabethan stage, Shakespeare took advantage of the common knowledge that erotic heat was no different from other kinds of heat in the human body and substituted verbal wit for it: the linguistic sparring
between lovers which produced the necessary dramatic friction to metaphorically represent the erotic friction on which sexuality was based. Greenblatt's theory explains the nature of the linguistic competition between Benedick and Beatrice: linguistic tension is at the very basis of the representation of love and compatibility between the two characters. On the other hand, while medical science has since then proved that the concepts of heat and friction are inaccurate to describe the functioning of the human sexual organs, the dramatic friction that, for Greenblatt, is in the Elizabethan era a consequence of the putting into discourse of these medical concepts is still understandable in the twentieth century as part of the codified structure of heterosexual relationships in comic fiction. In other words, the medical grounds of the convention may have disappeared, but the convention itself still works in our day, defining the representation of sexual relationships in cultural texts as a problematic tension between friction and harmony. For a late-twentieth-century film like *Much Ado*, the continuing applicability of this convention has the added advantage of highlighting Beatrice's "feminist" awareness of the unfairness of male behavior in patriarchy, while at the same time explaining her readiness to "submit" to a stable relationship with a man: she exposes Benedick's shortcomings and dismissive attitude toward women as sexist, but, through her verbal "abuse," the play simultaneously manages to convey her attraction toward him. To put this in other words, linguistic friction is the film's way of dramatizing the conflict between Beatrice's wish to be independent from men and her desire for Benedick, a conflict which is, for Rowe, at the basis of the contradictions experienced by heterosexual women in patriarchy. It also renders more credible Benedick's change from apparent resentment of women to the willing and joyful acceptance of a monogamous engagement with the most threatening specimen of the opposite sex.

This approach therefore reinforces the feasibility of a thematic structure in which conflict not only leads to final reconciliation but is an integral part of the sexual compatibility produced by that reconciliation. Having said this, it is however also possible to reverse Greenblatt's theory: in a play like *Much Ado*, successful sexual relationships are invariably based on ideological and linguistic tensions between the sexes that cast a permanent shadow on the feasibility of those relationships. Since reconciliation is a universal comic convention, to say that the film ends in reconciliation is not to say anything specific about the text itself. We must, therefore, analyze the specific terms in which that reconciliation takes place. On the other hand, Benedick's flexibility and readiness to compromise is not totally shared by his "buddies." While his apparent resentment of women may be considered as "only" one ingredient of his future acceptance of their difference, the attitudes of the other three male characters cannot easily be contained by this reading. The viewer must accept the final reconciliation between Claudio and Hero as a contribution to the generalized image of social harmony characteristic of Shakespeare's comedies, no matter how problematic this reconciliation may look nowadays, but no effort needs to be made in the cases of Don Pedro and Don John, who are, for apparently different reasons, simply excluded from the final heterosexual pairing celebrated by the song and dance. To put it briefly, a reading of the film must explain the exact terms of the negotiation that leads to heterosexual reconciliation in the case of Benedick and Beatrice and the reasons why Don Pedro and Don John are excluded from it (reasons which, in my view, should also lead to Claudio's exclusion and certainly to Hero's rejection of him).

For Barbara Everett, what distinguishes *Much Ado* from other Shakespearean comedies is its insistence on the radical difference in outlook and behavior between men and women and the fact that it is the women's world that dominates in the play. An element that may undercut this dominance, however, is Balthasar's song, one of the most problematic aspects of the staging of the play. Benedick's comparison of his singing to a dog's howling and the servant's acknowledgment of his own limitations as a singer have often been sufficient evidence to turn the song into parody and burlesque in performance. Zitner argues that Balthasar's limited ability as a singer may be the key to solving the problem of the contradictory message contained in the lyrics. For him, the message, delivered through the assertion that "men were deceivers ever" and, simultaneously, that women ought to leave lamentation over male infidelity and sing songs of flirtation (Zitner's interpretation of the phrase "hey nonny nonny") can only be explained as male self-serving counsel: "that women reconcile themselves to playing in an unfair game, even [while] blandly own[ing] up to male unfairness." The emotional power of this misogynistic message would then be undercut by Balthasar's exaggeratedly poor
rendering, thus invalidating the “truth” of its content.

This is clearly not the option taken in Branagh's film. In this case, Balthasar (Patrick Doyle) sings the song beautifully, and Branagh's histrionic but effective performance of Benedick's reaction contributes to the general impression that male pomp and self-importance ought to be abandoned before a balanced heterosexual relationship may be established. But the song is not rescued from parody and burlesque solely by Balthasar's performance. The same song is used for the final dance and celebration, which again sanctions its validity as part of the dominant discourse of the text. But, even more crucially, it is appropriated by Beatrice and used for the opening of the film. It is to this opening scene—Beatrice's performance of the song and the arrival of Don Pedro's men in Messina—that I want to turn my attention now.

Adrienne L. McLean has recently argued that musical numbers in nonmusical films tend to be dismissed as passages in which nothing important happens, yet they may provide one of the few places in classical Hollywood cinema “in which women do not necessarily always play only to male desire.” Elsewhere in her essay, McLean applies Rick Altman's contention that the musical reverses the “normal” image/sound hierarchy of classical cinema: in the musical number, image becomes subordinated to sound. Although the critic is referring to classical Hollywood films, her words accurately describe the narrative function of Beatrice's rendering of “Hey nonny nonny.” The film opens with the lyrics of the song gradually appearing on a black screen while Emma Thompson's voice is heard reciting them to the background melody which will again accompany the song on two more occasions during the film (first by Balthasar, and then by everybody at the end). The film's use of the written lyrics can be understood as prompting the spectator to sing, or at least recite, along and thus identify with the content of what is being said and with the speaking voice. Even before the importance of the message sinks in, the film is, therefore, demanding total identification with Beatrice from the spectator. After the end of the first stanza, the black screen is first replaced by a painting of the Italian villa, which idealizes the space of the recitation, and then, through a leisurely panning frame movement, followed by a view of Leonato's household as they sit on the grass in a “carelessly arranged” manner listening to Beatrice's words. Her face is then framed for the first time, in close-up, as her recitation of the song's second stanza finishes. This shot, therefore, establishes the space of Leonato's household as dominated by Beatrice and by the words she recites, bringing the film closer to Everett's reading of the play. But what exactly do these words mean?

This is not, as in the play, a man suggesting that women should put up with men's infidelities and keep on inviting male misogynistic behavior but a woman ironically suggesting that women reject that behavior and advising them not to take men too seriously and not to shed one single tear over them. The “hey nonny nonny,” whose original meaning is not clear anyway, appears here to be turned by the film's contemporary discourse into a song of celebration of a female space, a space initially occupied by the women and the men of Leonato's household. The song, therefore, cannot be taken ironically, as Zitner suggests in the case of the play, but at face value, as defining a position, within patriarchy, in which the basic injustice of patriarchal society is understood and in which women resist the humiliation stemming from that injustice.

The harmony of this female space is inevitably disrupted by the news of the imminent return of Don Pedro and his company of men. Beatrice's recitation, therefore, adds an interesting nuance to the play's opening. Whereas in Shakespeare the emphasis is, from the beginning, on Don Pedro's arrival and his men's exploits, in the film this arrival is presented both as a disruption of the female space with which the spectator is unequivocally asked to identify and as a slightly ridiculous event through the focus on the messenger's embarrassed replies to Beatrice's minimizing of Benedick's warring exploits. Shortly afterward, as the credits appear, the company of men are shown covering the last stretch of their journey, a moment which is visually presented through the point of view of Beatrice and her friends.

Being a comedy, Much Ado pays less attention to male performance in war than to Beatrice's biting comments about Benedick's cowardice. Yet the experience of war does seem to underscore some of the male characters'
actions and attitudes in Messina. For these men, the memory of war produces an experience of loss and a state of regressive bliss characterized by male bonding and total absence of women. In a recent analysis of Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), Tania Modleski has argued that “an important objective of war is to subjugate femininity and keep it at a distance.”26 This male fear of women in patriarchal societies has been persuasively analyzed by Susan Lurie in a feminist revision of the Freudian theory of castration, in which she argues that, in the course of their psychosexual development, male subjects gradually replace their longing for union with the mother with a fear of dissolution and loss of individuality through this union. A similar form of this terror is experienced in adult life every time the male subject has a sexual encounter with another woman. The threat of castration, accordingly, does not come from the father, as Freud had argued, but from the mother, who is not perceived by the boy as a “penisless man” but as the possessor of a terrible power that is capable of castrating him.27 This fear of women is a product of acculturation, the consequence of a patriarchal society that represses female sexuality, precisely by associating it with hostile, destructive drives, drives which do not respond to the reality of women but belong exclusively in men's minds. For Klaus Theweleit, the violence of war is a consequence of this same fear of dissolution through union with the woman. It is this fear that throws men into homosocial bonding.28 Male homosocial desire, the term coined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, describes precisely the cultural process whereby latent homoerotic desire is combined with apparent homophobia in a hegemony of male virility whose ultimate objective is the abjection of woman and the threat she poses.

The presence of this masculine hegemony in recent popular films has been analyzed, among others, by Cynthia J. Fuchs, who finds that the threat posed by women to the male bond becomes the unspoken structuring principle of many of these films, in which an “all-male unit transcending race and class distinctions” is finally triumphant.29 Fuchs's analysis centers mostly on action adventure films and is not immediately transferable to romantic comedies, in which, as I suggest in the introduction to this essay, the male bond, because of its latent homoerotic dimensions, is not usually so visible. In *Much Ado*, by contrast, the all-male unit is prominent but in a period of crisis, and it consequently becomes the main object of attack in Beatrice's song. As some critics have pointed out, however important male bonding is in the play, the film nevertheless turns this male-to-male allegiance into a much more central element of its ideological structure, one that simultaneously problematizes and highlights its heterosexual romance.30

The crisis of the male group, however, is not immediately obvious as they arrive in Messina on their return from the war. Celebratory military music forms the auditory background to a set of slow-motion shots of the riders as the credits are displayed on the screen. A shot of Don Pedro's flag is followed by a shot of horses' legs in full gallop and then an individual medium shot of Don Pedro, followed by similar shots of another five men: Claudio (Robert Sean Leonard) and Benedick, two lords, Don John, Don Pedro's bastard brother, and Borachio (Gerard Horan) and Conrad (Richard Clifford), two common soldiers, friends of Don John's. As in Fuchs's description, in this panoramic tableau there is no class or racial distinction. On the contrary, the picture presents an apparently idyllic male company, whose power and friendship are then emphasized by a final long shot, still in slow motion, framing the six men in a horizontal composition, riding together, with no hierarchical differentiation between them. Shots of the men arriving in Leonato's house are then crosscut with shots of the people in the house, mostly the women, both groups rushing to their meeting in an atmosphere of exhilaration, completing a rousing credit sequence which sets the mood for the rest of the film. In fact, it could be argued that the flutter, excitement, and even sexual euphoria shown by both men and women at this point underscore the truth value of Beatrice's ditty, as discussed earlier, and produce a spectatorial distance from her words of caution to women, prompting female spectators to surrender to male supremacy.

Closer attention, however, will show that the men's power and strong unity are, in fact, textually undercut by three stylistic elements: the credits, the music, and the clothing. As the sequence of shots reaches its first climax and the men are seen together for the first time, they raise one arm and shout in unison, reinforcing their teamlike unity. At the same time, however, the background music turns into a fully orchestrated repetition of the “hey nonny nonny” melody as the title of the film—*Much Ado About Nothing*—is
superimposed on the image. The music suggests that these warriors are entering a space where the budding romantic proceedings will have to take place on the terms proposed by Beatrice, totally opposed to this all-too-obvious display of machismo. At the same time, the title neatly suggests that military victories and men's subsequent sense of self-importance are … much ado about nothing. Finally, close attention to the six riders will reveal that although their white jackets are almost exactly alike, a slight contrast is established between the horsemen on the right and on the left of Don Pedro through the blue and black linings of the men's jackets. Suspicions are then confirmed at the end of the sequence, as the men walk in to meet Leonato and the others: it now appears that the riders' trousers are not all the same. This added detail definitely divides the men into three subgroups: Don John, Borachio, and Conrad, situated on the left-hand side of Don Pedro, wear black leather trousers. Claudio, Benedick, and the messenger (who has now joined the other men), on the right-hand side, wear blue flannel trousers. Don Pedro, who occupies the vortex of a now undeniably hierarchical composition, wears blue leather trousers, that is, halfway between the two groups.

I want to argue that the leather trousers of the two brothers and Don John's underlings are, through their contemporary connotations of homoerotic desire, a powerful, if not always obvious, symbol of the film's construction of male bonding as the most formidable opponent of heterosexual union, conversely depicted, as indicated before, as taking place in a feminized space. The main difference between Much Ado and the contemporary “buddy” films analyzed by Fuchs and others is that, while in the latter strong male bonding is generally compatible with heterosexual love, in Branagh's film it excludes heterosexuality. On the other hand, the film's celebratory support of heterosexual relationships, even its endorsement of the power of the female space, is enforced through an underlying streak of homophobia. At this point Sedgwick's term “homosociality” proves to be very useful, for it introduces the possibility of distinguishing male bonding in patriarchal societies from homoerotic desire, even though both are ultimately related. As Chris Holmlund has argued recently in a study of another group of contemporary “buddy” films, the risk of looking for homoeroticism in heterosexual male genre films “increases astronomically … if, as critics, we fail to notice or downplay the films' homophobia.” Much Ado appears to be aware of all these distinctions and risks, yet it cannot separate its conscious critique of patriarchal male bonding from a more ambivalent but, at times, very powerful homophobia. Through the symbol of the leather trousers, for example, homoerotic desire and male bonding are collapsed into one single concept.

Another “problem” often encountered by critics in Shakespeare's Much Ado is the indeterminacy of the nature of Don John's evil. While there is a consensus that the character's villainy is due to his being an illegitimate child, his bastardy is not explicitly mentioned until scene 4.1, after his appearance at the wedding. Even at this point, it remains unexplained and, as a reason for his evil acts, unsatisfactory. His villainy is described by Leggatt as generalized and conventional, with the only apparent function of furthering the plot. Several rather mystifying utterances by Don John to Conrad in scene 1.3—“I cannot hide what I am” (1.3.12-13), or, later on, “let me be that I am, and seek not to alter me” (1.3.34-35)—could be explained as an acknowledgment of the influence of his “unnatural birth” on his character. Yet while this explanation would have been perfectly understandable in the sixteenth century, it makes little sense nowadays.

Since the film belongs to a culture in which bastardy is no longer considered an inexcusable source of evil, an interesting shift takes place in this scene. The dialogue with Conrad takes place at night, in a small room suffused in the intense yellowish-red light of the fire, while Conrad gives his master a massage. Don John, still wearing his black leather trousers (like Conrad and Borachio, who later comes into the room), is naked from the waist up, the intimate relationship with his friend unequivocally seeking to position the spectator in terms of homoerotic desire. In this context one cannot but associate the homoerotic mise-en-scène with Don John's ambiguous words, which define him as different in the exclusivity of his all-male space. The abstract nature of the dialogue and the ambiguity of the terms used to define Don John combine with the visual rendering of the scene to reframe his difference as sexual difference.
Moreover, the villain's grim and surly general mood helps create an oppositional space to that of heterosexual celebration in Messina, a space characterized by strict exclusion of women and by alternative male specularization. The pleasures offered by this specularized all-male world are striking—the men's spectacular arrival at the beginning, Don John's exhibitionist poses and the massaging scene—but inevitably short-lived. In a society bent on marriage and strictly heterosexual exchange of energy, male bonding is doomed to failure, as the outcome of his two plots against Claudio proves. For Don John, Claudio is “that young startup [who] hath all the glory of my overthrow” (1.3.63-64). Don John's “overthrow,” another ambiguous and unexplained event in the play, is presented by the film as jealousy of the growing favors of Don Pedro toward Claudio at Don John's expense. On the other hand, Don John's hostility against Claudio can be interpreted as his disgust at the young nobleman's readiness to comply with the social rules in Messina and his willingness to abandon the men's company. Don John's bitterness can, therefore, be reread, in the new context offered by the film, as his disappointment and resentment at the sight of the dissolution of the company of men, some of whose members appear, in varying degrees, to have made up their minds to succumb to the socialized pleasures of marriage and abandon the dream paradise of male bonding. It may be proof of the sexual confusion of our times that, in identifying the narrative's evil as an excess of male bonding, the film falls into the characterization of its main villain in terms of homoeroticism. This characterization reaches its climax in the scene when Don John concludes that “it must not be denied but I am a plain-dealing villain” (1.3.29-30), framed in medium shot, arms outstretched, the firelight emphasizing the beauty of his desirable body. At this point, any distinction between homoerotic desire and villainy has totally disappeared.37

For his part, Don Pedro's position encapsulates all the difficulties of the role of the intermediary in a world in which heterosexual desire and male bonding are mutually exclusive spaces. He is both the men's leader and the creator of the plots that finally get the two young couples together. Yet his intervention on both occasions suggests that he is not happy with his lot. His plan to woo Hero in Claudio's name in the play is a rather unnecessary gesture, which may already suggest that he is uncomfortable in his role as go-between and would like to woo for himself.38 The film underlines this possibility by including a long shot in which he kisses Hero's hands with a genuinely felt intensity which betrays his own desire. Later on, still in the same scene, his proposal of marriage to Beatrice, which she rejects, is again supplemented in the film by a shot of Don Pedro looking at Beatrice, as she walks away, with an expression of longing and sadness on his face. The rendering of this scene also seems to suggest the importance of the casting of Denzel Washington in the part of Don Pedro. Beatrice's rejection and Don Pedro's sad expression suggest that the invisible barrier between them may not be so invisible after all, and the difference between them becomes not only one of class and sexual orientation but also a difference of race. Since Don Pedro does not need to be black in terms of realism (people from Aragón are not and have never been, as a general rule, black), it must be inferred that Washington's casting is, like Reeves's, a way of reinforcing the character's difference. It seems obvious that the film could not have used, with the same effect, Washington or any other black actor (British or American) to play the parts of Benedick or Claudio. The link established between homosexuality and blackness becomes a powerful symbol of the lingering “otherness” of both conditions in our culture.39

At the end of the film, when Don John has been arrested and brought back to Don Pedro's presence, the looks that the two brothers exchange are not so much looks of rivalry and hostility as of recognition. In spite of their differences, they are brought together by their mutual “difference.” Don Pedro seems to acknowledge the presence of Don John in himself, and when Benedick advises him to get married, it is obvious to the spectator that marriage is not such a straightforward proposition for the prince as his friend seems to think, both for sexual and racial reasons. The previous shot showing the prince at the vortex of the hierarchical arrangement can now be seen as a metaphorical representation of Don Pedro's predicament: his position at the apex suggests a tension between male bonding and heterosexual love. All of these details define Don Pedro's difference from the people in Messina, including Benedick and Claudio. Aware as a ruler of the limitations of male bonding and the necessity of stable heterosexual relationships for the model of society which he defends, he himself finds it impossible to be part of that society, much as he would like to be. Levin, writing about the play, argues that his dialogue with Beatrice suggests that they are not suitable life companions because an
invisible but powerful line separates them. This line, Levin continues, may be the line that separates heterosexual from homosexual, although “such terminology is too coarse for Shakespeare’s delicate and perhaps evasive portrayal.” Why this terminology should be too coarse for an author who wrote a whole series of sonnets about homoerotic desire is difficult to understand. In any case, the film's reading of the male space in Messina as a space of aggressive bonding and strict exclusion of women and its characterization of Don Pedro as longing for but incapable of sexual relationships with women once again recontextualizes the tensions of the story within a scenario of homosocial desire. The “otherness” and undesirability of this scenario is intensified by Don Pedro's skin color, a contemporary manifestation of the line that, according to Levin, separates this character from Beatrice.

From the perspective of the film's dominant discourse, Don Pedro's predicament brings into the open what Western cultural texts have generally attempted to hide for many centuries: the contradictions of a patriarchal discourse that has tried to harmonize male bonding with the centrality of stable heterosexual relationships. In many Western narratives the solution has been to subordinate the hero's erotic relationship with the heroine to his homosocial links with other men. Occasionally, such narratives as stories of *amour fou* and others have ignored men's relationships with other men and threatened through the male protagonist's total involvement with the female character the precarious balance necessary for the perpetuation of patriarchal structures. Branagh's film makes the most of the ambiguities and gaps already present in Shakespeare's play and advances a very different proposition: male bonding is, in the film's ideological discourse, the main obstacle to heterosexual relationships, which, in the egalitarian climate in which the film was produced, can only be successful if they take place within the female space of Messina and on the terms dictated by Beatrice. The prominence of Beatrice's song throughout the film and, specifically, its dominance over and infiltration of the male celebratory discourse of the first scene, together with Benedick's acceptance of Beatrice's conditions, suggest the ideological incompatibility between male bonding and marriage. The discourse of male bonding, on the other hand, is specularized by means of the ideologically significant collapsing of homosociality and homoerotic desire: the pleasures offered by this discourse are, in the scenes analyzed above, clearly homoerotic ones, yet they are ephemeral insofar as the film constantly asks the spectator to reject a discourse which is embodied, it must not be forgotten, in the narrative's unrepentant villain, Don John. In other words, the film's project of apparent rejection of male bonding and critique of women's subordination in patriarchy cannot be separated from its latent homophobia. In Branagh's new paradise, fear of women has been displaced on to—or, perhaps, hidden under—fear of homosexuals.

As a romantic comedy of the nineties, then, *Much Ado* signals the incompatibility between the genre and its initial scenario of men in leather. Like other recent examples of the genre, the film manages to promote its heroine as a “woman on top,” responding in this way to social changes by establishing a more egalitarian climate in the battle of the sexes. Yet, homoerotic desire (and, in a less obvious way, interracial relationships) must, for the time being, remain outside the genre as its “repressed other.” Further, the film presents its homoerotic and female spaces as incompatible and opposed to one another. It is, in cultural terms, as if the inclusion of one space actually reinforces the exclusion of the other. However, by dramatizing the impossibility of homoerotic desire in Messina rather than simply hiding it, the film becomes a particularly telling case of the underlying sexual ideology of romantic comedy and, if only indirectly, offers a possibility of change in the future evolution of the genre. In any case, the continuing success of such “new romances” as *French Kiss* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1995), *Nine Months* (Chris Columbus, 1995), or *The American President* (Rob Reiner, 1995) shows that this possibility remains, for the time being, largely unexplored within the Hollywood industry.41

**Notes**

6. Neale and Krutnik, Popular Film and Television Comedy, 171; the recent interest in history in film studies has provided the main impetus for Karnick and Jenkins's Classical Hollywood Comedy, an attempt to correct the ahistorical tendency in earlier approaches to comedy; however, Rowe's conclusion on Moonstruck, quoted above, attests to the difficulties inherent in such a project, especially in the case of romantic comedy.
7. Babington and Evans, Affairs to Remember, 268, 297.
8. See also Neale and Krutnik, Popular Film and Television Comedy, 145, 154; Rowe, “Comedy, Melodrama and Gender,” 45, 47.
9. Rowe, “Comedy, Melodrama and Gender,” 49.
10. Growing female independence is, for Rowe, the central issue of Moonstruck, but many of the most successful Hollywood romantic comedies of the eighties and nineties also deal with threats to patriarchal subjection of women. See, for example, Something Wild (Jonathan Demme, 1985), Peggy Sue Got Married (Francis Coppola, 1986) Broadcast News (James L. Brooks, 1987), Working Girl (Mike Nichols, 1988), The Accidental Tourist (Lawrence Kasdan, 1988), Green Card (Peter Weir, 1990), or Alice (Woody Allen, 1990). Homosexuality as the “repressed other” of romantic comedy, by contrast, is practically absent in recent Hollywood. Some exceptions are Tootsie (悉尼 Pollack, 1982), Victor/Victoria (Blake Edwards, 1982), and Switch (Blake Edwards, 1991).
11. Babington and Evans, Affairs to Remember, 269.
14. Since this is an analysis of the film as a romantic comedy, the most carnivalesque aspects of the story, especially the parts played by the comic characters, are not explored here. Yet the casting of star Michael Keaton as Dogberry in itself suggests the importance that the part of the action dominated by this character has in the overall structure of the film. Although I later suggest that Dogberry's Watch act is a comic foil for the male group of the romantic action, there are, no doubt, other dimensions to these characters and the type of comedy they embody that fall outside the scope of this paper.
17. The “displacement of physical sexuality into language” is, for Neale and Krutnik, also a characteristic of the screwball comedies of the 1930s. For these authors, who do not specifically refer to linguistic confrontations, this displacement is a reflection of the way in which courtship and seduction are carried out in real life (Neale and Krutnik, Popular Film and Television Comedy, 162). Friction between romantic partners in the cinema is also mentioned by Molly Haskell in From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies (London: New English Library, 1975), 127 and expanded on by Neale and Krutnik, Popular Film and Television Comedy, 140.
18. Rowe, “Comedy, Melodrama and Gender,” 54.

20. These are the words of the song:

    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 bright and bonny,
    Converting all your sounds of woe
    Into hey nonny, nonny.

    Sing no more ditties, sing no more
    Of dumps so dull and heavy.
    The fraud of men was ever so
    Since summer first was leafy.
    Then sigh not so, but let them go,
    And be you blithe and bonny,
    Converting all your sounds of woe
    Into hey nonny, nonny.


24. Ibid., 5.

25. It is in this context that the “truth” value of Benedick's assertion in the final scene, when he says to Don Pedro that “man is a giddy thing,” should be understood, for it has by then become clear that the frank acknowledgment of male infidelity and unfairness to women is the necessary condition for men to be admitted to the comic space of Messina.


31. I am indebted to Anita La Cruz for first pointing out to me the superimposition of the film’s title over the display and celebration of male power and to Chantal Cornut-Gentille for noticing details of the riders’ jackets. Leslie Felperin Sharman refers to the title as punning with the word nothing (“no thing” being a common Shakespearean play on virginity and women's “lack” of a penis) in “*Much Ado about Nothing*,” *Sight and Sound* 3, no. 9 (September 1993): 50-51, but the sexual reference is less than clear in Shakespeare’s play and would most certainly be lost nowadays anyway. Zitner goes through all the possible connotations of the title but settles for none of them and finally links it with Shakespeare’s other “throwaway titles”—*As You Like It, All's Well That Ends Well, Measure for Measure*, and *Twelfth Night*, more particularly, its subtitle, *As You Will*—as a probable fashion of the time to counteract excessively spectacular and explanatory titles (Shakespeare, *Much Ado about Nothing*, 14-15). Be that as it may, the film takes advantage of the indeterminacy of the title of the original and manages this unexpected ironic connection, very much in keeping with its foregrounding of male bonding.
32. Dogberry and his Watch constitute the comic foil of this powerful company of men. The stupidity of the comic company and their constant self-deconstruction represent another avenue of criticism of male bonding, through parody. For example, when Dogberry and his men question the villains after they have arrested them, the film's mise-en-scène presents both groups as distorted mirror images of one another.


34. Leggatt, Shakespeare's Comedy of Love, 156.

35. The lines from the play have been taken from the Zitner edition quoted above.

36. This positioning of the spectator is clearly intensified by the casting of Keanu Reeves as Don John, an actor who “signifies” queer through his body and previous roles, especially the part he had recently played in My Own Private Idaho (Gus Van Sant, 1991), curiously enough, another, if much freer, Shakespearean adaptation.

37. Unlike Benedick's, Claudio's transition from the war to Messina is more problematic than his hasty engagement to Hero may suggest. At the truncated wedding ceremony, he encapsulates all of Don John's resentment of women in his public humiliation of and physical violence against Hero. This attitude makes the young bride's forthright willingness to give herself to him in the final wedding ceremony the least palatable aspect of the film's version of the play to modern audiences.

38. Levin, Love and Society, 95-96.

39. Race is another area in which contemporary romantic comedy is resistant to change. The recent popularity of comic African American stars such as Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy, and Whoopi Goldberg should not blind us to the reality of Hollywood's resistance to make race visible in heterosexual romances. Denzel Washington may be, in fact, one of the first African American actors whose star persona makes him eligible for romantic parts, but his casting as Don Pedro in Much Ado attests to the difficulty of such an operation. The Pelican Brief (Alan J. Pakula, 1993) is another example, although not a comedy, in which the relationship between a law student (Julia Roberts) and an investigative journalist (Washington) would have most likely ended in romance had it not been for Washington's racial otherness. As it is, all we get is his longing look in close-up as Roberts walks away in the film's final scene. This look reminds us of the one described above when Beatrice refuses to marry Don Pedro and encapsulates Washington's contradictory position as a romantic lead of the nineties. Whoopi Goldberg has also been recently involved in romantic comedies such as Made in America (Richard Benjamin, 1993) or Corrina, Corrina (Jessie Nelson, 1994), but the analysis of her parts in these films falls outside the scope of this paper.

40. Levin, Love and Society, 98.

41. On the other hand, the relative success of non-Hollywood films such as The Wedding Banquet (Ang Lee, 1992), Go Fish (Rose Troche, 1993), or Gauzon Maudit (Josiane Balasko, 1995) proves the growing compatibility, within the present sociocultural context, between a certain normalization in the representation of male and female sexuality and the conventions and structures of romantic comedy.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Michael J. Collins (review date 1997)**


[In the following review, Collins contends that in his 1993 film version of Much Ado about Nothing, Branagh downplayed the tension regarding gender roles found in Shakespeare’s play in order to present the film as a romantic comedy in the popular Hollywood style.]
The availability of Kenneth Branagh's *Much Ado About Nothing* on videotape has provided me a way of exploring some of the issues involved in staging Shakespeare's comedies. As many people have pointed out, Claudio's question to Don Pedro in 1.1, “Hath Leonato any son, my Lord,” and the Prince's reply, “No child but Hero; she's his only heir” (284-85), open up the possibility that Claudio's interest in Hero (despite his declaration of love in the lines that follow) is, to some degree, financial as well as romantic. At the same time, no matter how much he may love his daughter, Leonato seems to appreciate that her marriage to Don Pedro will bring about a desirable “alliance” (to use Beatrice's word in 2.1.314); for when Antonio mistakenly informs him that the Prince loves Hero (1.2), he says, “We will hold it as a dream till it appear itself. But I will acquaint my daughter withal, that she may be better prepared for an answer” (18-21). Later, in 2.1.65-67, he reminds Hero, apparently for a second time, that “if the Prince do solicit you in that kind [i.e., with a proposal of marriage], you know your answer.”

Leonato's instructions to Hero in 2.1, however, leave his motivations unclear. While they may be meant to suggest that he simply wants an alliance with the Prince through the marriage of his daughter, his instructions are given to her in the context of Beatrice's disparagement of men and marriage; they follow her advising Hero to tell Leonato “Father, as it please me”; and they thus may also suggest that with two women in his care, one of whom he believes, as Antonio puts it, “too curst” (20) ever to be married, Leonato wants to make certain that the other one will not refuse the Prince's attractive proposal.

Although this second possibility may offer the actor playing Leonato a more plausible opportunity to show affection for Hero and implicit concern for her happiness, neither suggests that he believes or desires that Hero should marry, as Beatrice advises, for love. At the same time, Hero's notorious reticence (she says nothing to her father, her uncle, or Beatrice) leaves her intentions and her feelings unknown. Thus, by the time Don Pedro draws Hero aside at 2.1.99, the play has, in some measure, called into question the romantic view of Hero and Claudio that it has simultaneously created.

In teaching *Much Ado About Nothing*, I try to bring students to recognize that, on the stage, a production will probably emphasize one reading and repress the other, to see the relationship of Hero and Claudio either as romance (the more likely choice) or as alliance for financial and social reasons. To help make that recognition possible (and, at the same time, to emphasize the openness of all of Shakespeare's scripts to interpretation), I ask students to look carefully at the scene in which the Prince brings Hero back on stage, ultimately reveals to Claudio that he has wooed and won her for him, and then proposes marriage to Beatrice (2.1.210-337). I first divide the students into groups of six (to play the six roles in the scene) and then provide them a series of questions to help them imagine how the scene might look and sound on the stage. The questions are designed to address three fundamental questions: how are the actors positioned on the stage; how do they deliver their lines; and what actions do they perform? I ask half the groups to imagine a staging that articulates a romantic relationship between Hero and Claudio and half a staging that suppresses it. Since they have already watched, in class, the conclusions of such popular romantic comedies as *Sabrina* and *Sleepless in Seattle*, they have less difficulty imagining the first possibility.

I am not entirely fair to my students when I ask them to imagine a staging that suppresses the romantic possibilities of the scene, for, unlike them, working out such a staging on their own, I have seen a production which seemed to do just that, a *Much Ado* directed by Matthew Warchus in 1993 for The Queen's Theatre in London, with Janet McTeer and Mark Rylance as an awkward and inelegant Beatrice and Benedick (see *Shakespeare Bulletin* 12.1 [Winter 1994]: 16-17). When Don Pedro, having wooed Hero for Claudio, returned to the stage with her, he kissed her and left her, with the large jacket of his naval uniform around her shoulders for warmth, standing upstage center, uneasy, entirely alone, looking occasionally to one side or the other, while, downstage right, he talked first to Benedick and then to Beatrice and Claudio. Sitting alone, downstage left, her voice suggesting an emotional detachment from the action around her, Beatrice watched intently as Don Pedro and Leonato gave Hero to Claudio and, after they kissed, comically mimed vomiting.
She then stood up, moved across to a bar downstage right and, while mixing a drink, refused Don Pedro's offer of marriage. Both Leonato, standing next to her at the bar, and Don Pedro grew angry, and the Prince, crossing to the edge of the stage, still angry, stood looking out at the audience until Beatrice, with some nervous laughter, made her apology. Having told his niece some three hundred lines earlier that she would never get a husband if she remained “so shrewd” of tongue, Leonato looked angrily at her, apparently for letting the Prince's offer (and the alliance it would bring about) go by.

By answering the questions about the staging of the scene and trying, as the final part of the exercise, to stage and act it for themselves, students come to see more clearly not simply its ambiguity, its simultaneous potential for a romantic or an ironic reading, but also the ways in which it can be staged to articulate one or the other. At this point, I ask them to look at the scene in Branagh's film of the play, for, having worked through the script carefully themselves and having seen some broad and rudimentary stagings of its possibilities, they are now better prepared to recognize the decisions Branagh makes to achieve a remarkably beautiful and effective presentation of its romantic possibilities. In Branagh's version of 2.1.210-337, Hero enters smiling, alone with Don Pedro (and not also, as the conventional stage direction states, with her father). Although she has no lines, she remains next to Don Pedro, laughing and enjoying with him the good-natured teasing of Benedick about Beatrice. At the same time, as he does in the earlier exchange between Benedick and Claudio, where, for example, “Do you think the Prince would have served you thus?” is spoken to suggest that Benedick is correcting Claudio's mistaken conclusion, Branagh cuts all the lines in which Benedick expresses his belief that Don Pedro has betrayed Claudio and wooed Hero for himself. When he says, for example, “I told him, and I think I told him true, that your Grace had got the good will of this young lady” (213-15), the cuts here and earlier make the line mean Benedick has told Claudio that Don Pedro has won Hero for him, although, as we have seen in Claudio's response, he does not believe him.

When Beatrice enters with Claudio, she also brings Leonato, Antonio, and Ursula with her. The jocular tone shifts soon after she enters, for she is embarrassed and momentarily hurt by Benedick's “I can not endure my Lady Tongue” (272) and what Branagh's script calls her “rueful, rather sad” response (Much Ado About Nothing: The Making of the Movie. New York: W. W. Norton, 1993. 33) quite the scene and leads naturally to the exchange between Don Pedro and Claudio. Gently, Don Pedro tells Claudio he has won Hero for him. Leonato then steps forward and, smiling with great affection, gives Hero to Claudio (“Count, take of me my daughter, and with her my fortunes”). The camera focuses on Hero, who smiles happily at Claudio and, with Beatrice's gentle, playful encouragement (“Speak, cousin; or, if you cannot, stop his mouth with a kiss and not let him speak neither”), moves toward him. The two young lovers embrace and kiss, while, as the script has it, “the others laugh, cheer, and clap” (35). The subsequent exchange between Don Pedro and Beatrice is equally gentle and affectionate, and it ends with Don Pedro alone on a bench, speaking softly to himself as he admires Beatrice's pleasant spirit.

Everything in the scene conspires to make it a moving moment in the film, to evoke in its audience the feeling of satisfaction that often marks the end of a romantic comedy: the cuts Branagh makes, the focus of the camera on the joyful faces of the lovers, the music, the pleasure all the characters seem to take in one another, the apparent affection they have for one another. Hero, who has no words in the scene, joyfully accepts the man she loves: her laughter with Don Pedro at Benedick, her concern at Claudio's discomfort, her happiness as she looks at him and kisses him all put to rest any doubt about her feelings for Claudio that her silence, as it did in Warchus' production, might otherwise evoke.

Much Ado About Nothing was released in early summer 1993, coincidentally at about the same time as the spectacularly successful romantic comedy Sleepless in Seattle. The films have more than their time of release in common, however, for Branagh seems to have decided to suppress the play's uneasiness about the roles that gender imposes upon both men and women and make his Much Ado resemble, as far as possible, one of Hollywood's popular romantic comedies. I do not speak critically. Branagh has done what, it seems to me, all directors of Shakespeare's comedies must finally do: decide whether to emphasize in performance the
conventions of the genre with its happy ending or those elements, always present in Shakespeare's comic scripts, that call the conventions of the genre into question. Branagh chose to affirm the conventions of the genre and thus made *Much Ado About Nothing* into a beautiful, enjoyable, and commercially successful romantic comedy.

While I always enjoy the pleasure most students take in the film, I use it in the classroom, with either the acting exercise I have described here or a similar one for the last scene (i.e., 5.4.53-128, where both Kate Beckinsale as Hero and Emma Thompson as Beatrice make the appropriate romantic choices) primarily for other reasons. First, since the actors make clear choices to achieve clear effects, the film allows students, after they have worked through parts of the script themselves, to see how Branagh produced, as all directors do, a reading, an interpretation of Shakespeare's script. Then, the film makes clear as well how particular issues in a script can (through cuts, actors' choices, and directors' decisions) be ignored or suppressed, how even a complex script can be reduced to formula, a reduction which, in this case, blurs, to some degree, the differences between Beatrice and Benedick and Hero and Claudio, thereby obscuring the questions about the roles and status of women those differences often raise. Finally, the film suggests the power of actors and acting to shape both a production and our response to it: none of the doubts that the script raises about the love of Hero and Claudio are invited to make any impact on us in the film because John Sean Leonard and Beckinsale can convince us, even without much dialogue, that they are deeply in love, as they do at various moments in the film before the broken wedding and, most effectively, as they tearfully and silently embrace one another when they are reconciled at the end of the play. But, as students come to recognize, such acting finally makes Hero not a real woman but a conventional figure playing a conventional role, and thus it helps turn Shakespeare's complex, disquieting script into Branagh's simpler, more comforting, but undeniably enjoyable film.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Tom Provenzano (review date 2000)**


*In the following review, Provenzano assesses a 1999 East Los Angeles Classic Theatre adaptation of the play Much Ado about Nothing by Tony Plana and Bert Rosario, describing the production as an excellent introduction to Shakespeare for young people.*

Truncated versions of Shakespeare's canon provide millions of school-age children their first experiences with classic theatre while fulfilling the artistic desires and commercial needs of youth theatre companies across the country. Few of these outings, however, create the rich cultural events that East Los Angeles Classic Theatre has been furnishing since 1995. Currently, the company's touring “mariachi-style” adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing* is an exquisite young-people's introduction to the Bard—remarkably without condescension. While director Tony Plana and Bert Rosario have strategically cut the play to a blazing seventy minutes, it retains every important story point. Even the play's darker moments of sexual betrayal and death are not eradicated for adolescent audiences; rather, they are presented with simplicity and discernment, so parents can feel assured of the humanity behind the messages being delivered. The adaptation is essentially faithful to the integrity of Shakespeare's language, but often archaic phrases and rhetoric requiring annotation are sacrificed for clarity and accessibility.

This *Much Ado* transforms Italy into a nineteenth-century California fantasy in which Mexicans and Anglos live in peace and harmony. The Mexican wars and gold rush are over, and California has been admitted to the union, but rich, landed *ranchero* gentry like Leonato still control much of the land. In this world, the Mexicans represent the aristocracy while the Yankees are the lower, mercantile class moving in to take over...
the infrastructure of the state. When white soldiers Claudio and Benedick return triumphantly from battle, they are greeted jubilantly by Leonato, his daughter Hero, and niece Beatrice. Love and joy abound with masques and frivolity as the cultures blend happily. Unfortunately, a betrothal between the Mexican Hero and Anglo Claudio strikes a chord of racial hatred within the cruel Don John—designating a specific reason for his treachery that one rarely finds in the play. This turn of events highlights the play's clever twist of presenting Mexican cultural preeminence, which, in Don John's case, presents minority racism toward the increasingly dominant but cruder culture. In the midst of comedy, this racism turns to ugliness and tragedy as Don John manipulates his fellow soldiers, through gender chauvinism, to destroy the marriage plans and bring death and disaster to the once peaceful gathering.

Though darker themes of politics and sexuality remain intact, most of the production focuses on triumphant joys celebrated through opulent Mexican culture, specifically through the exciting music of Mariachi Del Sol. The mariachi component is not background; rather, it is the soul of this piece. Comic, tender, and even tragic portions of the play are turned over to classic mariachi themes that fit the context of the story. Mariachi's merging of Latino folk music and traditional European instrumentation works as a metaphor for the union of cultures represented in this adaptation. From a purely aesthetic point of view, the mariachi works beautifully, because it is such a pleasure to hear. The complex orchestrations and poetic lyrics, whether in bistros, show-stopping numbers, or moving ballads, utterly belie the common Anglo conception of mariachi as an inconsequential musical form.

Within the festive atmosphere of mariachi, the love story between Hero and Claudio thrives and the comic anti-love battle between Beatrice and Benedick takes root. This adaptation wisely focuses on the love story rather than the verbose war of the sexes, bringing an unusual equality between the two sets of lovers. Claudio and Benedick, as well as Mexican soldiers dressed in fine, traditional nineteenth-century uniforms, cut striking figures, looking like technicolor fantasies of The Cisco Kid or Zorro. This swashbuckling ideal is exemplified in flamboyant sword fights, both celebrating and lampooning macho posturing. Hero and Beatrice dress in extravagant and highly feminine period costumes, but both women are spirited matches for their comically virile mates. The fast-paced, nearly gymnastic staging splashes across a vast, multi-leveled set offering enormous variety of movement, which Plana uses to enthusiastic advantage.

Bowing to contemporary demands of youth theatre, Plana pulls in just a bit of audience participation, skillfully managed through some handclapping to music and group singing. The techniques are used most entertainingly during the extremely low-comic scenes with Dogberry, as prepubescent audience members are costumed as deputies and pushed adroitly through the play without stopping the action or lowering the overall level of performance. The acting and singing are uniformly expert and energetic in every role, and the mariachi musicians help keep the breakneck pacing alive. East Los Angeles Classic Theatre's extraordinary ability to effortlessly combine children's theatre techniques with traditional Mexican music and a difficult poetic text is a gift for Los Angeles families and youth who are served so well by the company, which is currently touring to more than sixty venues.

**Criticism: Themes: Walter N. King (essay date 1964)**


*In the following essay, King maintains that Much Ado about Nothing 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.*
What to do with *Much Ado About Nothing* has bedeviled Shakespearians for longer than one likes to think. And no wonder, when critics dismiss the play, if only by implication, as a charming potboiler, archly comic for the most part, but, in Acts IV and V, oddly tragicomic and melodramatic, and unconvincing.

Reaction against this usually disguised conviction varies, of course. G. B. Harrison shrugs the whole thing off as a diverting entertainment, “but for all that, as it turns out, ‘much ado about nothing’”.1 John Palmer is somewhat more complimentary; “this most brilliant but least profound” of Shakespeare’s comedies is one of his “greatest triumphs as a dramatic craftsman, showing what he can do when his genius is not half engaged and he falls back on his technical skill as a playwright.”2 C. L. Barber in his study of Shakespearian comedy is almost cavalier in his light-hearted apology for ignoring the play altogether, except for comments *en passant:* “What I would have to say about *Much Ado About Nothing* can largely be inferred from the discussion of the other festive plays.”3 In short, *Much Ado* is pigeonholed as a *tour de force* for consummate actors like Sir John Gielgud and Pamela Brown, while critics hasten on to *Twelfth Night*, which everyone agrees is profound as well as brilliant, and which after all has Feste and Sir Toby Belch to spice up the action.

Some of us, nevertheless, cannot dismiss *Much Ado* quite so nonchalantly. Shakespeare’s riddling title teases us into the belief that he had something to say about man and the world he lives in, or at least about some types of men and women and the social world that shapes them into what they are, worthy of the craftsmanship he lavished upon this merriest of all his comedies. “Nothing” must imply something, and the suspicion is hard to drown that that something embraces every part of the play, informs every part, unites every part. What to do with the word “nothing” is, in fact, a paramount critical issue, though it is astonishing how few critics have paid serious attention to it. Among these few is Dorothy C. Hockey, who suggests, because of the pun on “nothing” and “noting”, for which there is sound phonological support, that *Much Ado* is the dramatization of a series of mistakes produced by the recurrent failure of key characters to use their eyes and ears accurately when assessing themselves, each other, and events and situations. The play is thus a study of “a common human frailty—the inability to observe, judge, and act sensibly.”4

No one will quarrel with this sober conclusion; a verbal eye and ear pattern is indubitably central to the play’s structure, and mistaken judgments are certainly skeletal to the developing action. But what do the key characters misjudge? Simply themselves, others, events as they occur, as Miss Hockey suggests? Or more fundamentally, do they misjudge all these things by preferring poor values to better ones, as great comic characters seem duty-bound to do? With respect to values Miss Hockey is not very explicit, and so her interpretation falters just when it should rise completely to what John Russell Brown calls “the implicit judgement” so necessary to conceptual interpretation of Shakespearian comedy.5

On the other hand, one can concentrate upon the meaning of “nothing” to the exclusion of almost everything else, as have Paul A. Jorgenson and Harold C. Goddard. Renaissance theological treatises, Jorgenson points out, affirmed “the original nothingness surrounding creation and the essential nothingness of all temporal things.” “Nothing” is harmless “when compared with the miscarly occasioned by things”, yet “nothing, in a more positive sense, did produce all things; and its formidableness in the genesis of man’s affairs and dreams became for Shakespeare, as for all his contemporaries, a fertile obsession.”6 In particular, Shakespeare was attracted to the metaphorical implications of the word when applied to the poet’s craft. According to the psychological authority Laurentius, “The understanding part of the minde receiveth from the imaginative the formes of things naked and voide of substance”—so that “nothing” symbolized for Shakespeare the imaginative faculty of the artist. Or as Goddard puts it, “nothing” is a Shakespearian synonym for creativity.8 “*Much Ado About Nothing* is saturated with this idea of the power of Nothing (of the creative ingredient of the imagination, that is) to alter the nature of things for good or ill …” 9

Neither Jorgenson nor Goddard asserts, of course, that *Much Ado*, like *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, is a celebration of the poet’s imaginative capacity to create out of “airy nothing” something solid and local that can be contemplated objectively (see Theseus’ speech on the imagination, *MND* V.i. 2-22). Indeed, they scant
interpretation of the play as a whole. No doubt it is true that in terms of Shakespeare's broad development as an artist “nothing” does have the symbolic implications they suggest, but as to what “nothing” alludes to specifically in Much Ado, they say rather little. That “nothing” can “alter the nature of things for good or ill” is provocative, but what precisely is meant by “the nature of things”? Metaphysical things? Ethical things? Psychological things? And how do these things, whatever they are, relate to the play as a fully structured entity?

The point I have been edging toward is that criticism of Much Ado has become far too greatly entangled in the solving of an assortment of problems by now as much a part of the play as the text itself, or has been introductory to discussion of wide-ranging issues in Shakespearian studies. Aside from a few people like Miss Hockey, hardly anyone has bothered to suggest what the particular comic issues in Much Ado are, perhaps because there has been no agreement about what kind of comedy it is. Yet without some consensus as to genre, it seems difficult to get at a synoptic interpretation that eliminates problems and obviates any need for apologetic comments. I venture now to suggest the proper genre—comedy of manners; and I venture the further assertion that, if we read Much Ado as comedy of manners, we can discover rather easily what Shakespeare meant by the “nothing” in the title. An adequate descriptive definition of the word will be meaningful, of course, only if it exposes values that penetrate into every nook and cranny of the play.

II

Central to Much Ado, as to all great comedies of manners, is the critical inspection of a leisure-class world grown morally flabby by thoughtless acceptance of an inherited social code. All of the principal characters are presented in typical social situations that imply unexamined behavior close to abnormality, in that they react time and again as if they have lost all sense of proportion. Throughout they are being measured against a suitable norm of conduct that is only gradually revealed, but is implied obliquely from the beginning, often by means of the behavior of characters acting automatically in ways that appear to be superficially correct. In the denouement the proper norm is finally established, with the excesses of the major characters brought to a point of manageability or total cure. This gradual readjustment depends upon Shakespeare's deft treatment of the two counterpointed sub-themes into which he splits his major theme: love, courtship and marriage, as felt (or not felt) and verbalized upon in a highly aristocratic society; and the folly of elevating wit into a primary value in the daily life of that society.

Urbane to the point of absurdity, the aristocrats of Messina have canalized natural instinct (love, the battle of the sexes, marriage) according to a prescriptive code which almost everyone takes for granted and which almost no one has the intelligence to question. Exempt from daily labor, these sophisticates have little to do but fall in love, get married as social routine decrees, and squander whatever mentality they can lay claim to upon verbal high-jinks. As usual in such societies, wit is lavished upon two characteristic topics: love and sex (bawdry is a recurrent leitmotiv); and sharp, sometimes cruel, criticism of each other. The result is an extreme artificiality. Wit has degenerated into the smart crack; social custom has petrified into the hard-headedness stressed in the betrothal of Claudio and Hero; and love has been turned into a set of conditioned reflexes that smack of sentimentality, melodrama, and sheer eyewash.

Of the two sets of lovers, Claudio and Hero are the ultimate products of a fashionable code—thoughtless conformists who question nothing, least of all themselves. The most laconic of all Shakespeare's heroines, Hero speaks only six times in the first two acts, and then murmurs banalities or responds perfunctorily to insignificant, factual inquiries. Yet she is not a full-fledged object of satire. A well trained upper class Elizabethan daughter (Messina is simply a name for an aristocratic English locale), she muzzles her tongue in public, obeys her father implicitly and accepts (one supposes gratefully) the husband chosen for her. Obviously she is not much in love with Claudio, whom she barely knows, nor is she supposed to be. Nubility is her sole characteristic and her only asset. Her duty is to look charming, conduct herself decorously, and be a virgin—in order to maintain a high value on the international marriage mart. (Don Pedro is Prince of Aragon;
Claudio and Benedick are citizens of Florence and Padua. For marriage in aristocratic circles such as hers was largely, during the Renaissance, a business matter, in which love tooted up to little in pounds and pence. Claudio is depicted with equal realism and with a minimum of satire. A desirable catch himself, he is out shopping for a suitable wife, “modest” and “sweet looking” (the criteria he harps on when consulting Benedick about Hero in I.i)—and well-to-do. “Hath Leonato any son, my Lord?” (I.i.296) is the only question he asks Don Pedro, after requesting his services as a go-between, a question blandly materialistic and surprisingly unknowledgeable about Hero's family situation. Young but not shy, he wastes no time in romantic palaver. To Don Pedro he confesses that before the wars he “liked” Hero “with a soldier's eye” and apologizes “lest my liking might too sudden seem” (I.i.300-313). When Benedick asks flatly, “Would you buy her, that you enquire after her?” he replies, “Can the world buy such a jewel?” Benedick's answer, “Yes, and a case to put it into”, tells the full monetary story (I.i.181-184).

His lack of sentiment is further emphasized by the supine manner in which he accepts the false report that Don Pedro has won Hero for himself. Unwilling to condemn his social superior, he consoles himself with the platitude that a man should woo for himself (II.i.181-189), and when he discovers that Don Pedro has not been double-dealing, he accepts Hero without any romantic protestations. Leonato is equally unsentimental: “Count, take of me my daughter, and with her my fortunes” (II.i.313-314). Natural instinct counts for both of them only insofar as “liking” can blossom into love after the marriage has been arranged. Claudio will “be like a lover presently”, Don Pedro had jested earlier, “and tire the hearer with a book of words” (I.i.308-309). Love, then, has been devalued into verbal formulae in line, presumably, with the required decorum of the occasion.

But if the social homogeneity of Messina is typified in Claudio and Hero, Don Pedro and Leonato, it is offset by heterogeneous streaks of character in Beatrice and Benedick, whom Shakespeare presents ambivalently throughout. Frank, lighthearted, self-conscious to the marrow, they oscillate between acquiescence to the social norm and tart criticism of it. In part, their disapproval, especially of the ossified attitudes toward love of their fellow aristocrats, is mere pose; in part, objective assessment of social folly; in part, unconscious cultivation of self-esteem. Of the two, Benedick is the more conscious of the role he is playing. “Do you question me, as an honest man should do, for my simple judgment [about Hero]?” Benedick asks Claudio, “or would you have me speak after my custom, as being a professed tyrant to their sex?” (I.i.167-170). Beatrice is far less aware that she is a superb illustration of self-admiration. “I have a good eye, Uncle”, she congratulates herself, “I can see a church by daylight” (II.i.85-86). But singly or together, in spite of their failure to know themselves, these two serve as yardsticks for measuring the disproportionate in others, while missing the disproportionate in themselves.

Their psychological astigmatism produces subtle complications of moral character. They play the game of misogamy as if it were the acme of social wisdom, but from the start they are driven by emotional impulses absent in Hero and Claudio. Though they ridicule the love conventions honored mechanically in Messina (see Benedick's soliloquy, II.iii.7-38), they are themselves stunning examples of Petrarchan stereotypes: Beatrice the disdainful woman of courtly love (“too curst” to Antonio and “my Lady Tongue” to Benedick—II.i.22 and 284), and Benedick the anti-feminist windbag (as Beatrice understands very well—I.i.117-118 and II.i.142-156). Their destiny is the conventional punishment for misogynists: to fall in love with someone not (ostensibly) in love with them, though Shakespeare revitalizes this tired convention by means of the two orchard scenes, during which each is gullied into believing that the other is ill with love for him. Like Bernard Shaw's Bluntschli they epitomize on one level the romanticism they have made a profession of mocking in public.

On another level, their merciless railing against marriage and Petrarchan blarney amounts to a realistic revolt against the sentimentalizing of courtship that has become a social blight in Messina. Unhappily, their cure for it has hypertrophied into an aggravation of the blight itself: a reveling in wit for its own sake. Beatrice and
Benedick are, thus, another ultimate product of the artificiality of their environment. Though vexed by it in each other, they are unaware that their genius for repartee has grown tiresome and that their disgust with the follies love induces in others has taken the form of a serious under-valuation of love itself. Resolved not to be fools in love, they have mutated into fools of words, to which they ascribe the value that should be attached to things. Intellectual alertness, their finest quality, has catapulted them into the disease of self-love, a social abnormality that for some time has undermined their judgment.

The witlessness that often accompanies the gift of wit is repeatedly emphasized by means of the verbal pattern Miss Hockey has isolated: the motif of true and false seeing. Though Beatrice and Benedick pride themselves on the acuity of their mental eyesight, one of their most striking traits is a kind of tunnel vision not far removed from blindness. During the masque in Act II Beatrice cannot identify Benedick as the masked gentleman she is dancing with, although Ursula, dancing with Antonio, also masked, identifies him at once “by the wagging of your head” (II.i.119). Nor can Benedick understand why, during his dance with Beatrice, she derides him as “the Prince’s jester, a very dull fool …” (II.i.142-143). The implicit judgment to be drawn here is that people in love, as Benedick actually is, tend to see poorly, whereas in matters that permit detachment, they tend to see clearly—hence, Benedick’s clear-sighted observation that Claudio has been metamorphosed since his betrothal into the conventional lover-fool (II.iii.7-23), while failing to see that he has become one himself. Hence, also, the ease with which Benedick’s friends hoodwink him into the belief that Beatrice is heart-sick with love for him. The depth of his self-delusion (and yet an ironic intuition of the truth) is reached in his sudden conviction, after the first orchard scene, that “I do spy some marks of love in her” (II.ii.255), when Beatrice brusquely bids him come to dinner.

She too is easily deceived into love, but the comic point of the two eaves-dropping scenes in the orchard is not, for Beatrice and Benedick, the discovery of love, but the shock of perceiving the unwholesome effect of misused wit on their own personalities. “I must not seem proud”, Benedick soliloquizes.

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Happy are they that hear their detractions and can put them to mending. They say the lady is … 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? … 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.

(II.iii.237-251—my italics)

Intelligence, without which wit shrivels into vapidity (and in Elizabethan English “wit” means mental capacity, wisdom, good judgment, in addition to apt association of thought with expression), begins to assert itself, and simultaneously natural instinct, in spite of Benedick’s rationalizing, begins to destroy his inflated valuation of words as ends in themselves.

Beatrice’s smug self-approval disintegrates at once under the homiletic dissection of her character by Hero and Ursula.

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But Nature never fram’d 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.
Her caustic aspersions on men amount to “carping”, to social abnormality, defined by Hero (herself a yardstick for measuring the norm at this point) as “to be so odd, and from all fashions” (III.i.71-2). And Ursula hopes that Beatrice cannot be so much without true judgment [comic proportion]
(Having so swift and excellent a wit
As she is priz’d to have) as to refuse
So rare a gentleman as Signior Benedick.

Unlike Benedick's, Beatrice's rejection of wit is unleavened by rationalization and is starched with self-denunciation.

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.

Comedy continues, of course. Benedick languishes in tune with the Petrarchan symptomology of the man in love: beard shaved off, face dabbed with cosmetics and lover's melancholy proclaimed as toothache. Somewhat testily he endures the hackneyed wit of his male friends (III.ii), an ironic playback of his own earlier joshing of the lover-fool, and begs to speak “eight or nine wise words” with Leonato. Beatrice hides her distress under the pretense of a head-cold that prompts bawdy jests from Margaret that Beatrice would formerly have admired in herself. “O, God help me!” she lashes out. “How long have you profess'd apprehension [wit]?” (III.iv.67-68). The cure for false wit in both these essentially sound people requires only the church scene in Act IV for completion.

This much analyzed scene has been excessively damned by some critics as stagy melodrama, and excessively defended by others, too zealous advocates of Shakespeare's honor as psychologist-philosopher. Theatricality cannot be denied, but its essential rightness can be better defended than it has been, if it be judged as the crisis of a comedy of manners (like the crisis in The Misanthrope, Célimène's exposure as a vicious backbiter) rather than as a foretaste of tragicomedy. For 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. In part, critical misunderstanding of this scene has sprung from failure to realize that the deception by Don John and Borachio of Claudio and Don Pedro into the belief that Hero is sexually loose is symbolic as well as psychological. Inability to see clearly at night is a common human trait, but in Claudio and Don Pedro it symbolizes the dominant trait of aristocratic folk in Messina, in whom failure of physical eyesight is equivalent to moral confusion. Those who marry according to the philosophy of caveat emptor, like Claudio, are bound to be predisposed to sexual distrust, while their depreciation of love and marriage to the level of the market-place inevitably leads them to believe in virginity as the principal attribute of a bride-to-be.

Claudio's determination to expose Hero in church is quite in line with the social usage of his society, which accepted as legitimate harsh reprisal for sexual fraud, but he also exposes his general moral blindness. And the immediate compliance of Don Pedro (III.ii.126-130) indicates that Claudio's decision, however lacking in Christian charity, should not be reckoned a complete social abnormality. All those who reject Hero, even Leonato, assume they are justified, and they all behave melodramatically, just as shallow human beings are
always inclined to thunder for justice in a social crisis when wounded pride, far more than moral shock, begins to steam up their ethical consciousness.

Nevertheless, Claudio's self-righteousness exposes a serious flaw in the social code: the superficiality of a value system that mistakes sexual purity for love is shown up in all its heartless folly. At the same time, the concurrent movement away from superficiality in Beatrice and Benedick, already under way, suggests how witlessness can be exchanged for wisdom. Stupidity versus intelligence is the underlying theme of the church scene and is dramatized by means of a typical Shakespearian problem in epistemology: under what conditions can the senses be trusted to provide accurate data for substantive knowledge of human character? To what degree do objective and subjective ways of knowing lead to rock-bottom truth about people we think we are familiar with?

The dialectic begins in Claudio's ironic reflection upon human presumption: “O, what men dare do! what men may do, what men daily do, not knowing what they do!” (IV.i.19-21). His folly—tragedy to his social peers—is to confuse what appears to his eyes, Hero's external look of innocence, with what appears to his mind, her alleged promiscuity. “Would you not swear, All you that see her, that she were a maid, By these exterior shows?” (IV.i.29-41). The either/or mentality of the mediocre mind trying to think erupts in a burst of hackneyed metaphor:

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.58-62)

Some lines later comes a saving note of doubt: “Are our eyes our own?” (IV.i.72). Claudio is on the verge of learning the first lesson of the Platonic theory of knowledge, that the senses may deceive. (His early confession to Benedick that Hero “is the sweetest lady that ever I looked on” [I.i.189], has now been transformed into the false assumption that her “blush is guiltiness, not modesty” [IV.i.43].) But he is far from grasping the second lesson, that the senses are sometimes trustworthy. Appearance can be reality. As a consequence, he leaps to a false conclusion about Hero, owing to a confusion of mind that springs naturally enough from reliance upon second-rate values.

But Claudio is no worse than those who, knowing Hero better than he, take at face value the “fact” of her depravity. In twenty-three impassioned lines dripping with the sentimentality and bombast an unexamined moral code can produce, Leonato sermonizes on the theme: “Why ever wast thou lovely in my eyes?” (IV.i.121-144). “Let her die”, he urges (IV.i.155), and insists, “She not denies it” (IV.i.174), in the face of Hero's flat declaration to Claudio, “I talked with no man at that hour, my lord” (IV.i.87). Leonato's allegiance to a dessicated social norm continues even after Friar Francis outlines a means for retrieving Hero's reputation. As hyperbolic as Claudio, Leonato also illustrates the truth of Beatrice's summary estimate of the male world of Messina: “But manhood is melted into courtesies, valor into compliments, and men are turned into tongues, and trim ones too. He is now as valiant as Hercules that only tells a lie, and swears it” (IV.i.20-24). No longer fooled by words, she longs to be a man in a society in which the traditional concept of manhood has become debased.

She, too, along with Benedick, contributes to the dialectic. Whereas Beatrice knows instinctively that Hero “is belied” (IV.i.147), Benedick's reaction is “I know not what to say” (IV.i.146), a way to begin to know. His earlier brag, “I can see yet without spectacles” (I.i.191), has ceased to be an immodest claim, now that his faith in verbal gymnastics has vanished. His is the first sensible question to be asked, “Lady [Beatrice], were you her bedfellow last night?” (IV.i.148)—a way of knowing through research; and only he is keen-eyed
enough to suspect Don John's complicity in the slander—a way of knowing through hypothesizing. Together with the behavior of Beatrice and Friar Francis, whose reasoned faith in Hero's innocence is grounded in objective observation combined with extensive experience of human nature (another way of knowing), Benedick's behavior diverges sharply from the inadequate norms of Messina toward a revitalization of the norms that will culminate in Hero's restoration.

Such revitalization is difficult, demanding as it does the development of insight in people accustomed to see dimly. Those who can be tricked into seeing what is not obvious (Hero's “guilt”) must be tricked into seeing what is plain (her innocence); hence, Friar Francis' plan, based upon the psychological fact that superficial people have only a limited capacity for change, to reform Claudio's vision (and so his thinking) by deceiving him into the belief that Hero is dead. “She dying, …

Upon the instant that she was accus'd
Shall be lamented, pitied, and excus'd
Of every hearer. …

When he shall hear she dies 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 apparell'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.

(IV.i.215-231)

This method of stimulating the “imagination” (i.e., one's sense of values) might be called benevolent brainwashing—a way of inducing, though the Friar is not sure that it will succeed, sounder judgment in a man lacking emotional and intellectual depth.

His modest claims are well advised. Though Leonato agrees to the scheme, he is too strongly bound by the social code he has lived by for so long to understand it. Overwhelmed by the family disgrace, he delivers a soapbox diatribe against patience (a prime Christian virtue) that leads even Antonio, as shallow as Leonato, to rebuke him for childishness (V.i.33). Their retreat to the heroics of melodrama is not the failure in characterization some critics have branded it. Having lived by words for so long, they can condemn them in “fashion-monging boys” (V.i.92-98), yet miss the fact that they overrate words themselves. Their ridiculous challenge of Claudio dribbles out into the frustrated name-calling of men who have lived and think it grand to die according to shopworn behavior patterns. “… as I am a gentleman”, says Antonio, he will whip “sir boy” (V.i.84-85), and Leonato orates: “If thou kill'st me, boy, thou shalt kill a man” (V.i.79). Their concern for Hero is admirable; their rant is as comic as Alceste's in The Misanthrope.

Friar Francis' scheme is equally ineffectual with Claudio and with Don Pedro, who is “sorry” for Hero's death, but is still convinced of her guilt (V.i.103-105). Their insensitivity to human pain is reflected in Claudio's tasteless report to Benedick, “We had like to have had our two noses snapped off with two old men without teeth” (V.i.115-118). They are “high-proof melancholy”, but not from shame, and want Benedick “to use thy wit” (V.i.122-124) as an anodyne. Their trite jests about love in Acts I to III now seem, when repeated, as insipid as they always were, and Claudio's bewilderment at Benedick's challenge and contempt for his idle blather (“Sir, your wit ambles well, it goes easily. … You break jests as braggarts do their blades, which, God be thanked, hurt not”—V.i.159 and 189-190) is an ironic measurement of their social and personal irresponsibility.
Their change of heart, such as it is, comes about, not via the “imagination”, but by the factual confession of Borachio, led in opportune by Dogberry and the Watch (an ironic name for a constabulary in a community that refuses to see except at night). “I have deceived even your very eyes. What your wisdoms could not discover, these shallow fools have brought to light …” (V.i.238-240). Only now does Claudio begin to see imaginatively, but without any appreciable gain in depth: “Sweet Hero, now thy image doth appear In the rare semblance that I loved it first” (V.i.239-240—my italics). His apology to Leonato limps with self-defense: “Yet sinned I not But in mistaking” (V.i.283-284). And Leonato forgives him. So little does slander, the sin of misusing words, amount to in Messina. The conclusion seems justified that Dogberry's recurrent demand to “be writ down an ass” applies less to himself than to his betters, who have heedlessly clung to an ass's code. His parting wish to Leonato, “God restore you to health” (V.i.333-334), is rich in irony. The social norm of Messina has been ailing for a long time. Can the community now be brought back to social health?

A total cure for all the social abnormality in Messina, Shakespeare is too wise to posit, though cure rather than manageability is depicted in the transformation of Beatrice and Benedick. Claudio's change of heart is quite in character—a form of manageability. He delights in his “second” betrothal as pliantly as in his first and on the same materialistic terms: his new bride is “almost the copy of my child that's dead”, Leonato advertises, and she is “heir” to both him and Antonio (V.i.298-299). Claudio's acceptance of the masked Hero typifies his congenital inability to see beneath surfaces. To him one mariage de convenance is as good as another. (It is significant that Benedick inquires which of the masked women is Beatrice before asking for her hand—V.iv.72). The best that can be hoped from Claudio is that he may value better the externalities that alone appeal to him.

It is to Beatrice and Benedick that we must turn to find a yardstick for the proportionate in their reappraisal of love and wit. In their declaration of love at the end of the church scene their language is stripped bare of the wit associated with conventional love jargon. “I do love nothing in the world so well as you”, Benedick confesses. “Is not that strange?” (IV.i.269-270). And though he agrees to challenge Claudio, he refuses to kill him at the command of Beatrice, whose sense of outraged justice pushes her to extreme conformity to the social code. Benedick's indictment of Claudio's wit after the church scene is, however, not a repudiation of wit itself. His witty acknowledgement that he cannot “woo in festival terms” (V.ii.40) implies both self-realization and the conviction that life without wit would be dull indeed. “Thou and I”, he tells Beatrice, “are too wise to woo peaceably” (V.ii.73).

The teasing ambiguity of their final wit combat is a fair measurement of the distance they have come.

BENE.

Do not you love me?

BEAT.

Why, no; no more than reason.

BENE.

Why, then your uncle, and the Prince and Claudio

Have been deceived; for they swore you did.

BEAT.

Do not you love me?

BENE.
Troth, no; no more than reason.

BEAT.

Why, then my cousin, Margaret, and Ursula

Are much deceit'd; for they did swear you did.

(V.iv.74-79)

This superb example of Shakespeare's exploitation of Lylian dialogue illustrates graphically wit become the equivalent of wisdom. “No more than reason”—but is reason an attribute of love; does it induce or qualify love; can love be measured by reason; can one love reasonably? And are love and reason as truly antithetical as traditional belief insisted? Only a keen intelligence can play with such questions, all of which imply that love, whatever it is, cannot be entirely “much ado about nothing”.

What, then, does the “nothing” of the title imply, relevant to the themes of love and wit? To the detached, because they see clearly that those in love frequently behave like fools, love may appear to be “nothing”, a mirage that deludes those whose vision has become emotionally cloudy. Conversely, to the undetached, it makes no difference, once they fall in love, if their vision is blurred and that to the detached they appear to be fools. For they perceive—and it is another form of vision—that to be in love is to surrender to a higher wisdom than the detached can ever claim: the recognition of the validity of natural instinct unsoiled by materialistic or conventional considerations. Throughout the play Beatrice and Benedick have exemplified these various distinctions and learned in the process—a dynamic, far more than a rational process—that love is “much ado about something”, however indefinable in the long run that something may be.

But the title applies most aptly to the critique upon wit. To everyone but Beatrice and Benedick, and sometimes even to them, indulgence in wit has been an unconscious embrace of meaninglessness, the canker that can eat the heart out of a society like Messina. The innocent jest and the double-bitted witticism that reveal rather than conceal meaning have got lost in the welter of daily experience, and their place has been taken by the stale joke that can be peddled from mouth to mouth until its flatulence is a stench in the nostrils of those blessed with intelligence. Natural instinct has lost its centrality in human life, as if to say that the Wittier, and thus the more jargonistic, one gets about love, the further one gets from living human reality. Or to put it another way, as language depreciates into a coinage little removed from the counterfeit, those who pay their social bills with it sicken into abnormality.

Viewed in this way, Dogberry's struggle to enlarge his vocabulary is not just verbal comedy rooted in the inability of an oaf to say what he means. In Dogberry can be perceived the halting, but conscious movement upward of the near-illiterate to linguistic exactness, to that happy condition in which words, witty or otherwise, are anchored in real meaning. In the fashionable upper crust of Messina can be perceived the unconscious movement downward of the pseudo-literate to the unhappy condition in which words, especially “witty” words, have retained only the residual meaning of gobbledygook. Dogberry's bumbling hold upon the moral truth that Borachio and Conrade are villains who should be investigated is a trenchant comment upon the purblindness of his social superiors who fail to see when they should that chicanery is responsible for the slanderous charges against Hero, charges that in effect are an impeachment of their whole society. Thus, to value life in terms of wit alone is to make “much ado about nothing”.

Nevertheless, to value wit truly is to make “much ado about something”. This double way of assessing the same thing, characteristic of Shakespeare's wholeness, is implied in Benedick's ultimate witty appraisal of the value of wit.
I'll tell thee what, Prince: a college of wit-crackers cannot flout me out of my humour. 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 purpose to marry, I will think nothing to any purpose that the world can say against it. …

(V.iv.100-107—my italics)

Though love may appear to be nothing, it is the final something that gives meaning to life; and though wit may decline into nothing, it can, when properly seasoned with wisdom, add a significant savor to life, without which even love would be tepid and tedious.

Social abnormality has been cured, then, in Beatrice and Benedick; in Claudio and the fashionable world of Messina, it has become manageable. More significant is the fact that Beatrice and Benedick have developed sufficient insight into themselves to become living norms for their society instead of being carping critics of their society's norms. Though their society remains essentially unchanged, this is as we should expect. In the world of comedy of manners social health depends upon compromise, adjustment, resilience, not upon fundamental social change; and wit, fully matured in Beatrice and Benedick, is the best available instrument for achieving external and internal harmony. Shakespeare knew what he was doing, therefore, when he designed Much Ado so that wit, a salient feature of all his previous comedies, became the final integrating factor. Without it the play would be the double-jointed affair, replete with problems, it has so frequently been mistaken for, a mélange of odds and ends like Love's Labor's Lost, in which wit, though a major theme, never quite pulls the play into a rounded construct. And it is because of the theme of wit that Much Ado rises to the kind of profundity to be found in all great comedies of manners in western literature. It remained for Shakespeare to show how wit can provide penetrating insights into the dark corners of human existence in the language of Feste in Twelfth Night and the Fool in King Lear.

Notes

5. John Russell Brown, Shakespeare and His Comedies (London, 1957), chap. I. Miss Hockey's interpretation loses value, in my opinion, when she discusses Benedick's behavior in V. i, as if it were similar to his behavior hitherto. After the church scene Benedick's eyes are fully open; his character has changed signally; he is not “seeing” in the same way as he had before. In short, he has shifted his standard of judgment, as I point out later on.
7. Jorgenson, p. 293.
9. Goddard, p. 275. This conclusion Goddard grounds in Friar Francis' argument that, once Claudio believes Hero to be dead, “Th' idea of her life shall sweetly creep / Into his study of imagination” (IV. i. 225-226) so that she will seem more precious than when she lived. Citations from Much Ado are from The Complete Works of Shakespeare, ed. by George Lyman Kittredge (Boston, 1936).
11. Palmer, p. 113, classifies the play as comedy of manners. Charles T. Prouty, The Sources of Much Ado About Nothing: A Critical Study, Together with the Text of Peter Beverley's Ariodanto and Ieneura (New Haven, 1950), pp. 63-64, calls the play high comedy. That Much Ado is high comedy seems undeniable, but that it is comedy of manners has met with little general acceptance. The reason lies, perhaps, in the assumption that Shakespearian comedy of the middle period is, sui generis, too unique for rigid classification, and in the tendency of theorists of comedy to define comedy of manners with an eye confined to average Molière and the pseudo-Molière comedy of manners of the Restoration. These presuppositions, it seems to me, ought to be vigorously questioned.

12. For the theory of comedy on which I ground the following interpretation of Much Ado, see L. J. Potts, Comedy (London, 1949). Such abstract terms as I have used here and in subsequent paragraphs come from this excellent little book.

13. See Prouty, pp. 39-52, and Nadine Page, “The Public Repudiation of Hero”, PMLA, L (1935), 739-744, for fuller treatment of the subject of arranged marriages in Elizabethan England. I am unable to understand why their sociological treatment of the Hero-Claudio plot has been depreciated in some quarters; it seems to me to make good sense, and it will be noticed that my reading of Much Ado has been strongly influenced by both these scholars.

14. The fuss over the false report that Don Pedro is wooing Hero for himself—one of the red herrings in discussion of the play—can be cleared up by recognition of the fact that Don Pedro is pretending to be Claudio in the masque (i.i.323-7), a fact none of the characters but Claudio is aware of. I see no reason to assume that Shakespeare was guilty of poor design and awkward motivation in this instance.

15. David Lloyd Stevenson, The Love-Game Comedy (New York, 1946), pp. 209-214, has pointed out Shakespeare's double point of view with respect to Beatrice and Benedick as lovers, but he does not suggest how this ambivalence is carried through with respect to Beatrice and Benedick as fanciers of wit.

16. I am indebted for insight here to Mr. Charles Frey, a former student of mine at Yale.

17. Kerby Neill, p. 93, makes a somewhat similar comment, but in terms of the traditional conflict between reason and emotion. I find it hard, however, to accept Neill's description of Claudio as a somewhat idealistic, if naive, young man.

18. Claudio's penance, which strikes modern readers as silly in the extreme, I take to be a further illustration of his and his society's superficiality. Readers who are amused by it are, I think, reacting as Shakespeare hoped they would—comically.

19. Dogberry's misuse of words represents the obverse side of a culture that values words above deeds. All the Dogberry episodes can be read as parody of different elements of the upper plots.

20. Beatrice's sudden “kill Claudio” (IV. i. 291) has occasioned much comment upon inconsistency of characterization. It seems to me that her demand upon Benedick makes sense, if the play is read as comedy of manners. It should not be assumed that, because Beatrice and Benedick are in some matters at odds with the conventions of their world, they are at odds with them in every matter. In moments of high crisis, especially those involving strong moral shock, nonconformists frequently revert to black and white social judgments. Beatrice has always been somewhat fierce in her judgments of other people; she is uncompromising in her judgment of herself after the orchard scene; now she has a legitimate reason for a truly ferocious outburst, however melodramatic it may be.

Criticism: Themes: Carl Dennis (essay date 1973)


[In the following essay, Dennis explores the two modes of perception he maintains are at work in Much Ado about Nothing: wit and wisdom. In the end, Dennis asserts, wit is portrayed as an unreliable mode of perception.]
Recent critics of *Much Ado About Nothing* have tended to agree with Mr. Graham Storey's convincing suggestion that the play is about "man's irresistible propensity to be taken in by appearances."¹ "Deception," Mr. Storey writes, "operates at every level of *Much Ado*: it is the common denominator of the three plots, and its mechanism—eavesdroppings, mistakes of identity, disguises and maskings, exploited heresay—are the stuff of the play."² What causes the characters to be so often deceived is one of the central critical questions that the play raises. Mr. Storey attributes all the confusion to man's innate "giddiness," following Benedick's concluding assertion that "man is a giddy thing" (V.iv.107); but the term is perhaps too imprecise to clarify the particular limitations of the protagonists.³ Perhaps a more helpful suggestion is made by Mr. A. P. Rossiter, who considers almost all the characters to be "self-willed, self-centered, and self-admiring creatures, whose comedy is at bottom that of imperfect self-knowledge which leads them on to fool themselves."⁴ Surely Beatrice and Benedick are betrayed by their overreaching cleverness when they spy on their friends; Claudio is led astray when he proudly assumes that his eavesdropping gives him the knowledge and the right to vilify Hero; and Dogberry hopelessly distorts facts because of his infatuation with his own imagined excellences. But self-centeredness and self-deception are such generally pervasive flaws in Shakespearean comedy that without being further discriminated they are not very useful in defining the distinctive attributes of any particular group of characters. In this essay I want to try to sharpen the meaning of the various mistakings and discoveries of *Much Ado*, of the many changes from blindness to insight and from insight to blindness, by relating them to an opposition which the play develops between two ways of perceiving the world. One mode of perception presented here, which may be called "wit," relies on prudential reason and practical evaluation of sensory evidence; the other, the opposite of wit, rejects practical reason for intuitive modes of understanding. The drama of the play resides in the protagonists' moving from one way of seeing to the other; and their practical and moral success is determined by their willingness to lay down their wits and approach the world through faith, through irrational belief.⁵

The characters whom the reader associates most immediately with wit are Beatrice and Benedick, though in their cases wit seems to be not so much rational calculation as a simple delight in verbal ingenuity, in wittiness, which the reader admires for the sharpness of mind and the playfulness of spirits which it betokens. But this wittiness also implies a certain view of life. Taking the form of playful insults between a man and woman, it expresses indirectly a detached attitude to love, a sophisticated amusement at conventional romantic attitudes. It thus is not simply evidence of a quick mind but an indirect affirmation of rational self-control as opposed to emotional self-indulgence that carries man away from reality on the tide of feeling. For both Beatrice and Benedick, perhaps especially for Benedick, a lover like Claudio is a pathetic lunatic. From a plain-speaking, battle-loving soldier he becomes a lover whose "words are a very fantastical banquet—just so many strange dishes" and whose "soul is ravished [with] sheep's guts" (II.iii.21-22, 60-61). The witty man, on the other hand, keeping his wits about him, is able to avoid anything as irrational as love.

The desire of Benedick and Beatrice to keep their practical reasons dominant is perfectly understandable; for they are experts in the exercise of their cleverness and rank amateurs in the exercise of their emotions. But problems arise when their bias towards reason deludes them into believing that they have no emotional selves that require expression. When this happens their verbal wittiness is used not so much to expose foolishness in others but to disguise to themselves the state of their own feelings. To insult playfully a person to whom one feels attracted is a way of proving to oneself that the attraction does not exist. In Benedick's case this self-deception is also dramatized by his vexation at Claudio's immediately falling in love with Hero. To Benedick his impulsive friend is an image of his own emotional self which he is unconsciously trying to suppress; and his laments about Claudio's giving up manly soldiership for effeminate love express his unacknowledged war against his own latent desire for love. The war is doomed to failure, not only because feelings cannot be ignored indefinitely, but also because a refusal to acknowledge them weakens one's ability to cope with them when they finally surface. Much of the humor of the eavesdropping scenes where Beatrice and Benedick decide to take pity on each other results from the speed in which their defenses are broken down.
Along with this distrust and denial of the emotions, a bias toward wit is associated with a hard-headed, skeptical attitude to human worth. Beatrice and Benedick mock lovers as being not only impulsive and fantastical but also prone to see value where none exists. Their battles of wit take the form of insults because they want to show themselves as being under no idealistic delusions about the worth of the opposite sex. Benedick's skepticism about women calls particular attention to itself because it involves a complete reversal of the conventional view of man as woman's persuer. Doubtless his abuse of women is done in part for sport. He himself distinguishes his "custom" of speaking as "a professed tyrant to their sex" from "the simple true judgment" of his more serious moods (I.i.169-170). But he would hardly adopt the role of woman-hater if it did not correspond, however indirectly, to some real aspect of his own beliefs. And when he doffs his guise of the "tyrant" to speak "truly" about Hero, he still refuses to acknowledge any of her obvious merits. He is still, as Don Pedro says, "an obstinate heretic in the despite of beauty" (I.i.236-237). If he does not actually believe that all women make their husbands cuckolds and prisoners, as he asserts he does, he at least has serious doubts about the value of their society. The shrewd man of wit knows that to idealize a woman is to play the fool.

But all this shrewdness of practical reason turns out to be blindness, not insight. Benedick's prudential skepticism is not based on any actual experience of human nature, on any specific knowledge of particular women, but on foolish pride. His distrust of love and marriage results in good part from an overestimation of his own worth, from his seeing himself as superior in kind to women in general. He gives himself away most obviously in his soliloquy in Leonato's orchard, in which he defines the woman who will be worthy of his love: "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 shall not come in my grace" (II.iii.28-31). To be "well," to be prudently rational, is identified here with being impervious to love, with complete self-sufficiency. But since the rationale for this resistance is Benedick's ridiculous assurance of his own perfection, the wisdom of wit turns out to be foolishness. To identify giving "grace," giving unmerited favor, with finding "all graces," all perfections, in the object, is to willfully ignore the necessity of unearned trust, of irrational, unprovable faith, in every bond that holds people together. If strictly followed prudential wit, with its proud demand for positive proof of perfection, leads logically to a state of complete isolation, to a repudiation of the social communion that Shakespeare's comedies invariably celebrate.

Although Benedick avoids this kind of isolation by falling in love with Beatrice, we are given a grotesque example of what can happen to the man of skepticism and pride in the figure of Don John. The melancholy that Don John admits suffering from, which prevents him from liking anyone and impels him to stir up mischief, is finally not the result of particular injuries but the fruit of a morbid pride that makes him consider all society with others a diminishment of his self-sufficiency. What seems to aggravate him most when he is first presented to us is not so much his failure to defeat his brother in their recent quarrel but his being forgiven for starting it, since the forgiveness places him in the role of inferior: "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. 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" (I.iii.27-33). His claims to self-sufficiency, to "smile at no man's jests" and "tend to no man's business," are of course specious (I.iii.15, 17). Just as in a lighter vein Benedick seeks out the company of the woman he overtly spurns, because of his suppressed attraction to her, so in a sinister vein Don John spends his time thinking of ways to hurt the people whom he overtly pretends to ignore, feeling a suppressed admiration for them which his pride refuses to acknowledge.

The great moral difference between Benedick and Don John is rooted in the fact that Benedick is merry and Don John melancholy. Beatrice herself points out this contrast: "He were an excellent man that were just in the midway between him [Don John] and Benedick. The one is too like an image and says nothing, and the other too like my lady's eldest son, evermore tatling" (II.i.7-11). The overflow of good spirits that underlies at least some part of Benedick's wit-play is a safeguard against dangerous pride because it expresses a general delight in human relations, a delight that makes isolation from society impossible. The world pleases
Benedick too much for him to reject it. The same kind of delight in life is associated with the sportive aspects of Beatrice's wittiness. She is, as Don Pedro comments, “a pleasant-spirited lady”; and her uncle, Leonato, drives the point home: “There's little of the melancholy element in her; she is never sad but when she sleeps, and not ever sad then” (II.i.356, 357-359). Wittiness, then, can have positive meaning as well as negative. If, on the one hand, it can be used as a tool of practical reason in the service of emotional repression, distrust, and pride, it can also express a light-hearted playfulness, a love of life, that undermines the vices of proud reason and brings man into communion with his fellows. Thus the playful side of Beatrice's and Benedick's wit-cracking prepares us for their transformation into lovers and their abandonment of bad wit.

Because Beatrice and Benedick are duped into loving each other, we may at first not be inclined to see their love as an indication of an important shift of internal perspective. After all, the trick played on them seems to appeal basically to their vanity. Each decides to love the other partly because he is flattered by the other's supposed adoration. But to move from a pride that rejects all potential lovers as unworthy to a vanity that is willing to reciprocate another's admiration is to make a crucial moral adjustment. Vanity, unlike pride, is social; it requires the good will of others in order to thrive. And the good will that Beatrice and Benedick seek is not only that of each other but the good opinion of their friends. They are duped successfully by their friends because neither wants to be thought hard-hearted and disdainful by the people they most respect. They want to fulfill the values of their community.

In accepting the criticism of their friends Beatrice and Benedick show not only a desire for approval and communion but a willingness to lay aside a reliance on their own wits and rely instead on the perceptions of others. They believe on trust that their friends can see them more clearly than they can see themselves. Thus Beatrice's acceptance of the criticism she overhears is immediate:

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.

(III.i.107-112)

In submitting here without question to the censure of her friends, Beatrice seems to be rejecting the authority of autonomous reason. This willingness of both Beatrice and Benedick to use other eyes than their own applies of course to their views of each other as well as of themselves. When at the close of the play Leonato says that the lovers were “lent” their eyes by their friends (V.i.23-26), he means primarily that each was encouraged to love the other by overhearing reports of the lovelorn state of the other. Though in this regard they are completely mistaken, their being deceived is perhaps a step in the right direction. By rejecting objective appearances of disdain in the other by a subjective belief in the other's devotion, they indirectly repudiate the skeptical reason that supported their disdain. To be sure, they are supporting their faith here on hearsay, on circumstantial evidence. But they are willing to believe this evidence so quickly only because it agrees with their own hidden desire for love. And if they are in one sense fools, their foolishness is finally vindicated; for their very acts of irrational belief in each other's love help to bring their real love for each other into being.

That genuine love entails giving up the outer eye of reason for the inner eye of faith becomes clear later in the play when Beatrice and Benedick are tested by the crisis of Hero's vilification. Beatrice here proves her powers of commitment by believing without question in her friend's innocence. She is the only one, along with the holy Friar Francis, to give no credence whatever to the accusations of Don Pedro and Claudio. She requires no factual evidence for her conviction, relying rather on an act of subjective trust. Benedick's powers of commitment are tested during this crisis when he places himself completely at Beatrice's disposal, agreeing
even to obey her command to challenge his friend Claudio to a duel. He agrees not simply because he wants to keep Beatrice's love, but because his love for her enables him to trust in the rightness of her commands:

BENEDICK:

Tarry, good Beatrice, By this hand, I love thee.

BEATRICE:

Use it for my love some other way than swearing by it.

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:

Enough, I am engaged, I will challenge him.

(IV.i.327-331)

In accepting without external evidence the absolute wisdom of his beloved Benedick proves that he has abandoned the external perception of wit for the inner vision of faith.

It has been argued by some critics that Beatrice and Benedick are comically emotional in their defense of Hero, that we are meant to laugh at Beatrice's command, “Kill Claudio,” and at Benedick's zealous obedience. If before the pair were too witty, it is contended, now they have become too romantic. This argument is true in the literal sense that the lovers are over-hasty in their revenge against Claudio, in the sense that they are ignorant of how he was deceived. But in the larger moral context of the play this emotional impetuosity is a proof of the sincerity of their trust, and hence of their moral maturity. Only through their emotions are they led to the unprovable insight that Hero is innocent. Calm self-control and rational sifting of evidence cannot lead them to this all-important truth.

As has already been suggested, to say that Beatrice and Benedick abandon bad wit is not to say that they abandon wittiness. Humorous joking can express a playfulness founded on a love of life; and at the end of the play the pair are as playfully witty as ever. Now, however, the negative side of their wit is repudiated. Instead of concealing their feelings, their joking actually expresses them. Thus after brief and humorless assertions that they love each other “no more than reason,” they submit to the evidence of their love-letters and acknowledge their emotions by the use of witty irony:

BENEDICK:

A miracle! Here's our own hands against our hearts. Come, I will have thee, but by this light, I

BEATRICE:

I would not deny you, but by this good day, I yield upon great persuasion, and partly to save you

(V.iv.91-96)
Wittiness here takes the form not of an insult ingeniously clever, but an insult transparently a lie. Their new wit is finally directed towards themselves rather than towards others. It gently mocks the fundamental irrationality of love, though it accepts that irrationality as an essential part of life.

While Beatrice and Benedick develop morally by abandoning the perception of skeptical reason for that of intuitive faith, by leaving wit for a higher wisdom, Claudio degenerates in the course of the play by rejecting subjective faith for prudential doubt. He compromises his initial emotional involvement with Hero by relying on his wits to understand her character. The fatal flaw in his love for Hero is not its impetuosity; for though it begins rather suddenly, it is based on some prior acquaintance and attraction and is directed toward a woman who is intrinsically admirable. The flaw, rather, is its lack of depth. Underneath Claudio's impetuous ardor is a latent uncertainty about the rightness of his own emotions and the value of love. This uncertainty shows itself first in the cautiousness with which Claudio tells Benedick of his feelings for Hero. Instead of boldly declaring his love at once, he begins by asking Benedick for his opinion, and when he later does acknowledge his feelings, he hedges his acknowledgement in a series of gentle qualifications. “In mine eye she is the sweetest lady that ever I looked on,” he tells Benedick (I.i.189-190), guarding his praise by admitting indirectly the possible bias of his emotions. And when he later asserts, “If my passion change not shortly, God forbid it should be otherwise” (I.i.221-222), he seems to admit a lack of complete confidence in the strength and stability of his emotions.

This lack of confidence may perhaps result partly from mere inexperience; for Claudio appears to be a young man who is more practiced as a soldier than as a courtier. He does not know the subtle workings of love, and for this reason is happy to have his friend Don Pedro woo Hero as his substitute. But when he believes Don John's lie that Don Pedro has wooed and won Hero for himself, he shows a lack of generosity as well as a lack of experience. He is too ready to distrust not only his own feelings but the intentions of others. He sees man as an easy prey to irresponsible infatuations that betray all other commitments:

’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.  

(I.i.181-187)

This explanation of Don Pedro's supposed inconstancy in friendship, it should be noticed, not only degrades man by viewing him as a passive victim of his feelings, but also degrades women by viewing her attractions as Circean enchantments that make men act with the amorality of animals. In opposing blood to faith, love to constancy, Claudio is actually stripping love of its greatest virtue. He is blind to the fact that faith lies at the very center of love's power of perception; and this blindness prepares the way for his great blunder, his mistrust of Hero.

Some critics have tried to mitigate the guilt of Claudio's condemnation of Hero by reminding us that he is duped into his false belief not only by the slanders of Don John but by the seemingly conclusive proof of his own observation. Claudio in fact uses this argument to defend himself. “Yet sinned I not but in mistaking,” he assures Leonato when he finally discovers the truth (V.i.284-285). But this defense overlooks the crucial fact that real love abandons the external perception of the eye and ear for internal subjective perception. It rejects circumstantial appeals to practical wit, to skeptical prudence, for unconditional trust. Claudio is disposed to accept flimsy appeals to his senses because he has never fully committed himself to Hero, never rejected his suppressed doubts about the value of love. It has been argued that Don Pedro's acceptance of the false evidence is a proof of its power, that we must excuse Claudio's credulity if the good-hearted and sensible Don
Pedro is duped as well. But there is obviously one all-important difference between the two men: Claudio is in love with Hero, or thinks he is, and Don Pedro is not. If love means anything here it should mean a special will to believe in the goodness of the beloved. Because Claudio's love is superficial, that special will does not exist. At the crucial moment he relies on wit, not faith.

Abetting Claudio's lack of trust in Hero is the kind of pride that we have seen supporting Benedick's initial commitment to wit. One of the reasons behind Claudio's decision to expose Hero in public is a desire to punish her for daring to dishonor him. He seems to be moved as much by the need of personal revenge as by the claims of moral justice. His dignity is offended that someone would be brazen enough to try to trick so noble a man as himself. By deciding to “bear her in hand until they come to take hands” (the phrase is Beatrice's, IV.ii.305-306), by feigning ignorance until the last moment, he intends to prove that he can overmatch her craft with his own. The hurt to his pride accounts for the viciousness of his attack, for his willingness to hurt cruelly the feelings of Hero's father and uncle in order to make her suffer, for the preponderance of anger over pity as he says to Leonato, “take her back again, / Give not this rotten orange to your friend” (IV.i.32-33). To the extent that Claudio's sense of justice is tainted by proud vengefulness he becomes like Don John, the man who is angry at the world and who is the prime agent in causing Claudio's distrust of Hero.

After his condemnation of Hero, Claudio holds a position in relation to Benedick that exactly reverses their original relations. While Benedick has rejected the perceptions of the skeptic for those of the lover, Claudio has moved from love to skepticism. Where the old Benedick who trusts no woman is left behind for the new Benedick who trusts one woman completely, the old love-seeking Claudio is abandoned for a new Claudio who decides “to lock up all the gates of love” and “turn all beauty into thoughts of harm” (IV.i.106,108). Because Benedick has abandoned wit for the will to believe, he can see the goodness of Hero that is hidden from her apparent lover, Claudio, who has abandoned the will to believe for wit. The extent to which they have developed in opposite direction is shown most emphatically in the scene in which Benedick challenges Claudio to a duel. Benedick here is now in deadly earnest, attacking his former friend with honest indignation; Claudio is now the flippant man of wit, hiding under his wittness whatever qualms he may feel about Hero's death. He expects Benedick to provide some witty entertainment, unaware that the old Benedick no longer exists:

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 they 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

(V.i.122-129)

Though Claudio and Don Pedro amuse themselves by joking about Benedick's loss of wit and his falling in love, Benedick is now wit-proof, as he says in his parting speech to Claudio: “Fare you well, boy. You know my mind. I will leave you now to your gossipltike humor. You break jests as braggarts do their blades, which,
God be thanked, hurt not” (V.i.187-190). The laugh that Claudio and Don Pedro have at Benedick's new seriousness, at the love-striken man who “goes in his doublet and hose and leaves off his wit” (V.i.202-203), is cut short when they learn from Borachio just how much their own wits have been deceived. “I have deceived,” affirms Borachio, “even your very eyes” (V.i.238).

In order for Claudio to deserve Hero's love at the end of the play, he must repudiate the prudential reason and reliance on sensory evidence that comprises bad wit. At first it may be a little difficult to see him accomplishing this; for when he tells Leonato that he sinned “But in mistaking,” he seems to overlook, as we have mentioned, the lack of trust which made this mistaking possible. Yet when he mourns Hero at her tomb he not only shows real grief at what his mistaking has done, but makes no effort to mitigate his guilt. The epitaph he writes for her affirms that she was “Done to death by slanderous tongues” and identifies her murderers with her mourners:

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)

Moreover, in yielding himself up completely to the will of Leonato, in agreeing even to marry any woman that Leonato chooses, Claudio seems to be renouncing his reliance on self-sufficient intelligence. Just as Benedick finally relies on Beatrice's perception, so Claudio is finally willing to let someone else see for him and “dispose / For henceforth of poor Claudio” (V.i.305). And his not being allowed even to see the face of his wife before the marriage suggests symbolically the need to abandon external perception of the outer eye. The apparent miracle of Hero's resurrection comes about only by repudiating the kind of skeptical wit that caused her apparent death.

The crowning blow to the claims of wit in Much Ado is given in farcical terms by the antics of Dogberry and Verges. For these blundering clowns, who are completely witless, manage to stumble into the truth that is denied Claudio and Don Pedro. As Borachio tells the deceived noblemen, “What your wisdoms could not discover, these shallow fools have brought to light” (V.i.238-240). In the task of discovering clever criminals, crafty wit must yield to well-intentioned stupidity. Instead of cautioning prudent vigilance, Dogberry and Verges tell the watches to avoid getting into trouble; but the culprit gives himself away. They completely misconduct the trial, but they seem to know somehow that Borachio is a villain; and when they finally bring Conrad and Borachio before Leonato, Dogberry is able to give the crime its right name, although he is too ignorant to count to six: “Marry, sir, they have committed false report; moreover, they have spoken untruths; secondarily, they are slanders; sixth and lastly, they have belied a lady; thirdly, they have verified unjust things; and, to conclude, they are lying knaves” (V.i.220-224). What seems to lie behind the success of their witlessness is their good will. They are simple-minded, but their hearts are in the right place. Their respect for Leonato's good name, for example, is ridiculously expressed, but is finally commendable:

LEONATO:

Neighbors, you are tedious.

DOGEBERRY:

It pleases your Worship to say so, but we are the poor Duke's officers. But truly, for mine own part

LEONATO:

All thy tediousness on me, ah?
In the world of the play such good feelings seem to be enough to enable one to stagger into truth. While Dogberry and Verges, when taken together, represent the triumph of witlessness, Dogberry taken by himself can be seen to expose wit in even a more direct way. For with all his stupidity Dogberry believes that he is a clever man; and by his fatuous pride in his wit he parodies unconsciously the pride of Benedick and Claudio. Thus his malapropisms, which result partly from his desire to display his vocabulary, are related in motive to the word-play of his betters, which expresses, at least in its debased form, a kind of intellectual vanity. And Dogberry's patronizing lament that old Verges's "wits are not so blunt" as they should be, that "when the age is in, the wit is out," recalls Benedick's initial patronizing of love-lorn Claudio, and looks forward to Claudio's laughing lament over Benedick's foolishness as a lover. The relation of Dogberry to Claudio is especially close. Dogberry's examination of Borachio and Conrade follows immediately after Claudio's public examination of Hero; and the absurd mishandling of the villains' hearing (though Dogberry has promised to "spare no wit" in the matter (III.v.66)) is a commentary on the injustice of Hero's hearing. Even Dogberry's horror that he should have "been writ down an ass" (IV.ii.90) may perhaps echo Claudio's angry indignation at the affront to his dignity which might be caused by Hero's supposed deception. The men of wit in the play, then, are not only less successful than the fools in seeing truth, but are mocked by one fool's aping of their witty pretensions.

The inadequacy of wit as a mode of perception is perhaps suggested by the very title of *Much Ado About Nothing*. It has been often pointed out that "noting" and "nothing" were pronounced alike in Elizabethan England, and one recent critic, Miss Dorothy Hockey, has suggested in a very useful article that *Much Ado* is really a "dramatization of mis-noting," pointing out the many specific references to hearing and seeing in the play that underscore the mistakes of observation. We can enlarge the meaning of this point if we keep in mind the relation of noting to wit; for wit in *Much Ado*, as we have seen, entails a skeptical prudence that relies on sensory facts rather than on intuitive belief. The pun in the title, which suggests that to depend on noting is to depend on nothing, thus vindicates indirectly the intuitive mode of perception to which wit is opposed.

**Notes**

5. The importance of the notion of wit in *Much Ado* has been particularly emphasized by two critics, Mr. Walter N. King and Mr. William G. McCollom. Mr. King, in his interesting article, “Much Ado About Something,” *SQ*, XV (1964), limits the meaning of wit to the use of word-play, contending that the expressive practice of this kind of joking buries “natural instinct” under a layer of conventionality.
Mr. McCollom, on the other hand, contending that wit is a positive force in *Much Ado*, argues that the play is “about the triumphing of true wit (or wise folly) … over false or pretentious wisdom,” with Beatrice and Benedick being the truly wise and “Don John, Borachio, Don Pedro, Claudio, and even Leonato … present[ing] in very different ways the false wisdom which deceives others or itself” (“The Role of Wit in *Much Ado About Nothing*, SQ, XIX (1968), pp. 166, 173). The problem with this formulation is that it fails to notice that the wit-play of Benedick and Beatrice has potentially negative qualities that lead to self-deception, and that a reliance on wit, in the general sense of practical reason, leads to error more often than to insight. The opposition between pride and humility is doubtless a crucial distinction in the play; but Mr. McCollom does not make clear enough how the mistakes of Claudio and Don Pedro are attributable to pride, or how Beatrice's and Benedick's belief in Hero is the result of their humility.

I must admit that I agree with the many critics who are disturbed by Claudio's joviality during his wedding. His punning jokes at Benedick, his rather crude question, “Which is the lady I must seize upon?” (V.i.53), and his playful request to look under the bride's veil before the ceremony suggest that his remorse over Hero's death is somewhat superficial. A more somber bearing here would make us more willing to believe that he deserves Hero, that he has reached the moral plane of Beatrice and Benedick.

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7. Mr. Rossiter makes a similar point, contending that “wit and nitwit share a common obsessive delight in the wonder of words” (p. 28).


**Criticism: Themes: Laurie E. Osborne (essay date 1990)**


*[In the following essay, Osborne analyzes Much Ado about Nothing as an integration of the Italian novella and the English comedy. Osborne asserts 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.]*

In *Much Ado about Nothing*, Shakespeare creates two plots from a single principal source—the slandered maiden tale which Ariosto and Bandello both treat. One plot, the story of Hero, up to the end of the comedy, imitates the action of the original Italian *novellas* and their interesting villain, while the other, the story of the courtship of Beatrice and Benedick, which is Shakespeare's creation, refashions the main plot and its dramatist manipulator according to comic principles.

The relationship between these two plots is most frequently discussed—or dismissed—in light of the two pairs of lovers. Charles Prouty claims that the couples each represent different “realistic” views of love. In the courtship of Hero and Claudio, he sees a Renaissance commonplace, the marriage of convenience, and in Beatrice and Benedick, the “realistic” rejection of outworn romantic ideals. John Traugott, in a more recent version of the same kind of argument, suggests that Shakespeare manipulates comedy and romance to expose the potential violence at the heart of the latter and to create through Beatrice “a rational Rinaldo of Benedick, a worldly Ginevra of herself.” Both Prouty and Traugott begin by observing how Shakespeare alters his sources, specifically with the addition of Beatrice and Benedick. Their analyses rely on the premise that what interested Shakespeare most about these *novellas* was the courtier's code—that is, the idea of a romance courtship like that of Ariodant and Genevra in Book 5 of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*.

Up until now, examining Shakespeare's sources for *Much Ado about Nothing* has led almost inevitably to arguments about how Shakespeare revises or imitates their representations of romantic love. Problems of
mixed genres or generic contamination, from this perspective, center around the opposition between the domestic married love of comedy and the chivalric devotion and peregrinations of love in romance. As a corrective to this limited view, I suggest that Shakespeare's principal interest in these works lies in their representation of the dangerous powers of dramatic play—staging scenes, acting roles, and creating spectacle. In my view, what Shakespeare's use of these tales reveals most strikingly is his fascination with figures who manipulate their worlds by dramatic means. Shakespeare sharpens the focus on these figures, whom I will call player-dramatists, in a variety of ways. By deliberately dulling the passionate love and jealousy experienced by the lovers in his sources, he draws attention away from Hero and Claudio and directs it towards the disinterested malevolence of Don John. Of the three characters drawn directly from the novellas—the lover, the slandered maiden, and the obsessive rival, only one, Don John, retains something of the excessive emotion of the originals.

Yet Don John is obsessed with his brother, not Hero. In fashioning his villain, Shakespeare totally abandons the jealous rivalry which motivates Ariosto's Polynesso and Bandello's Girondo to slander the chaste maidens. Whereas the other versions, one and all, focus on a rejected lover's contrivance, Don John has no personal interest in Hero at all. In fact, it is Don Pedro, not Don John, who is presented, however briefly, as Claudio's rival for Hero's affections. This mistaken conflict, which dominates the first act and a half, is one of the first hints of how crucially connected the two brothers are in Shakespeare's use of the novellas. The other sign is, of course, Don John's predominant desire to thwart his brother in any way: "I had rather be a canker in a hedge than a rose in his grace." With the sole intention of opposing his brother's favorite, Don John effectively recasts the actors in Claudio's courtship, not once but twice. Yet Don John is not the first to exploit a staged scene in Messina; Don Pedro initiates the dramatic play in Much Ado about Nothing with his unexpected offer to act the role of suitor in order to further the match between Hero and Claudio.

Shakespeare singles out the slanderous player-dramatist of his source by leaving that figure involved in the extravagant emotion so common in the novellas and by creating a character who is, for all practical purposes, his mirror image. If Don John is preoccupied with crossing his brother in any way, Don Pedro is equally obsessed with making marriages, first Hero's and Claudio's and then Beatrice's and Benedick's. In fact, Don Pedro's tactics and goals in his role as comic matchmaker inspire Don John's match-breaking. For both, dramatic play becomes the expression of their needs, as each stages and restages contrived scenes to force his view on Messina.

In this way, Shakespeare establishes Don Pedro as the comic impulse in Messina, creating a new version of the villain of the novellas who uses his dramatic play exclusively to achieve the comic goal of marriage. Don John's violent urge to sabotage his brother shows the lingering resistance of the Italian novellas to such comic treatment and the vitality given comedy by such opposition. Don John insists upon the villainy of dramatic play and revels in his marriage breaking as he persistently recalls Shakespeare's imitation of his sources.

By linking these two player-dramatists so strongly, Shakespeare examines the difficulties of absorbing non-comic, non-dramatic materials into comedy. Examining what role narrative from the novellas can play in comedy ultimately reveals the contradictory functions of the comic dramatist as he must not only seek to further social union but also complicate and delay that union to tell a tale. Thus Much Ado, in transforming non-comic materials into comedy, uncovers the contradictions in the comic conventions which form the basis for that revision.

My reading of Much Ado about Nothing insists upon the importance of the brothers and the other characters who take up or challenge dramatic play. In examining the relationship between the melodramatic novellas and Much Ado about Nothing, I focus on comedy as a genre in process rather than a conventional dramatic form determined by its end. As a result I look at the connections between the self-contained "comedy" of the first two acts and the rest of Much Ado in terms of Shakespeare's initial responses to his narrative materials. I also explore the way the power of dramatic play passes from the brothers to other characters like Leonato and the
Friar in the course of Shakespeare's ongoing reworking of his original materials. Whereas a critic like Bertrand Evans in *Shakespeare's Comedies* approaches these “practices” in terms of how Shakespeare is manipulating the audience's perceptions, I am interested in how he uses these player-dramatists to draw together the discourses of different genres. The conflict between the narrative *novella* and comic drama forces a new consideration of the contradictions at the heart of comedy and leads to a radical shift in his use of the sources in the second half of *Much Ado.*

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The first two acts of the comedy test the power of Don Pedro's comic vision to dominate in a world where play can also effectively create an anti-comic view—the world of Ariodant and Genevra, for example, where Polynesso's dramatic play nearly results in Ariodant's suicide and Genevra's execution. The opening apparently establishes the extreme difference between the comic Don Pedro and the contrary Don John but actually implies a close relationship between the two.

In act 1, Don Pedro peremptorily usurps Claudio's courtship. Once Claudio reveals his interest in Hero, Don Pedro takes up not only the cause of forwarding the marriage but also Claudio's role as suitor: “I will assume thy part in some disguise / And tell fair Hero I am Claudio” (1.1.103-4). By the end of the first scene of *Much Ado*, Don Pedro has identified himself so thoroughly as a proponent of marriage that he reduces Claudio to a mere observer of his own courtship. As Don Pedro seeks to assimilate Hero to his comic vision of marriage, he becomes the first player-dramatist in Messina.

When Don Pedro turns so readily to dramatic play, his action has several results. First, instead of effectively promoting Claudio's and Hero's union, as he seems to expect, his actions lead to immediate confusion in her family. In the scene following the Prince's decision, Antonio rushes in to tell Hero's father that “the Prince discovered to Claudio that he loved my niece your daughter, and meant to acknowledge it this night in a dance” (1.2.10-12). Leonato, as a result, counsels her on how to react to Don Pedro's proposal, not Claudio's. At this point, like Polynesso of *Orlando Furioso*, the Duke is seen as the only potential suitor for Hero.

Don John hears a more accurate description of his brother's plan and responds with his usual contrary spirit: “This may prove food to my displeasure; that young start-up [Claudio] hath all the glory of my overthrow. If I can cross him any way, I bless myself every way” (1.3.61-66). Motivated purely by the desire to cross Don Pedro and his friends, Don John looks for “any model to build mischief on” (1.3.44). In his brother's dramatic play, he finds both a cause to oppose in this marriage and a model to imitate.

As a result, Don John becomes the rival player-dramatist, and begins to act as the single-minded enemy of comic union. He doubly opposes marriage in his dramatic play during the masked dance. Not only does he destroy Claudio's anticipation of wedding Hero by asserting that Don Pedro woos for himself, but he also ostensibly seeks to ruin his brother's proposed “marriage” to the lady. Don John addresses Claudio as Benedick and begs him to intervene—“Signior, you are very near my brother in his love. He is enamored on Hero; I pray you, dissuade him from her, she is no equal for his birth” (2.1.151-53). Purposefully mistaking the masked Claudio for Benedick, Don John exploits his brother's playing as he sees through Don Pedro's disguise to “discover” his wooing, thus establishing Don Pedro as Claudio's rival. Moreover, in focusing on the disparity between Hero's and Don Pedro's birth, he offers the very reason given by Fenicia's father in Bandello's story when Timbreo rejects her. Don John's passionate opposition to the lovers' betrothal links him strongly to Shakespeare's sources, while the effects of his actions, the establishment of Don Pedro as a suitor, serve to implicate his brother as the rival of the *novellas*.

I read the first practice of Don Pedro and Don John's corresponding deception as two aspects of the same action, an action as thoroughly grounded in the *novellas* as the actual slander at the end of the play. Don John and his later villainy actually come from the *novellas* and, in turn, inspire Shakespeare's invention of Don
Pedro, who uses disguise and staging scenes for very different purposes. Paradoxically, within Much Ado itself, it is Don Pedro's immediate impulse to act the role of suitor in arranging Claudio's wedding which incites Don John. By showing Don Pedro as both the initiator and resolver of his own small comedy, Shakespeare seeks to privilege his dramatic play and the comic conventions which he espouses. Yet the first act and a half indicate his fatal connection to the source's villain when he seems to be Claudio's rival. Moreover, Don Pedro's single-minded pursuit of Hero's and Claudio's betrothal is matched and mirrored in Don John's equally dedicated opposition to it.

In the first practices of Much Ado, these two characters share the artistry of the comic dramatist, which Marvin Herrick describes in Comic Theory in the Sixteenth Century, “the art of the poet is shown by his ability to weave a tangled web of threats, dangers, misunderstandings, and errors, which are then skillfully, but with an air of naturalness, happily resolved.” Both Don Pedro, who aims at happy endings, and Don John, who arranges “threats, dangers, and misunderstandings,” are essential in making a comedy of the first part of Much Ado, since Don John's playing leads to the near disaster which intensifies the joy of Hero's and Claudio's betrothal.

However, their persistent conflict suggests that the extreme contradiction between comedy in process, i.e. erecting threats, etc., and comedy as goal, aiming toward union, cannot be easily resolved “with an air of naturalness.” The comedy continues for two reasons. Don John persists in his efforts to break the betrothal that his brother has arranged, and Don Pedro persists in making marriages, now turning his attention to Beatrice and Benedick, a pair as resistant to marriage as Don John.

Both Beatrice and Benedick defy Don Pedro's matchmaking. When Benedick reveals his most thorough opposition to women and marriage, declaring, “I will live a bachelor” (1.1.228), Don Pedro responds to this statement as if it were a personal affront, “I shall see thee, ere I die, look pale with love” (1.1.229). Benedick's further avowal that he would not marry Beatrice “though she were endowed with all that Adam had left him before he transgressed” (2.1.235-36) both denies the validity of the Prince's comic vision and contests his power to arrange the match.

Beatrice first provokes Don Pedro by drawing attention to his orchestration of Claudio's betrothal—“Speak, Count, 'tis your cue” (2.1.287). When she explicitly prompts the two lovers to speech as if they were actors, she shows her awareness of Don Pedro's playful control. As the woman who notes that God “send[s] me no husband, for which blessing I am at him upon my knees every morning and evening” (2.1.24-26), Beatrice appropriately calls attention to Don Pedro as the active comic principle in the comedy—and resists his vision even as she perceives its force over Hero and Claudio. When the dominance of his comic vision becomes even more obvious in his offer to marry her, she refuses him.

Don Pedro, with his curious proposal, not only reinforces the fact that he has only one possible objective in his dramatic play but also suggests that the true goal in this comedy is his own union. The real task in Much Ado about Nothing goes beyond arranging the marriages of the two couples, whose betrothals are achieved with relative ease; the real issue here is wedding the melodramatic novellas, concentrated around Don John, and comedy, represented in Don Pedro. Resolving the opposition between the two brothers is essential not only to unite the two functions of the comic dramatist which the brothers embody but also to combine the powers of narrative and drama.

As Don Pedro gets more deeply involved in pursuing comic union, his actions becomes more closely identified with drama. The most striking quality of the trick he arranges for Benedick is its overt theatricality. The display the conspirators put on is excessive, especially in contrast to the practice Don Pedro has used to bring Hero and Claudio together. What becomes clear in the dramatic play which Don Pedro orchestrates here is that the purpose is not to control events but to control the way Benedick perceives them.
Don Pedro's preparation of his audience begins with his insistence that Balthasar repeat a song which Don Pedro has had him "rehearse"—"Come, Balthasar, we'll hear that song again" (2.3.43). However, Balthasar's initial reluctance to "slander music any more than once" indicates immediately the potential problems of the co-operative dramatic play which Don Pedro has set up in his second attempt at matchmaking. It seems to me unlikely that Balthasar is aware of the role he is playing here, since he is sent away before Don Pedro initiates the topic of Beatrice's love. Moreover, Balthasar is all too obviously designing his witty self-deprecation and his performance to suit Don Pedro as his audience and patron. His unwittingly obstructive scene-stealing in Don Pedro's planned performance irritates the Prince more and more as he keeps trying to get Balthasar to sing and to stop making puns about music. Don Pedro finally exclaims, "Note notes, forsooth, and nothing!" (2.3.57). When Balthasar finally does produce the designated song, a ballad on the faithlessness of men, Don Pedro's refashioning of Benedick's perceptions begins.

In the revelation of Beatrice's affections, Don Pedro takes the role of questioner. He enacts Benedick's part in the scene by playing the person who does not exactly know the details of Beatrice's feelings but would like to know. From that position, he can act as a prompter, asking Claudio and Leonato the questions which will elicit the information he wants Benedick to know. He can also voice Benedick's doubts, "Maybe she doth counterfeit" (2.3.103). Yet again, Don Pedro chooses the suitor's position, carrying it to the point of saying, "I wish she had bestowed this dotage on me, I would have daffed all respects and made her half myself" (2.3.164-66).

However, in this scene Don Pedro is not the sole actor as he was in Claudio's courtship; he must rely heavily on Leonato and Claudio. Leonato, who presumably has much at stake in arranging a match for his niece and pleasing the man who arranged his daughter's betrothal, keeps up with Don Pedro's conversational gambits, but Claudio keeps breaking out of character to comment on Benedick's responses. His exuberant pleasure in tricking his friend almost wrecks the scene as, at first, he pays more attention to his audience than to his role. When Don Pedro asks, "Why what effects of passion shows she?" Leonato paves the way for Claudio's contribution—"She will sit you—you heard my daughter tell you how" (2.3.108, 110-11). But Claudio, who has been watching and commenting on Benedick, says only, "She did indeed" (2.3.112). It takes several more lines to bring Claudio into the conversation enough to begin his description of Beatrice's letterwriting.

Even Beatrice herself is transformed into an actress in Don Pedro's dramatic play. At the beginning of the scene Leonato has commented that it is "most wonderful that she should so dote on Signior Benedick, whom she hath in all outward behaviours seemed ever to abhor" (2.3.96-99). Much as Ariosto's Polynesso suggests to Ariodante "How cunningly these women can dissemble, / Little to love where they make greatest show," Don Pedro suggests that Beatrice's outward behavior is an act which hides her true feelings. Moreover, Claudio and Leonato describe her behavior in acknowledging that she loves Benedick as if that, too, were a role.

In describing the scene of Beatrice's writing, the conspirators use narrative within dramatic play, yet the form their "narrative" takes is that of a play script. They quote Beatrice's words and narrate her actions, culminating in Claudio's extended stage direction: "Then down upon her knees she falls, weeps, sobs, beats her heart, tears her hair, prays, curses" (2.3.143-44). He assigns to her actions all the theatrical signals of extreme anguish. Despite the way the three men "theatricalize" their narrative of Beatrice, ultimately their description recalls both the extreme emotion of the novellas and the revealing letter of love which initiates Polynesso's raging jealousy of Ariodant in Ariosto's tale. This portrayal of Beatrice's emotional vulnerability, which is crucial in altering Benedick's perception of their relationship, also connects Don Pedro once again with the slanderous player-dramatist of the sources.

In fact, the conspirators cannot resist mentioning the possibility of counterfeiting. When Don Pedro and Claudio suggest that she feigns the emotion, Leonato insists that Beatrice loves Benedick passionately, while continuing to emphasize the possibility of counterfeit: "Oh God! Counterfeit? There never was counterfeit of

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passion came so near the life of passion as she discovers it” (2.3.105-6). Benedick picks up the suggestion of counterfeiting but discounts twice the possibility that he is being tricked. As soon as the conspirators suggest that Beatrice is pretending passion, Benedick comments “I should think this a gull, but that white bearded man speaks it” (2.3.118-19). Alive to the possibility of dramatic play, Benedick nevertheless looks for reasons to believe their version, accepting the word of Don Pedro's most recent ally, Leonato. After the conspirators have concluded their game, Benedick once again considers the possibility of a trick but concludes, “This can be no trick: The conference was sadly borne” (2.3.212-13). Convinced by their sincerity, he abandons his suspicions and moves to adapt his views to suit Beatrice's love—“I will be horribly in love with her” (2.3.226-27).

The comedy which Don Pedro imagines for Benedick in act 2, scene 3 has three scenes. The first is the scene of Beatrice's love-stricken anguish which Claudio and Leonato recall and recount; it establishes Benedick's character as the obstruction to Beatrice's happy acknowledgement of her love. The second scene is the one which the conspirators put on for Benedick, where they challenge him to change his view and marry Beatrice. The aim of all Don Pedro's preparations is yet a third scene. His goal is a meeting between Beatrice and Benedick: “The sport will be when they both hold one an opinion of another's dotage, and no such matter: that's a scene that I would like to see, which will be merely a dumb-show” (2.3.207-10). If Beatrice and Benedick will not act willingly in his comedy, he will trick them into it.

The excessively “dramatic” qualities of Don Pedro's scene are even more noticeable in contrast to the straightforward practice Hero enacts for Beatrice. Beatrice is similarly prepared to meet Benedick with a more accommodating spirit in act 3, scene 1, but the scene she witnesses is more direct and much shorter. Hero starts off by declaring Beatrice too disdainful to hear of Benedick's love. Hero concentrates on the characteristic play which blocks the mutual affection of Beatrice and Benedick: “She cannot love, / Nor take no shape nor project of affection / She is so self-endeared” (3.1.54-56). Whereas Don Pedro's staging is elaborate both in its production and in its descriptions of Beatrice's sufferings and Benedick's cruelty, Hero strikes directly at Beatrice's destructive role as scorner of love.

The contrast between Don Pedro's self-consciously theatrical trickery and Hero's more straightforward approach is important because of Hero's unwitting critique of the egocentricity of dramatic play. Whereas Don Pedro glories in describing Beatrice's role playing, Hero sharply criticizes Beatrice's role as inherently destructive. Whereas Don Pedro and his cohorts enjoy their production so much that they joke with “counterfeiting,” Hero reinterprets the false presentation of Beatrice's character as slander, “Truly I'll devise some honest slanders / To stain my cousin with” (3.1.84-85). Don Pedro's dramatic play may seem innocuous, but Hero's version of the same trick offers a harsher view and recalls vividly how closely all the staged scenes of this comedy are related to the slander at the heart of Shakespeare's sources. Even in Don Pedro's moment of greatest triumph, Shakespeare never lets his audience forget that he is still vitally linked to Don John.

Shakespeare's attempt in the main action to transform the melodramatic novellas into a subject for comedy meets the resistance of the necessary slander at the center of the source's plot. Juxtaposing the destructive dramatic play of Bandello's or Ariosto's version with comic conventions has had the double effect of exposing slander as a type of dramatic play useful also for comic ends and, more disturbingly, of insisting on the creation of “false” or divisive discourse as the prerequisite of comic dramaturgy. The revelation of this contradiction at the heart of comedy is figured most powerfully in Don John.

As the player-dramatist who opposes marriages, Don John is inevitably most effective in the interim between betrothal and wedding where he can fashion difficulties. His dramatic play dominates the epitasis of the comedy where “the complications, the intrigues, are developed. More often than not, dangers arise, increase, and finally become so pressing that a drastic remedy is necessary.” The danger in Much Ado is the threat of dishonor, which in the courtier's code of Messina, is also the threat of death.
Still following the source, Don John pursues the ruin of Claudio's marriage to Hero in the second half of the comedy. Once again Don John, the imitator, must turn to others for inspiration. Slow to catch the implications of Borachio's dalliance with Margaret, Don John cannot see beyond his main purpose: “What is in that, to be the death of this marriage?” (2.2.19-20). Borachio must explain the mechanism of the slander, but he points to Don John’s role as crucial:

The poison of that [Borachio's meeting with Margaret] lies in you to temper. Go you to the Prince your brother; spare not to tell him that he hath wronged his honor in marrying the renowned Claudio … to a contaminated stale, such a one as Hero.

(2.2.21-26)

Instead of merely influencing Claudio, who has already proven all too susceptible to the opinions of others, Don John must now draw Don Pedro into a new interpretation of the proposed match. As Don Pedro's dramatic play has prepared Benedick and Beatrice to conform to the love which supposedly controls them both and discover the proof of that love in each other's actions, Don John prepares Don Pedro and Cludio to adjust to the new view of Hero and to perceive proof of it in Borachio's encounter with Margaret.

In fact, Don John's most effective tactic in inspiring their reversal in judgment is very similar to Don Pedro's tactics with Benedick. Don John encourages his brother and Claudio to imagine what they will do if they do discover Hero's dishonor, much as Don Pedro and his friends anticipate Benedick's playful scorn if he knew of Beatrice's love. However, while Don Pedro leaves open an alternative reaction for Benedick, Don John leaves no hint of sympathy for Hero as he obviously allows only one imagined result of his proof.17 Because Don Pedro lacks Benedick's or Beatrice's ironic appreciation of his own playing, he does not even suspect a counterfeit. Instead, he adopts this attitude toward Hero as freely as the ever-accommodating Claudio.

Whereas Don Pedro's manipulations of Benedick and Beatrice emphasize his connections with comic drama, Don John's trick is predominantly associated with narrative. Not only does the scene at Hero's window only occur in Borachio's story of what happened, but also Don John's speech to Claudio and Don Pedro bears a noticeable resemblance to the one given by the creator of the bedroom scene in Bandello's version. The nameless obsequious villain of Bandello's tale (counterpart to the nameless Messaline nobleman who acts as matchmaker and then conveys Timbreo's refusal to wed Fenicia) claims to act only in Timbreo's best interest: “Sir, I come at this hour to speak with you about matters of the utmost importance, which touch your honor and well-being, and since perhaps I may say something could offend you, I pray you pardon me; let my devotion to you be my excuse.”18 Don John's approach to Don Pedro and Claudio is similar, invoking their honor while, more improbably, asserting his devotion to them.

As a result of this conversation, Don Pedro and Claudio undergo a startling change from the beginning of the scene to its conclusion. Where they start out by playing with the lovesick Benedick and glorying in their jest, they end the scene as dupes themselves. As Don Pedro moves from playful control to being controlled by another's schema, even his language changes, and he begins to sound like Don John:19

DON Pedro.

O day untowardly turn'd!

CLAUDIO.

O mischief strangely thwarting!

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

(3.2.120-23)

Having masterfully persuaded them to adjust to his view, Don John has predisposed them to perceive the “sequel” as proof, to act and speak in ways which conform to his vision. Like the anonymous evil courtier who helps Girondo arrange the slander of Fenicia and the anonymous matchmaker who starts by arranging the marriage and then joins in its destruction by reporting Timbreo's rejection of his bride, Don John and Don Pedro become one in their desire to disrupt the wedding.

When the Prince and his bastard brother move on to new practices after act 1, scene 2, both men continue to enact the same kind of play, but with very different purposes. Both seek to persuade a more sophisticated audience to accept a new view. Their activities in the second movement of the comedy once again represent two halves of a single ruse. In fact, Don John creates the exact counterpart to Don Pedro's small comedy for Benedick. His miniature tragedy also contains three scenes: the scene which prepares Claudio and Don Pedro to see Hero's frailty; the scene at Hero's window, and the shaming of Hero in the church. Here Don John poses the greatest possible threat to comedy—the disruption of the wedding and the disgrace of an innocent and unsuspecting maiden. But, most shockingly, Don Pedro, the player-dramatist who originally arranged the match, joins in transforming what should be a joyous celebration into a public disgrace which apparently results in death.

In act 4, it seems that Much Ado about Nothing gives over all comic purpose to submit to the power of the narrative source. Even Beatrice and Benedick, according to Traugott, revert to imitations of the excessively romantic novellas as she plays distressed maiden to his errant knight. As Don Pedro and Don John together come to express the anti-comic dramatic play of the source, it becomes clear that the only kind of harmony that can be achieved between the two brothers is, ironically, a union which destroys the goal of comedy.

In creating Much Ado, Shakespeare uncovers the utter dependence of the comic on the anti-comic. The enactment of that problem is displayed in the creation of one plot from the other, one player-dramatist from another. In the second section of this comedy, with the union of the two brothers, the inextricable connection between the comic and the anti-comic in the catastrophe essential to comedy becomes explicit, as the two brothers unite and in effect becomes one figure. Don Pedro becomes his own antithesis, the marriage-breaker of the source, and, as a result, Don John literally disappears when his function as the imitator of the source is absorbed in his brother's character.

At the same time, ironically, the joining of the two brothers achieves the fullest integration of narrative and drama and consequently the most powerful dramatic play up to that point in the comedy. Until act 4, scene 1, Don Pedro prefers drama and transforms the narration he must use to persuade Benedick into as theatrical a form as possible, whereas Don John consistently favors telling a story over acting it out, even though he must feign concern for his brother to tell the tale of Hero's infidelity. When the two brothers unite in support of Claudio, the three together stage the most effective dramatic play thus far in the comedy, the humiliation of Hero at the altar. Claudio and Don Pedro use and improvise upon the script of the wedding ceremony, while Don John acts as the grieving witness. They narrate the story of Hero's frailty as the crucial part of their staged punishment of Leonato and his daughter. This scene, which is unique to Shakespeare's version of the novellas, marks the point of greatest power for the two brothers as their dramatic play apparently proves Hero's frailty and results in her death. However, their united success violates comedy as well as the innocent Hero and leads Shakespeare to abandon his player-dramatists—suddenly and completely, both lose the power to play.

There are reasons for this abrupt loss. Don Pedro's faith in his own play has been undermined so he cannot return to achieve the “cheerful outcome;” his comic purpose has failed utterly. Don John, on the other hand, cannot maintain his slanderous vision of Hero, because he has not engaged enough of Messina in his dramatic
play. Consequently, his view of Hero dissolves readily. Nonetheless, their unexpected powerlessness is all the more striking because it coincides and, in some ways expresses, Shakespeare's sudden departure from his sources—the disappearance of Don John, who in the other versions is always present, either to be killed as Polynessso or married off as Girondo; the disturbing silence of Margaret whose prototype, Dalinda in Ariosto's tale, is the person who reveals the trick of the bedroom scene; and perhaps the most striking changes of all, the omission of the window scene which occurs in every other version of the story.

While Don John's disappearance, which occurs because he and Don Pedro have become one and the same, occasions little comment, Margaret's silence has caused critics and students alike more anxiety. Her patent involvement in Borachio's trick and failure to vindicate Hero either at the wedding or later are frequently dismissed by the claim that she is not so much a character as a plot convenience. Her reticence would pass unnoticed on stage, or so the argument goes. Yet given the fact that almost the entire story of Ariodant and Genevra is narrated by the maidservant Dalinda, Margaret's failure to speak seems to me too important to be set aside that easily. By denying Margaret speech, Shakespeare overtly rejects the narrator of the novellas. Yet, strangely enough, he does not replace her lengthy story of the trick staged at the window by dramatizing the event.

The omission of the scene at Hero's window is perhaps the most startling change Shakespeare makes in the original narratives. All of the variations of the source tale both include and emphasize such a scene, but Shakespeare leaves it out with three crucial results. First, the true emphasis of Don John's dramatic play, like his brother's, is concentrated more in shifting the attitudes of his audience than in controlling what they see. He prepares them to discover "proof," rather than supplying that proof.

Second, the omission of that staged scene emphasizes still further the narrative quality of Don John's trick. While still involved in dramatic play, Don John's marriage-breaking is associated with narration in this comedy just as strikingly as Don Pedro's manipulations of Benedick are linked to theater. First Don John tells the story of Hero's frailty. Then we do not see the scene at Hero's window; we hear about it from Borachio:

> Know that I tonight have wooed Margaret, the Lady Hero's gentlewoman, by the name of Hero; she leans me out at her mistress's chamber, 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, placed, and possessed by my master Don John, saw afar off in the orchard this amiable encounter.

(3.3.139-47)

Borachio even draws attention to the fact that he is telling a tale rather than enacting the dramatic play which he describes. Whereas Don Pedro allies himself with comedy only to be betrayed in his connections to the narrative novellas, Don John at every point seems to be associated with the narrative and the slander of the source.

Finally and most importantly, Don John draws attention to the "sequel" of his persuasions, but Shakespeare replaces Don John's carefully contrived scene which transforms Hero to a contemptible stale with the only scene of unplanned eavesdropping in the comedy: the Watch overhearing Borachio's confession to Conrade. Borachio's incoherent, out-of-order recital of events, whose flaws he self-consciously acknowledges, becomes all the more convincing as proof of villainy because he has not crafted it carefully to persuade his audience. Indeed the Watch as his audience, prepared only with Dogberry's somewhat confusing analysis of villainy, completely misconstrues the crime. When Shakespeare takes over the very type of dramatic play which serves his player-dramatists throughout Much Ado about Nothing, he does not concern himself with making or breaking marriages. Instead he unites melodramatic narrative in Borachio's story of slander and comic drama in staging the drunken, out-of-order recital of events before a well-meaning but not-very-bright internal
audience. By staging the only scene of “genuine” eavesdropping, Shakespeare deliberately invokes the
narration of the sources and renders it theatrical.

Leaving aside his original attempts to transform the source's villain into a comic figure by creating Don Pedro
to oppose Don John, Shakespeare unites narrative and comic drama in other ways. In place of the notable
omissions from the source material, Shakespeare creates and refashions a variety of characters—Dogberry,
the Friar, Leonato—to assume the burden of comic creation in Messina. Notably, all these new figures
combine elements of narrative and theater as each unites an anti-comic deferral of union with the ultimate
purpose of union and suggests ways of reconciling the contradiction in comic creation exposed by the two
brothers.

As the task of comic assimilation passes from Don Pedro's flawed hands to Shakespeare's manipulations of
the plot, the most notable assurance of comic resolution which Shakespeare supplies is his creation of
Dogberry and the Watch. After the scene where Don John carefully prepares his brother and Claudio to
interpret the “proof” of Hero's infamy, Shakespeare supplies the only characters in the play who do not
originate in any fashion from the source—Dogberry and his Watch.

In fact, Dogberry's briefing of his Watch is quite different from Don John's preparation of his brother and
Claudio. Unlike Don John, Dogberry does not urge his men to any action. In fact, if any resist their warnings,
the Watch is instructed merely to leave the drunkard at the tavern, to watch the thief steal away, and to listen
to the babe crying. In short, the Watch is carefully told how to react to the normal “villainies” they may
encounter. Consequently, they deal with Borachio and Conrade in terms of the crimes for which Dogberry has
prepared them. When Borachio offers “like a true drunkard,” to tell his tale to Conrade, the Watch, instructed
to deal with vagrants and drunkards, draws close to listen to “some treason.” And when Borachio
metaphorically refers to fashion as a deformed thief, the Watch has truly found out one of the great villainies
they were warned against.

With the inept but inevitable mechanism of comic justice in place, Shakespeare assures us that the slander of
Hero will eventually be revealed while insuring that the resolution will be delayed by the bungling of the
investigators. The crucial revelation of the villainy in the court combines narration, telling the story before a
judge, and comic drama as Dogberry interrupts and misconstrues almost the entire deposition. Such well
meaning incompetence becomes the first explanation of how erecting difficulties in comedy does not
contradict the pursuit of comic union; human fallibility becomes a natural obstacle.

After the link between Don Pedro and Don John becomes explicit and undeniable in their unity in act 4,
Shakespeare also creates a new player-dramatist who both imitates the villain of the source in arranging
Hero's “death” and transforms that threat to a comic purpose. The Friar recognizes Hero's blushes and
death-like faint as signs of her innocence and suggests his own dramatic play: “publish it that she is dead
indeed; / Maintain a mourning ostentation” (4.1.204-5). The Friar's plan demands both the public narration of
Hero's death and the display of “mourning ostentation” in order to achieve its effect. This feigning at first
appears to complicate the situation and delay Hero's wedding indefinitely as Leonato realizes when he
demands what purpose such a pretence can serve. Friar Francis offers two goals. First her death will affect the
conscience of the Count and therefore, if the accusation is misproved, pave the way to “fashion the event in
better shape / Than I can lay it down in likelihood” (4.1.235-36). Or, if her honor cannot be regained, her
pretended death not only “will quench the wonder of her infamy,” but also will permit further concealment as
her stained reputation requires (4.1.239).

The Friar's dramatic play unites the impulse to complicate the situation and the desire to resolve Hero's
dilemma, as he asserts that obstacles are necessary to promote her marriage, delay is necessary to effect union.
In this new player-dramatist, Shakespeare combines the opposing tendencies of the two brothers, Don Pedro's
goal of comic union and Don John's single-minded attempts to prevent the wedding. The Friar uses her
feigned death so that she may “die to live” and find that her “wedding-day / Perhaps is but prolong’d” (4.1.253-54). Her presumed death, which completely thwarts her union with Claudio, will inspire him to recall his love for her; total opposition to his desires will bring them to light more strongly. Though not entirely effective, the Friar offers a single pattern which expresses the contradictory needs of comic dramaturgy—and explains away that paradox when challenged.

Dogberry's bumbling insures the revelation of the truth—after a time—and the Friar's dramatic play combines delay with the desire for union, by promising to provoke love by feigning death. Similarly, Leonato, as the character whom Shakespeare entrusts with enacting the comic resolution of *Much Ado*, expresses the paradoxical requirements of comedy as he exacts a penance from Claudio which requires both the telling of Hero's innocence and the enactment of mourning and marriage. Here the complications inherent in comedy are framed as the necessary expiation which precedes union.

In the series of figures who replace Don Pedro and Don John as the engineers of *Much Ado*’s plot, we see Shakespeare gradually reapproaching his sources, this time aiming at combining the opposing facets of comedy in each character's actions. Shakespeare renews his assimilation of the sources at three different levels. Dogberry, of course, is entirely Shakespeare's invention, but a priest appears in Bandello's version of the source even if his role is not that of a player-dramatist. Leonato—the ultimate assurance that the contradiction of delaying to promote union is resolvable—is a direct imitation of the father Lionato, in Bandello's “Timbreo and Fenicia.” While Shakespeare does condense the action from a year to overnight, the tactics of Leonato in *Much Ado* reflect pretty faithfully Lionato's strategies—provoking mourning, demanding that the suitor marry a girl of his choice, supplying that girl who is in fact the original maid. Yet Bandello's Lionato actually carries through the marriage before revealing who the girl is, while Leonato, like the other player-dramatists in this comedy, merely prepares Claudio to marry his niece and leaves the action of marriage until after the close of the comedy.

What becomes obvious in Leonato's play—as well as in the dramatic play of other characters I've discussed—is that the purpose is not to manipulate events so much as to control the ways others perceive them. This tendency may be most obvious in Don Pedro's actions as he encourages Beatrice and Benedick to refashion their interpretations of one another, but does not try to control their meetings. Yet this insistence on recasting the characters' understanding of their situations is also evident in Don John's practice upon his brother, the Friar's plan for Hero, and even Leonato's arrangement of Claudio's new marriage. In none of these cases does Shakespeare show the player-dramatist staging the event itself—Don Pedro aims at the scene of Beatrice's and Benedick's doting which he himself does not witness, the window scene is omitted from the comedy, the Friar is noticeably absent at the marriage, and Leonato stops short of forcing Claudio to wed a veiled bride. Though all of these “non-events” actually do occur in his sources, Shakespeare chooses to leave them out and emphasize instead the way these player-dramatists prepare others to react to their situations.

This emphasis reveals that it is not the actions themselves which are so different from the *novellas* to the comedy—what differs is the way the characters, and, to some extent, the audience imagine their relationship to those events. In drawing together these two genres, Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* juxtaposes the discourse of the melodramatic *novellas*, designed (like the Friar's plan) to present disaster in order to provoke strong emotions, and the discourse of comedy, designed to present disaster that can be easily and naturally set aside to promote harmony and union. Uniting these two different sets of conventions—even though the plots both involve betrothal, misunderstanding, and reconciliation—all too vividly exposes the contradiction at the heart of comedy. The differences between narrative and theater, displayed particularly in the conflicting dramatic play of the two brothers, only further underscores the paradox of comic dramaturgy, which must erect obstacles, like Don John, while pursuing marriages, like Don Pedro.

In response, Shakespeare offers not one but three ways the contradiction which Don Pedro and Don John embody can be resolved “with an air of naturalness.” Dogberry's well-meaning ineptitude, the Friar's
production of Hero's death to reveal Claudio's true emotion, and Leonato's representation of expiation as the necessary prerequisite for comic union are all attempts to explain the contradiction of comedy which disrupts in order to unite. Significantly, none of these figures is entirely successful on his own. The resulting over-determination of reasons for the combination of obstacle and goal reflects the force with which Shakespeare's use of the novella narratives, evoking the patterns of melodrama, has challenged the conventions of comic drama. The process of creating this comedy from a noncomic source exposes the contradictions at the heart of a genre which requires the manufacture of disasters and opposition in order to assert the inevitability of harmony and order.21

Notes


3. In her analysis of Much Ado's sources in The Book of the Courtier, Barbara Lewalski also deals mainly with the two couples, claiming that Beatrice and Benedick "acted out of the pattern of Bembo's rational lovers … basing love on genuine knowledge, and accepting it not in terms of mad passion but by conscious choice" (Barbara Lewalski, “Love, Appearance, and Reality: Much Ado about Something,” SEL 8 [1968]: 244-45).

4. Some critics do take a different approach. Joyce Hengerer Sexton, for example, in “The Theme of Slander in Much Ado about Nothing and Garter's Susanna,” PQ 54 (1977): 419-33, argues that "Shakespeare was emphasizing not the mechanism of the trap or the feelings of those caught in it, but something else: what slander is. Out of the source material he extracted the ethical issues, bringing to the center of his play a sense of the absoluteness of the evil of slander" (p. 420).

5. Jean E. Howard takes a comparable position in discussing anti-theatrical tracts and the theatrics in Much Ado about Nothing; her attention to the sources also emphasizes the focus on dramatic play. Her reading, however, does not address the relationship between Don John and Don Pedro, between narrative and drama, so much as the theatrical representation of a politics of gender (“Renaissance Antitheatricality and the Politics of Gender and rank in Much Ado about Nothing” in Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology [New York: Methuen, Inc., 1987], pp. 163-87).


7. I take my definition of play from Jean Piaget's Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1960). Piaget sees play in a spectrum of possible relationships between the child and reality; on one end of the spectrum he locates imitative accommodation and on the other end playful assimilation. Dramatic play, as I see it, tends toward an equilibrium between play and imitation as it approaches dramatic work; however, dramatic play remains predominantly assimilative and egocentric.


9. Bertrand Evans, in Shakespeare's Comedies, suggests that this first set of practices allows Shakespeare to demonstrate both the willingness with which the citizens of Messina engage in deception and the ease with which they are taken in by these practices—even by the very ones they are involved in (pp. 70-74). As I see it, the practices of acts 1 and 2 prepare the way for the main action of the plot; however, Shakespeare does not create Don Pedro's little comedy solely to make Hero's slander and its effects more plausible but also to explore the intimate connection between his two player-dramatists.
10. Throughout this essay I refer to Marvin Herrick's book *Comic Theory in the Sixteenth Century* ([U. of Illinois Press, 1964], p. 121) because he catalogues so thoroughly the conventions of comedy from which Shakespeare was working.

11. When he does speak, as Alexander Leggatt notes, her intervention "makes the rightness of Claudio's speech look disconcertingly like the rightness of a wind-up toy. Beatrice is outside the convention, and her perspective provides a comically dislocating effect" (*Shakespeare's Comedies of Love* [London: Chatto & Windus, 1974], p. 154). In orchestrating their betrothal, Don Pedro has contrived a comic ending for Hero and Claudio, but Beatrice, recognizing this influence, challenges his power.


13. Bertrand Evans claims that Shakespeare uses these hints to maintain the audience's awareness of the tragic overtones to these comic practices, but again I feel their purpose extends more particularly to connecting the two brothers (p. 75).

14. Ruth Nevo draws attention to Anne Barton's assertion that Don John is the official enemy of all happy endings when she comments that "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" (*Comic Transformations in Shakespeare* [London: Meuthen & Co., Ltd., 1980], p. 173).

15. Herrick, p. 121.

16. Of the critics who have drawn attention to the courtier's code and its importance in both *Much Ado* and its sources, Barbara Lewalski, in "Love, Appearance and Reality: *Much Ado about Something*," discusses the Renaissance notions of courtiership and their implications for *Much Ado* most thoroughly. She notes quite prominently the equation of dishonor with death in the courtier's code, in part as a defense of Claudio.

17. As Paul and Miriam Mueschke note in "Illusion and Metamorphosis in *Much Ado about Nothing*,“ *SQ* 18 (1967): 53-65, Don John offers several ambiguous hints and slowly reveals Hero's "fraility": "He deliberately tantalizes his victims until their nerves are raw and fear of dishonor is fomented; after their judgment is paralyzed by innuendo, he lures men reft of judgment to an immediate and irrevocable choice between tainted love and undefiled honor” (p. 60).


19. Critics such as Alexander Leggatt notice a shift in style: "Deceiving not only Claudio but Don Pedro as well, he [Don John] produces a decisive shift to a simplified, arbitrary dramatic idiom … The style is stiffly patterned, and the expressions of intent are not only arbitrary but pat and perfunctory. Claudio and Don Pedro are now moving as Don John moves, simply as figures in a story, engaged in conventional roles” (p. 160).

20. As Bullough notes, "It is truly remarkable that Shakespeare does not present the scene in which the hero sees his ‘rival’ climbing to his betrothed's window; for such a scene is found in all the analogues” (p. 78).

21. It is only fitting that comic closure in *Much Ado about Nothing* restores the dramatic play of Don John and Don Pedro. The final scene restages Hero's wedding but demands an act of faith on Claudio's part which rewrites the tragic conclusion of Don John's dramatic play. Moreover, the evidence of Beatrice's and Benedick's writing of their love which forces them to acknowledge their love also restores Don Pedro's dramatic play by making good on the scene of writing which he and his conspirators describe so elaborately.

**Criticism: Themes: Camille Wells Slights (essay date 1993)**


*[In the following essay, Slights asserts that one of the main concerns of *Much Ado about Nothing* is the social nature of language and its relationship to hierarchical social and political power.]*
'and two men ride of a horse, one must ride behind'

(III.v.36-7)

In the first scene of Much Ado About Nothing, when Claudio and Don Pedro make fun of Benedick's use of a conventional verbal formula, Benedick retorts: 'Nay, mock not, mock not. The body of your discourse is sometime guarded with fragments, and the guards are but slightly basted on neither. Ere you flout old ends any further, examine your conscience' (I.i.285-9). When Benedick accuses his friends of guarding their discourse with fragments that are 'but slightly basted on,' his attack is both rhetorical and moral. Assuming the value of elegant language, he claims that Don Pedro and Claudio also resort to 'old ends' of conventional verbal formulas and, moreover, fail to integrate them gracefully into their own language. At the same time, he implies that these 'fragments' that 'guard,' that is, decorate and/or protect, are inauthentic embellishments on the true body of their discourse. The pun registers Benedick's awareness that the rhetorical authority invoked by proverbs, classical allusions, and traditional tropes and figures is a means both of self-display and of self-protection. More significant is the ambivalence towards language implicit in his metaphor. 'Guards' suggests that words are extrinsic to truth, but 'the body of your discourse' acknowledges that words also constitute the meaning that is decorated or hidden. Benedick understands language as the material of the social self, the means by which people present themselves to others, and prides himself on his witty, elegant language. At the same time, he is deeply suspicious of the capacity of language to obscure truth.

Benedick's interest in language and his ambivalent attitude towards it are not individualizing traits but typical of the characters in Much Ado About Nothing. In the opening scene that introduces Shakespeare's Messina, almost all the characters speak with self-conscious artfulness, ranging from the Messenger's rhetorical flourishes to Beatrice and Benedick's exchanges of wit. That the Prince's messenger should speak with elegant formality and the young aristocrats with spirited wit is, of course, entirely decorous; what is striking is the frequency with which characters talk about the problematics of language. The Messenger protests, in a standard rhetorical figure, that he is unable to do justice to Claudio's merits: '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 bett'red expectation than you must expect of me to tell you how' (I.i.13-17). Benedick calls Beatrice 'a rare parrot-teacher' (I.i.138), implying that she speaks meaningless chatter, learned by rote. Beatrice's response—'A bird of my tongue is better than a beast of yours' (I.i.139)—implies that Benedick is sub-human, incapable of rational speech.

These gibes at falling short of a human standard of discourse are based on a conception of language as the distinguishing human trait and as the basis of civilization. These, of course, are Renaissance commonplaces. According to Ben Jonson, for example, 'Speech is the only benefit man hath to express his excellencie of mind above other creatures. It is the Instrument of Society.'1 But if the characters in Much Ado assume that language is the basis of harmonious social relations, they also know that it can be the source of misunderstanding and conflict. Don Pedro, for example, assumes a general skepticism about the identity of tongue and heart when he reports Leonato's invitation to hospitality with the assurance 'I dare swear he is no hypocrite, but prays from his heart' (I.i.150-2). And Benedick assumes a gap between truth and ordinary social discourse when he asks Claudio: 'Do you question me … for my simple true judgment? or would you have me speak after my custom … ?' (I.i.166-9). Conscious of the misunderstandings arising from such ambiguities of tone, Leonato anxiously apologizes for Beatrice's barbed references to Benedick: 'You must not, sir, mistake my niece. There is a kind of merry war betwixt Signior Benedick and her' (I.i.61-3). Claudio, too, as he confides his love for Hero to his friends, is careful to avoid misunderstanding, replying to Benedick: 'Thou thinkest I am in sport. I pray thee tell me truly how thou lik'st her' (I.i.177-8) and tentatively accusing Don Pedro: 'You speak this to fetch me in, my lord' (I.i.223). Similarly Benedick asks Claudio: 'But speak you this with a sad brow? or do you play the flouting Jack … ? Come, in what key shall a man take you to go in the song?' (I.i.182-6).
The characters, then, both distrust and delight in the multivalency of the language they use to engage and to struggle with each other. In addition, as Leonato's concern that the Messenger not misunderstand Beatrice and as Claudio's suspicion that Don Pedro's speech is intended to 'fetch [him] in' indicate, they are also aware that language is inextricably implicated in relationships of power. For example, Leonato's concern with the nuances of social discourse is nicely illustrated in his short exchange with the Messenger. Leonato's first speeches are straightforward and stylistically plain: 'I learn in this letter that Don Pedro of Arragon comes this night to Messina' (I.i.1-2); ‘How many gentlemen have you lost in this action?’ (I.i.5-6). In contrast, the Messenger speaks with elaborate artifice, reporting, for example, of Claudio's uncle: ‘I have already deliver'd 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’ (I.i.20-3). In response, Leonato first anxiously checks whether he has interpreted the metaphor correctly: ‘Did he break out into tears?’ (I.i.24). Then he replies in the same euphuistic style: ‘A kind overflow of kindness. There are no faces truer than those that are so wash'd. How much better is it to weep at joy than to joy at weeping!’ (I.i.26-9).^2 Leonato's eagerness to understand and to speak the language of the court shows not only his use of language to create social bonds, but also his awareness of the ambiguity of language and of its involvement in hierarchies of power.

I have examined what Kier Elam calls metadiscourse in the first scene of Much Ado in order to suggest that the play is centrally concerned with the social nature of language—with the power of language and with language as an articulation of power. The witty repartee, elaborate rhetoric, compliments, accusations, and apologies function as means of social cohesion, establishing relations between people, and simultaneously as expressions of relative power. The Messenger, reporting on the casualties in the recent battle, equates language and power, explaining that Don Pedro's forces lost ‘But few of any sort, and none of name’ (I.i.7). To have a name in Messina is to be recognized as a participant in its power structure; to be powerless is to be nameless.

While all the characters are aware of language as an expression of social and political hierarchy, it is Don John who illustrates most clearly the Renaissance association of speech and sociability. In his popular commentary on Aristotle's Politics, for example, Louis LeRoy explains that men are 'naturally Civill and publicke, that is to say, by their naturall disposition, enclining to live in societie: as it appeareth by Speech, which was in vaine bestowed upon them if they should live solitarily without companie and conversation. And if by chance there be any such monster extant, which by a particular inclination should shun and avoid Civill societie, hee ought to be reputed as most wicked, a lover and stirrer up of warres and seditions …'^4 In the first scene Don John signals his anti-social nature by announcing his laconic style: ‘I am not of many words’ (I.i.157). When he next appears, in private conversation with his companion Conrade, he identifies himself as ‘a plain-dealing villain,’ who, on hearing of an intended marriage, immediately wonders whether it will ‘serve for any model to build mischief on’ (I.iii.32, 46-7). And he explains his rejection of social discourse as an expression of his anti-social nature: ‘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’ (I.iii.13-18). For Don John, adapting to other people is a painful infringement of freedom: ‘I am trusted with a muzzle, and enfranchis'd with a clog, therefore I have decreed not to sing in my cage’ (I.iii.32-4). While Don John's determination ‘not to sing in [his] cage’ is the converse of Benedick's desire to figure out what key Claudio is in so that he can ‘go in the song,’ they are talking about the same thing: the discourse that enables social relationships also controls individual expression.

Beatrice and Benedick, whose verbal battles are clearly power struggles, understand the power of language. Hence Beatrice describes Benedick as ‘too like my lady's eldest son, evermore tattling’ (II.i.9-10), and he calls her ‘my Lady Tongue’ (II.i.275). When Benedick addresses Beatrice as ‘my Lady Tongue’ or ‘Lady Disdain’ (I.118) and when Beatrice renames Benedick ‘Signior Mountanto’ (I.130), they are utilizing the connection between naming and power deeply embedded in Western culture. Adam's ability to name the creatures was interpreted as demonstrating his knowledge of their natures and thus as evidence of his right to dominion over
them. According to most Elizabethan language theorists, Adam's descendants inherited this power collectively: custom, not individual genius, is the basis of language. Thus, the logician Ralph Lever warns, 'no man is of power to change or to make a language when he will.' Beatrice and Benedick, then, by exercising the power to create names, not only try to claim dominion over each other but pretend to an Adam-like independence from social control. Their name-calling and reciprocal accusations of talking too much are significant indications of their understanding of themselves and of each other in relation to society. Beatrice recognizes that, while language is an expression of power, it can also function to create the illusion of power. She suspects Benedick of words without substance. He talks a good war, but she is skeptical about his prowess as a soldier. He is like a child, 'evermore tattling,' not a man of action. He is the 'Prince's fool' (II.i.204), whose verbal wit amuses but does not command respect. He is gregarious and likable, but shallow and fickle: 'he hath every month a new sworn brother' (I.i.72-3). If Don John's taciturnity indicates a monstrous incivility, Beatrice fears that Benedick is too socially compliant. He is 'the Prince's jester,' who becomes 'melancholy' if his jokes are not laughed at (II.i.137, 148).

Even though Beatrice interprets Benedick's loquacity as evidence of unmanly weakness and dependence on social approval, she uses her own verbal dexterity to gain independence in a male dominated society. When Leonato warns her that her shrewish tongue will prevent her from getting a husband, she protests that spinsterhood is a blessing. She does not want a husband, she tells her uncle, 'till God make men of some other mettle than earth. Would it not grieve a woman to be overcome'd 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 kinred' (II.i.59-65). Beatrice's witty speech defines a genuine dilemma: her society urges her to marry but structures marriage so that she must submit to a master whose superiority she does not admit. Men are not made of a different clay, but of the same stuff as she. More specifically, she complains, a man such as Don John 'says nothing' (II.i.8), while Benedick talks too much. Beatrice, then, must either subordinate herself to an equal, or, as she jokingly suggests to Don Pedro, marry her social, though not her sexual, superior. And that alternative she rejects on the grounds that 'Your Grace is too costly to wear every day' (II.i.328-9). Beatrice, then, is aware of the coercive power of the hierarchical society, but instead of responding with Don John's sullen resentment, she exploits the gap between literal and actual meaning to mock masculine pretensions without offending the victims of her wit: 'But I beseech your Grace pardon me,' she apologizes gracefully, 'I was born to speak all mirth and no matter' (II.i.329-30).

Like Beatrice, Benedick warns his listeners against interpreting his wit literally, and in his customary role as 'a profess'd tyrant to their sex' (I.i.168-9) condemns women in general and Beatrice in particular. While Beatrice interprets Benedick's talkativeness as an unmanly substitution of words for deeds, Benedick condemns hers for its intimidating power: 'She speaks poniards, and every word stabs … I would not marry her, though she were endow'd with all that Adam had left him before he transgress'd. She would have made Hercules have turn'd spit, yea, and have cleft his club to make the fire too' (II.i.247-54). By characterizing Beatrice's discourse as emasculating aggression, Benedick accuses her of inverting the hierarchy of the sexes. His antipathy is not limited to 'my Lady Tongue' but includes all women, basically because a woman's word cannot be trusted. 'Because I will not do them the wrong to mistrust any,' he declares, 'I will do myself the right to trust none' (I.i.242-4). Benedick, of course, is voicing traditional attitudes. If the talkative woman is a rebel against the orthodox sexual hierarchy, she is also a recognizable cultural stereotype—the shrew. Similarly, the association of women with duplicity is inscribed clearly in Western culture at least since the story of Eve's tempting Adam to eat the apple. In this misogynistic tradition, the charge of female duplicity usually is associated with sexual promiscuity. Certainly Benedick's mistrust of women is essentially skepticism about their sexual fidelity. He invariably associates marriage with cuckoldry. 'Cuckoo' is a word that strikes terror into the heart of the bachelor Benedick, not so much because he fears personal betrayal, as because he imagines vividly the public shame of being labeled a cuckold. If he should ever submit to marriage, he tells his friends, they are entitled to: 'pluck off the bull's horns, and set them in my forehead, and...
let me be vildly 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” (I.i.263-8).

Beatrice and Benedick, then, epitomize the ambivalence towards language endemic to their society. Like the other inhabitants of Messina, they use language to create engaging social presences with which to establish relations with other people and also to protect and distance themselves from others. They delight in wordplay and admire people, as Benedick says of the ideal woman, ‘of good discourse’ (II.iii.33-4); at the same time they are skeptical of the veridical force of language and fear its powers of deception and coercion. And they associate these dangers with gender and with sexual relationships. Benedick's cuckoldry jokes echo Leonato's. In the first scene, when Don Pedro politely remarks, ‘I think this is your daughter,’ Leonato responds, ‘Her mother hath many times told me so’ (I.i.104-5). And Beatrice's accusation ‘He wears his faith but as the fashion of his hat’ (I.i.75-6) applies to Benedick the generalized sentiments of Balthasar's song: ‘Men were deceivers ever … To one thing constant never’ (II.iii.63-5).

By the fashion in which they guard their own and criticize the other's discourse, Benedick and Beatrice make evident the contradictions inherent in their culture's definition of marriage. It is the expected norm of social behavior, encouraged by figures of authority like Leonato and Don Pedro. But it requires women to subordinate themselves to fallen Adam's sons, prone to deception and inconstancy, and requires men to entrust their honor to untrustworthy women. These contradictions are brought to a crisis by Don John's plot to disrupt the marriage of Claudio and Hero by accusing Hero of infidelity.

The deception responsible for Hero's disgrace is a verbal construct. As Borachio confesses, it was done ‘partly by [Don John's] oaths … but chiefly by my villainy, which did confirm any slander that Don John had made’ (III.iii.156-9). The slander consists of and is nourished by the attitudes encoded in the cultural discourse. The association of female speech with sexual promiscuity underlies the charge against Hero—that she did ‘Talk with a ruffian at her chamber-window’ (IV.i.91). And the stereotype of female duplicity makes the charge credible and prevents her from defending herself. Everything she says is used against her literally. Her denial—‘I talk'd with no man at that hour, my lord’—convicts her: ‘Why then you are no maiden’ (IV.i.86-7). By denying that Hero's speech has any relation to truth, the male authorities—her betrothed husband, her father, and her ruler—try to destroy her. Claudio tells her that the purpose of his accusations is ‘To make you answer truly to your name’ and insists that her name itself is proof of her guilt: ‘Hero itself can blot out Hero's virtue’ (IV.i.79, 82). Dehumanized by being deprived of language, Hero to her father's eyes becomes not a speaking subject but the objectified printed text of the story Claudio has told: ‘the story that is printed in her blood’ (IV.i.122). And so Leonato mourns that:

she is fall'n

Into a pit of ink, that the wide sea
Hath drops too few to wash her clean again.

(IV.i.139-41)

Hero's helplessness under this bewildering attack is total because not only is she effectively silenced but no one speaks to defend her. Beatrice never doubts her cousin's innocence, but she remains silent. Her distrust of glibness has become disdain for language as a tool of feminine weakness. She is contemptuous of men who substitute words for physical force: ‘men are only turn'd into tongue … He is now as valiant as Hercules that only tells a lie, and swears it’ (IV.i.320-2). Her strongest wish is to be a man who could avenge her wronged cousin's honor, and her only strategy for fighting the injustice is to persuade Benedick to kill Claudio. Beatrice, who earlier claimed to be the equal of any man, shows that she is controlled by the patriarchal values of her society when she despairs: ‘I cannot be a man with wishing, therefore I will die a woman with grieving’ (IV.i.322-3).
If Beatrice has been co-opted by the collective prejudices of her culture, Hero's other potential defenders, her father and her lover, have also been colonized quite literally. Although most critics who comment at all on the setting of Much Ado perfunctorily characterize it as a sophisticated, courtly world, the most significant fact about Messina is that it is an Italian city-state ruled by Spain. Leonato, the Governor of Messina, is subject to the authority of Don Pedro, Prince of Arragon. In Shakespeare's source for the Hero and Claudio story, Bandello's Novella 22, the relations between the natives of Messina and their Spanish rulers provide a framework for the plot. Bandello begins by describing the political context of his story:

During the year of Grace mcclxxxiii the Sicilians, no longer able to endure French domination, rose one day of the hour of Vespers and with unheard of savagery murdered all the French in Sicily—for so it was treacherously concerted throughout the island. Nor did they massacre only the men and women of the French nation, but on that day slew all Sicilian women who could be suspected of being pregnant by Frenchmen … whence arose the melancholy fame of the ‘Sicilian Vespers.’ King Piero of Arragon hearing of this came quickly thither with his army, and made himself lord of the Island.

In the happy ending, after the calumniated heroine has been exonerated, Bandello emphasizes the integration of the Sicilian and the Spanish nobility. King Piero provides the heroine's dowry as if she were his own daughter and gives her father an honorable office in Messina. In the final paragraph, Bandello links the story to contemporary political circumstances by praising the political and military deeds of descendants of Sir Timbreo of Cardona, who 'was the first who in Sicily founded the noble race of the lords of the House of Cardona, of which there live today both in Sicily and in the Kingdom of Naples many men of no little esteem. In Spain also flourishes the noble breed of Cardona, producing men who do no shame to their ancestors both in arms and in the senate' (2:134). In Bandello's narrative, Messina welcomes King Piero's victory, but there are tensions between the citizens of Messina and their Spanish rulers. Sir Timbreo (the Claudio figure) first tries to seduce Fenecia (the Hero figure), the daughter of a poor Messinese nobleman. Only when Fenecia virtuously rejects him does Timbreo decide to marry her, 'although he thought that he was demeaning himself by so doing' (2:113). When Timbreo is duped into believing that Fenecia is unchaste, her father assumes that his accusations are an excuse not to marry a woman who is his inferior in wealth and rank.

In Shakespeare's version, the historical details are vague (we do not know the year or the enemy in the recent battle), but the setting and political structure are insistently clear. The repetition of the name 'Messina' four times in the first few minutes of dialogue (I.i.2, 18, 39, 114) alerts us that the action takes place in a remote provincial city ruled by Spanish overlords. The epithets 'Don,' for the Prince of Arragon and his brother, and 'Signior,' applied consistently to the Italians, are frequent reminders of the political situation. As in Bandello, the relations between the Spanish and the Messinese are cordial. Indeed, in Much Ado, although the Sicilian setting is a reminder of the infamous Sicilian Vespers and the potential for violence in the colonial enterprise, the emphasis is on the Italians' eager acquiescence to Spanish domination. While Sir Timbreo is Spanish, Claudio and Benedick are Italian followers of the Spanish Prince. Leonato, a native of Messina, is delighted when he hears the rumor that the foreign ruler intends to court his daughter and apparently just as pleased to accept the son-in-law that Don Pedro actually proposes to him. Equally as significant as the Italians' deference to Don Pedro is the ruling Spaniards' control of Messinese society. In Bandello, a Messinese nobleman approaches Leonato on Sir Timbreo's behalf, and King Piero figures only as the authority who rewards the virtuous at the end of the story. The plot to discredit Fenecia originates in sexual jealousy: a Messinese nobleman in love with Fenecia deceives Sir Timbreo in hopes of winning her after Timbreo renounces her. In Much Ado, of course, Don Pedro himself is the matchmaker, and Don John is responsible for the slander. Hero is not the primary object of the plot but an expendable casualty in the murky hostility between the two Spanish princes.

The control of society by a colonial authority is dramatized in the first scene by Don Pedro's appropriation of Claudio's discourse. As soon as they are alone, Claudio begins to tell Don Pedro of his love for Hero. Don
Pedro cuts him short, mocking his bookish wordiness:

Thou wilt be like a lover presently,  
And tire the hearer with a book of words.  
If thou dost 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?

(I.i.306-11)

Overriding Claudio's protest that his love requires ‘a longer treatise’ (I.i.315), Don Pedro plans to disguise himself as Claudio and to woo Hero in his stead, promising to

take her hearing prisoner with the force  
And strong encounter of my amorous tale.

(I.i.324-5)

Don Pedro insists on being the author of Claudio's story and has no doubts about the effectiveness of the tale he will tell.

Don Pedro's control of social discourse results from the deference paid to his political power and serves as a means of exercising and maintaining that power. Controlling language is an effective way of controlling the people who use it. After arranging Claudio's marriage with his consent, Don Pedro decides to make a match between Beatrice and Benedick without their knowledge. This time, instead of speaking for someone else, he directs the speech of others, teaching Hero, Leonato, and Claudio what to say. Although Don Pedro uses his power altruistically, the misunderstanding when Benedick and Claudio think that Don Pedro has courted Hero for himself warns of the dangers inherent in being appropriated into someone else's discourse.

These dangers are realized in Don John's plot. As Borachio outlines the plan, its object is to convince Don Pedro that ‘he hath wrong'd his honor’ (II.i.23) by arranging Claudio's marriage to Hero. When Claudio was told that Don Pedro had betrayed him, he suffered passively and privately, and the mistake was easily corrected. When he is told that Hero is unchaste, he reacts to the dishonor to his Prince as well as to himself and immediately plans Hero's public disgrace. Instead of coming to nothing as had the previous deceptions and misunderstandings, the slander of Hero has serious consequences, partly, as I have already argued, because of the presuppositions about Hero as a woman, and partly because of political relationships. Claudio feels his first loyalty to Don Pedro, not to Hero and not to Leonato. In this situation, Don Pedro can assert his power and vindicate his honor without needing to speak or even to direct Claudio how to speak; he can rely on Claudio, who identifies his own interests with those of his Prince, to speak for him.

Even Leonato, who in Bandello's story defends his daughter, in Much Ado makes common cause with Hero's accusers. At the beginning of the wedding scene, he is a proud father whose only child is marrying a nobleman in an alliance arranged and blessed by the Prince himself. His sense of patriarchal authority is expressed in his assumption of control over language. He opens the scene peremptorily: ‘Come, Friar Francis, be brief—only to the plain form of marriage …’ (IV.i.1-2). When Claudio answers ‘No’ to the friar's first question—‘You come hither, my lord, to marry this lady’—Leonato presumes to interpret Claudio by criticizing the friar's diction: ‘To be married to her. Friar, you come to marry her’ (I.i.4-8). And when the friar asks Claudio whether he knows of any impediment to the marriage, Leonato interrupts: ‘I dare make his answer, none’ (IV.i.18). But when Claudio savagely denounces Hero, Leonato's expansive confidence collapses, and he appeals to Don Pedro: ‘Sweet Prince, why speak not you?’ (IV.i.63). And when Don Pedro pronounces Hero guilty, Leonato accepts his word. Denying that ‘the two princes’ (IV.i.152) and Claudio
would lie, he laments the outrage to his honor and wishes for his daughter's death.

Hero's disgrace, then, exposes problems already present in Messinese society. The conventional rhetoric of Claudio's denunciation associates Hero's supposed wantonness with the stereotype of female duplicity and sensuality:

\[
\text{You seem to me as Dian in her orb,} \\
\text{As chaste as is the bud ere it be blown;} \\
\text{But you are more intemperate in your blood} \\
\text{Than Venus, or those pamp'red animals} \\
\text{That rage in savage sensuality.}
\]

(IV.i.57-61)

And the cruelty of Don Pedro and Claudio justifies Beatrice's disdain and fear of established authority. ‘Princes and counties!’ she exclaims with sarcastic contempt. ‘Surely a princely testimony, a goodly count, Count Comfect, a sweet gallant surely!’ (IV.i.315-17). At the same time, the characters' distrust of language intensifies. Claudio's outrage is directed as much at Hero's deceitfulness as at her sexual misconduct, and Beatrice is overwhelmed by the power of the ‘public accusation’ and ‘uncover'd slander’ (IV.i.305) that have dishonored her cousin.

If events in the church seem to confirm the characters' worst fears, to the audience aware of their source in lies and deception the scene is an even more devastating critique of social discourse. Language, which according to Renaissance theory should bind people together in a civilized community, is portrayed as an unreliable guide to truth and a powerful instrument of coercion. The citizens of Messina, by speaking with the collective voice of their patriarchal culture and by articulating the desires of their foreign ruler, have lost the authority to order their own lives. Just how deeply encoded in language are the relationships of dominance and submission becomes clear when Leonato, finally persuaded of Hero's innocence, accosts Claudio and Don Pedro. Although Leonato shows contempt for Claudio by calling him 'boy' and using the familiar 'thou' form of the pronoun (V.i.79), he calls Don Pedro 'my lord' and continues to observe the pronominal convention by addressing him respectfully as 'you' (V.i.48). During this encounter, Don Pedro condescends to Leonato as an 'old man' (V.i.49-50, 73) and brushes him aside: 'I will not hear you' (V.i.107). As soon as Leonato and his brother withdraw, Don Pedro joins Claudio in laughing at their impotent rage.

This dramatic representation of sovereign political authority as a callow young man mocking the ineffectual anguish of a subject obviously provokes a critical attitude toward the uses of power. Just as obviously, as I have tried to trace Shakespeare's portrayal of the role of language in the dynamics of power, my own rhetoric has become misleading. Talk about the dangers of colonialist verbal appropriation comes out of twentieth-century, not sixteenth-century, discourse.14 Shakespeare's contemporaries recognized the threat of foreign domination, and Shakespeare was aware, as was Francis Bacon when he analyzed the idols of the market place, that language is implicated in dangerous confusions of thought. But Shakespeare's Messina is not an Orwellian image of thought-control, and Much Ado About Nothing is not propaganda for a Sicilian liberation movement. Like the other comedies, Much Ado celebrates human community and the cohesive power of language even as it exposes dangers inherent in both. The pathos of Hero's disgrace and Leonato's grief is contained by knowledge that Dogberry and his friends are on the way to deliver Borachio's sworn statement that will reveal the truth.

Language, which creates the crisis, also resolves it. The collective nature of social discourse, which makes it a powerful coercive force to frighten Benedick with the name of cuckold and to drive the disgraced Hero from society, also limits authoritative control. In Mikhail Bakhtin's terms, language is a heteroglossia, an unsystematic collection of the voices of diverse social groups that guarantees the dispersion of creative authorship and authority throughout society.15 In addition, the inherent imprecision and fluidity of language
create spaces where unknown and unofficial truths can emerge. The diversity of social discourse and the polysemic fluidity of language, its capacity for irony and resonant ambiguity as well as misunderstanding and deception, prevent total control of the community by any univocal authority.

I have already noted one form of this verbal creativity in Beatrice's parodies of hierarchical power: when, for example, she tells Don Pedro that he is ‘too costly to wear every day’ (II.i.328-9), or when she instructs Hero how to deal with patriarchal authority in selecting a husband: ‘it is my cousin's duty to make cur'sy and say, “Father, as it please you.” 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”’ (II.i.52-6). The plot to trick Beatrice and Benedick into love enacts more fully the benign results of the multivalency of social discourse. Not only are the staged conversations fictions created to deceive their unwitting audiences, they are cooperative efforts that depend for their success on their listeners' susceptibility to other voices. Beatrice and Benedick are able to fall in love because they trust their friends' praise of the other's merits, because they believe their friends' report that they are loved by the other, and because they accept their friends' accusations that their own speech misrepresents the truth. The possibility of verbal ambiguity, moreover, allows their love to flourish—a potential exploited most delightfully perhaps in Benedick's imaginative deconstruction of Beatrice's invitation to dinner: ‘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”’ (II.iii.257-62).

Just as Benedick's discovery of double meanings in Beatrice's words allows him to requite the love he finds there, misunderstandings and ambiguities contribute to Hero's vindication. Midway through the scene of the interrupted wedding, Friar Francis announces his belief in Hero's innocence. ‘By noting of the lady,’ he explains, he has ‘mark'd’ (IV.i.158), as evidence of her innocence, the blushes that Claudio had interpreted as a sign of ‘guiltiness, not modesty’ (IV.i.42). The friar presents his ‘noting’ and ‘marking’ as at once a reading of ambiguous signs and as a writing, with himself as an author of more credible authority than Claudio:

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.

(IV.i.165-70; italics added)

He then counsels Leonato to hide Hero away and ‘publish it that she is dead indeed’ (IV.i.204).

The friar's book, of course, is only partly accurate. When the news of Hero's death is published, Claudio does not feel remorse or regret for his lost love as predicted. But the fiction is also intended for the community as a whole, and in that object the plan succeeds. When the watchmen tell the sexton about the plot to slander Hero, he believes them because their account fits the facts as he knows them: ‘Hero was in this manner accus'd, in this very manner refus'd, and upon the grief of this suddenly died’ (IV.ii.61-3). The line from Borachio's confession of his part in the plot to the full revelation of the truth is hilariously circuitous. In his drunken ramblings, Borachio deplores men's subservience to social conventions and fads, exclaiming on ‘what a deformed thief this fashion is’ (III.iii.124). The watch who overhear him are more concerned to arrest the notorious thief named Deformed than to reveal Don John's treachery. Master Constable Dogberry, hearing the accusation against Don John, is indignant: ‘Why, this is flat perjury, to call a prince's brother villain’ (IV.ii.41-2). But eventually, through the attempt to apprehend the thief Deformed and to record the full extent of the ‘perjury’ against Don John, Borachio's story is told. By repudiating Hero publicly, Claudio and Don Pedro involve the whole community that includes the friar, Dogberry and the watch, Borachio, and the sexton. Social discourse, then, in addition to courtly formality and sophisticated wit, includes the friar's fiction,
Borachio's drunken ramblings, Dogberry's malapropisms and homely aphorisms, and the sexton's conscientious recording of the testimony of the watch. Out of this strange mixture, truth emerges. Significantly, the society that in the beginning of the play counted only those 'of name' is saved by its most despised members, most effectively by the efforts of a nameless sexton.

The power of Don Pedro's authoritative discourse, then, is limited, as Dogberry understands in his own muddled way. Instructing the watchmen in their duties, he tells them: 'This is your charge: ... you are to bid any man stand, in the Prince's name' (III.iii.24-6), but, he continues, if the culprit will not stand: 'Why then take no note of him, but let him go ... and thank God you are rid of a knave' (III.iii.28-30). They should, for example, 'call at all the alehouses, and bid those that are drunk get them to bed' (III.iii.42-3), but if the drunks decline to obey, Dogberry's advice is to 'let them alone till they are sober' (III.iii.45-6). What Dogberry recognizes is the futility of attempting to impose control over those who do not accept your authority. Or, as he explains, as representatives of 'the Prince's own person' (III.iii.75), the watch are empowered to detain any man at all, even the Prince himself, but in practice they can stop the Prince only if 'the Prince be willing, for indeed the watch ought to offend no man, and it is an offense to stay a man against his will' (80-2). Although originally it seemed that Don Pedro and the collective values of society constituted authority in Messina and that Don Pedro would compose the 'amorous tale' of Claudio and Hero, it has emerged that Don John, rejecting that authority, has told another story. As Ursula tells Beatrice, 'Don John is the author of all' (V.ii.98-9). With the attribution of authorship comes responsibility. Don John is held accountable, and Hero is vindicated.

Hero's vindication is also a vindication of language. While her name is blackened, words seem useless. Leonato rejects Antonio's consolatory advice as hollow:

Can counsel and speak comfort to that grief
Which they themselves not feel, but tasting it,
Their counsel turns to passion, which before
Would ...
Charm ache with air, and agony with words.

(V.i.20-6)

If speech is only air to Leonato in his grief, the written word is equally powerless:

For there was never yet philosopher
That could endure the toothache patiently,
However they have writ the style of gods.

(V.i.35-7)

Yet before the scene is over, Borachio's confession testifies to the power of words: 'My villainy they have upon record, which I had rather seal with my death than repeat over to my shame' (239-41). And Don Pedro and Claudio understand that power: 'D. Pedro. Runs not this speech like iron through your blood? Claud. I have drunk poison whiles he utter'd it' (V.i.244-6).

 Appropriately, the reparation that Don Pedro and Claudio must make for the damage their words have done is verbal. 'I cannot bid you bid my daughter live—/ That were impossible,' Leonato says,

Possess the people in Messina here
How innocent she died, and if your love
Can labor aught in sad invention,
Hang her an epitaph upon her tomb,
And sing it to her bones, sing it to-night.

(V.i.279-85)

Human language is not omnipotent—it cannot resurrect the dead—but it is, in Jonson's phrase, ‘the instrument of Society’ that can restore Hero's good name in the community, her life in society. To object, as critics have done, that Claudio's observances at Hero's tomb seem too formal and conventional to express love and remorse convincingly is, I think, to miss the point. Events have demonstrated the radical uncertainty of individual perceptions, which are inextricably involved in cultural codes and conventions and susceptible to ignorance and error. This treacherous instability can be controlled at least partially by the openness and permanence of communal and written forms of discourse. By writing an epitaph and participating in a communal ritual, Claudio gives formal shape to his obligations to Hero, demonstrating not intense romantic feeling but commitment and responsibility. The necessary complement to Claudio's epitaph is the song that Balthasar, as representative of the social group, sings, asking forgiveness for Hero's detractors.

*Much Ado About Nothing* achieves its happy ending not by resolving conflicts and coming to rest on a harmonious major chord but by dramatizing a dynamic tension between impulses towards freedom and towards responsibility and order. While social discourse constitutes an unavoidable, arbitrary authority, its diversity and multivalency also limit its power to enforce conformity. If the slipperiness of language exerts a centrifugal force that threatens social cohesion, the written word and the collective nature of language provide a measure of stability. When Benedick and Beatrice would disclaim their love, they are protected from their own skittishness through the efforts of their friends and the stabilizing power of the written word. Their friends produce sonnets each has written as evidence of their mutual love. Beatrice and Benedick fall in love in the terms available in their culture, but they continue to resist the rigidifying, coercive force of linguistic formulas and cultural norms. Benedick, the dedicated bachelor, decides to accept the yoke of marriage, but he speaks of his decision as defying rather than conforming to social expectations and conceives of marriage in terms of change rather than permanence: ‘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.105-9). He acknowledges authorship of his ‘halting sonnet’ (V.iv.87) as evidence of his love for Beatrice, but he knows that the conventional love sonnet is not his style. As he tells Beatrice, they are ‘too wise to woo peaceably’ (V.ii.72), and the linguistic forms appropriate to them are the destabilizing ones of parody, ambiguity, irony, and paradox. They first declare their love in language that is a triumph of ambiguity: ‘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 lov'd nothing so well as you, but believe me not; and yet I lie not: I confess nothing, nor I deny nothing’ (IV.i.267-72). In the last scene, they reaffirm their love in language that denies it: ‘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’ (V.iv.92-7). And Benedick's last word on marriage is a mock encomium of cuckoldry: ‘Prince, ... get thee a wife. There is no staff more reverent than one tipp'd with horn’ (V.iv.122-4). Benedick's paradoxical valuing of the cuckold's horn over the staff of office does not constitute a rejection of political authority or of male dominance, but his playful, ironic language acknowledges the contingency of both authorities.

Claudio and Hero do not speak with the ironic wit of Beatrice and Benedick, but their marriage too embodies a tension between acceptance and defiance of social hierarchy. Claudio's acceptance of an unknown and unseen bride from Leonato revises the form of the earlier betrothal by asserting Leonato's authority at the expense of Don Pedro's. This modification of the way the political hierarchy functions is not, of course, a repudiation of Spanish hegemony any more than Benedick's encomium of cuckoldry is a repudiation of male dominance. But both gestures imply limits to hierarchical power.
**Much Ado About Nothing** is not an attack on the principle of hierarchy, but it does reveal hierarchical structures as often arbitrary, contradictory, dangerous, and irrelevant. In one of the ‘old ends’ with which he guards his discourse, Dogberry suggests that hierarchy is unavoidable: ‘and two men ride of a horse, one must ride behind’ (III.v.36-7). But Dogberry has also suggested the theory that political authority governs by the consent of the governed: ‘it is an offense to stay a man against his will’ (III.iii.81-2). The ordering, centralizing language of official hierarchy is only one of the competing voices heard in Messina. No one defies Don Pedro's authority at the end of the play, but no one listens to him much either. Whereas Bandello's story of the slandered bride moves from an account of the violent overthrow of a political authority to a description of the integration of the rulers with the ruled, Shakespeare's moves from a dramatization of excessive deference to political authority to a kind of marginalization of that authority. At the end of the play Don Pedro is addressed respectfully as Prince, but his voice is only one among many and a relatively minor one at that. After discovering that he has been repeating slanders authored by Don John, Don Pedro is noticeably chastened and silent, but his experience is only an especially humiliating version of the common one. Even Don John is not in fact ‘the author of all’ as alleged: Borachio invents the story he tells. In one sense, all the characters in *Much Ado* are ‘parrot-teachers.’ Their speech is made up of old ends of common linguistic usages, rhetorical conventions, and social customs that compose an authorless discourse which they have only the illusion of creating and controlling. But there is another sense in which they are all authors, who, out of the ambiguous, polysemic fluidity of social discourse, create the texts of themselves and, through their dialogues with each other, authorize their society.

**Notes**

2. Brian Vickers points out that Leonato creates his effect by using an image, a polyptoton, and an antimetabole; *The Artistry of Shakespeare’s Prose* (London: Methuen, 1968), 174.
3. ‘Language used to comment directly on language itself is generally know[n] as metalanguage … And by analogy, a use of language which in turn frames, or “goes beyond”, language in use can be termed metadiscourse.’ Kier Elam, *Shakespeare's Universe of Discourse: Language-Games in the Comedies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 19.


Although such notable Elizabethan tourists as Thomas Coryat and Fynes Moryson did not go to Sicily, George Sandys stopped there on his return from the Levant in 1611. His account emphasizes the violent history of foreign control and contemporary colonial status: ‘… at length Clement the fourth did give it from Conradine, unto Charles of Aniou the French Kings brother; betraying him [Conrad] to the slaughter, who was overcome neare Naples in a mortall battell, and his head stricken off by Clements appointment. So fell the Germans, and so rise the French men to the Kingdome of Naples and both the Sicilias. But here some seventeene yeares after they were bid to a bitter banquet: al slaine at the tole of a bell throughout the whole Iland, which is called to this day the Sicilian Even-song. A just reward (if justice will countenance so bloudy a designe) for their intollerable insolencies … Don Pedro King of Aragon, had married Constantia the onely daughter of Manfroy. In whose right (although Manfroy was a bastard, a parricide, and usuper) he entred Sicilia in this tumult whereunto he was privy, and was crowned King with the general consent of the Sicilians: it continuing in the house of Aragon, untill united to Castile. So it remaineth subject unto Spaine … They [the Sicilians] have their commodities fetch from them by forrainers, and withall the profit … The chiefe of the ancient Sicilain Nobility attend in the Court of Spaine: a course of life, rather politickly commanded, then elected’ (237-8).

In Messina, Sandys was most struck by the Spanish influence and by the violence of the society: ‘The better sort are Spanish in attire … The Gentlemen put their monies into the common table, “for which the Ctie stands bound” and receive it againe upon their bils, according to their uses. For they dare not venture to keepe in their houses, so ordinarily broken open by theves (as are the shops and ware-houses) for all their crosse-bard windowes, iron doores, locks, bolts, and barres on the inside: wherein, and in their private revenges, no night doth passe without murder … The Duke of Osuna their new Vice-roy, was here daily expected; for whom a sumptuous landing place was made …’ (245-6). George Sandys, A Relation of a Journey begun An: Dom: 1610 (London, 1615).

13. In all other versions of the story, a rival lover is responsible for the slander. See Charles T. Prouty, The Sources of ‘Much Ado About Nothing’ (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), 34.


16. Carl Dennis points out that the deception successfully appeals to Benedick and Beatrice's social natures: ‘They want to fulfill the values of their community’ (228). See ‘Wit and Wisdom in *Much Ado About Nothing*,’ *Studies in English Literature*, 13 (1973), 223-37.

17. Joyce Hengerer Sexton observes that the emphasis on publicizing the truth about Hero in the denouement represents a significant divergence from the sources and analogues; see ‘The Theme of Slander in *Much Ado About Nothing*,’ *Philological Quarterly*, 54 (1975), 423, 428.


**Criticism: Themes: Nova Myhill (essay date 1999)**


[In the following essay, Myhill observes that *Much Ado about Nothing* is centrally concerned with the problems related to knowledge and perception, and argues that the depiction in the play of numerous deceptions highlights Shakespeare's methodology for creating different modes of interpretation.]

In the past twenty years, a great deal of criticism has focused on concerns about appearances in the early modern period, particularly in terms of ‘self-fashioning’;¹ in this article, I want to look at the other side of this issue: the fashioning not of the self but of others through theatrical display. The debate over the stage in early modern England was also a debate over the ways in which audiences perceived and were affected by spectacles. This debate, at its most polemical, led the theater's detractors to claim that audiences would “learne howe … to beguyle, howe to betraye … howe to murther, howe to poysone, howe to disobey and rebell against Princes,” and its supporters to claim the theater “teach[es] the subjects obedience to their King … shew[s] the people the untimely ends of such as have moved tumults, commotions and insurrections … present[s] them with the flourishing estate of such as live in obedience, exhorting them to allegeance, dehorting them from all trayterous and fellonious stratagems.”² These claims can easily be applied to the same plays; the “trayterous and fellonious stratagems” that Thomas Heywood claims the theater teaches its audience members to avoid are the same as those John Northbrooke claims it teaches them to perform. But playwrights recognized the power of the audience over the play as well as the converse that so agitated the theater's opponents.

For the antitheatrical tracts of the 1580s, the threatening power of the stage lies in the inevitable interpretive failure of its audience—‘in the way in which “straunge sortes of melody … costly apparel … effeminate gestures … and wanton speache … by the privie entries of the eare, slip downe into the hart, and … gaule the minde, where reason and vertue should rule the roste.”’³ Playwrights seem to have shared the antitheatrical writers' interest in, though not their despair of, the ways in which their audiences perceived spectacles. *Much Ado about Nothing* is centrally concerned with problems of knowledge and perception. The representation of multiple deceptions reveals a mechanism of creating methods of interpretation—the process by which narratives ensure particular readings of spectacles, at times in the face of other equally possible interpretations. The theater audience's assumption of its own privileged position as eavesdropper is undercut by the frequency with which the play's characters are deceived by their assumptions that eavesdropping offers unproblematic access to truth.⁴
When Claudio denounces Hero at their abortive wedding, he asks as a means of confirming his accusation, “Leonato, stand I here? / Is this the prince? Is this the prince's brother? / Is this face Hero's? Are our eyes our own?” If, as Leonato admits, “All this is so,” then Hero is guilty of seeming unchastity and Claudio's denunciation and repudiation of her is acceptable within the social framework of the play (IV.i.66). But Leonato is wrong; all of this is not so. In supposing that our eyes are our own in the same unarguable way that he “stand[s] here,” Claudio implies that only one interpretation of a spectacle is possible—a position the play is at some pains to dispute. Claudio sees Hero's face, but it is not the same face he saw the previous night at Hero's window because, in the deception of Claudio and Don Pedro, their eyes are extensions of Don John's vision, not their own. Moreover, the theater audience is denied direct access to the pivotal moments in Don Pedro and Claudio's courtship of Hero—Don Pedro's wooing of her at the masked ball and the scene of Margaret and Borachio at Hero's window—and instead must cope with multiple and contradictory narratives it can only measure against each other. In its dependence on frequently false narratives, the theater audience also sees with eyes that are not its own.

From the first scene, Much Ado presents a world of differing interpretations which cannot be reconciled. Claudio says of Hero that “In mine eye, she is the sweetest lady that ever I looked on,” but Benedick “can see yet without spectacles, and [sees] no such matter” (I.i.139-40). While a difference in taste does not indicate a fundamental difference in perception, this emphasis on sight reappears throughout the play in describing the assumptions that characters bring to their observations. When Don Pedro asks Claudio about his feelings for Hero, Claudio answers that he “looked upon her with a soldier's eye” (I.i.224) before he went to the wars, but now 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.i.227-31)

The way Claudio saw Hero before he went to war and the way he sees her at the start of the play seem to differ only situationally. In attributing his new view of Hero to the promptings of his “delicate desires,” which seem to function independently from the “me” they prompt, Claudio defines his vision as involuntary and unquestionable. Benedick marvels at Claudio's new way of seeing, wondering “may I be so converted and see with these eyes?” (II.iii.18). Eyes in Much Ado are not what one sees with, but what one sees through—the filters that lead characters to see people in particular, conventionalized ways. At the play's end, Leonato claims that Benedick has “the sight” of his “eye of love … from me, / From Claudio and the prince,” and that Beatrice's “eye of favor” for Benedick “my daughter lent her” through the false narratives of each other's passion that Beatrice and Benedick overhear (V. iv. 23-6). This essay examines how characters in the play come to “see with these eyes.”

The possibility that spectacles can “convert” their audiences against their wills is the basis of a persistent anxiety in antitheatrical writing. In Playes Confuted in Five Actions (1582), Stephen Gosson warns that “as long as we know ourselves to be fleshy, beholding those examples in Theaters that are incident to flesh, we are taught by other men's examples how to fall. And they that came honest to a play may depart infected.” The language of infection, which appears frequently in antitheatrical writings, implies an audience helpless to avoid the influence of the plays. Gosson's final “action” of Playes Confuted is a discussion of “eye Effects yt this poyson works among us … These outward spectacles effeminate and soften ye heart of men, vice is learned in beholding, sense is tickled, desire pricked, & those impressions of mind are secretly conveyed over to ye gazers, which ye players do counterfeit on ye stage.” He describes these “effects” as entirely outside the playgoers' control. In his example of the effect of Bacchus's seduction of Ariadne on its spectators, Gosson claims that the audience reproduces what it sees: “when Bacchus rose up … the beholders rose up … when
they sware, the company sware … when they departed to bedde; the company presently was set on fire, they
that were married posted home to their wiues; they that were single vowed very solemnly to be wedded.”

While the first set of imitations, rising up and swearing, are physically identical—imitation in the simplest and
most literal sense—the second set involves a replication of the mental state, not the physical. “Vow[ing] very
solemly to be wedded” is not the same thing as having sex, but in this context it suggests that the effect of
seeing Bacchus and Ariadne was to compel the audience to replicate not the physical action of seduction, but
the mental state that enabled this action.

Gosson's example suggests that “we” will all have no choice but to learn from the same examples. His
formulation implies a stable relationship between spectator and spectacle, in which the spectator is always at
the mercy of his (for Gosson's spectator is always male) involuntary responses. But John Northbrooke, in the
earliest pamphlet directed specifically against the London public theaters, recognizes what Gosson attempts to
deny—that members of the theater audience are simultaneously spectators and spectacles, and vulnerable on
both accounts. His anxieties about female theateregoers stem from their positions as spectacles for and
spectators of the male theateregoers and actors: “What safegarde of chastitie can there be, where the woman is
desired with so many eyes, where so many faces look upon her and again she upon so many?” For Gosson,
whose spectators all become like Bacchus, not like Ariadne, spectatorship is a male province, and his
expressed concern for female playgoers is that “you can forbid no man, that vieweth you, to note you and that
noteth you to judge you.”

In becoming spectators—a role that Gosson implicitly denies them—women make
spectacles of themselves and are vulnerable to the judgment of the male spectators. But if spectacles shape the
viewer, as Gosson and many other writers claim, does not the woman have as much threatening power as the
play? And if the opposite is true, then is not the play threatened as much as the woman?

The “nothing” about which there is much ado in Shakespeare's play is simultaneously the female genital
“nothing” and “noting”—habits of observation and interpretation. “Noting” becomes a problem in the play
because the male characters accept that women should be, as Hero is, silent and defined by the ways in which
they are seen. Hero is defined visually not only for Claudio, but for the theater audience, which has more
access to her than her lover, but still cannot see or hear her response to Don Pedro's offstage wooing, cannot
hear her response to Claudio's declaration of his own silence, “the perfectest herald of joy” (II.i.232). Hero
characteristically lacks a voice and “becomes in effect a sign to be read and interpreted by others.”

The contested territory of Much Ado about Nothing is not action, but interpretation, and while the theater
audience occupies a privileged position in relation to the action of the play, the play presents it with audiences
that also believe their position privileged and shows how that assumption leaves them vulnerable to having
their readings controlled by the play's internal dramatists Don John, Borachio, and Don Pedro. The
represented audience's perception of an event is based on both what it is allowed to see and hear and what it
expects—an expectation created by a narrative like the one of Hero's falseness that Don John provides Don
Pedro and Claudio or the narratives of the other's love and their own shortcomings to which Beatrice and
Benedick are exposed. While much criticism examines the difference between Don Pedro's benevolent and
Don John's malevolent deception, the similarity both of methods and of results is striking. The
represented audience's perception of its spectatorial power allows it to accept an externally imposed narrative over the
evidence of its senses. By presenting the manipulation of interpretation and questioning the privileged status
of the spectator, the play challenges the idea of omniscience in any spectator, or the possibility of any
spectator having the sort of automatic access to truth that the position implies for both characters in the play
and the theater audience.

Don Pedro, Claudio, Beatrice, and Benedick all observe and overhear scenes actually predicated on their
presence, which they believe to be predicated on their absence; the deceptions are based on the victim's
assumption that he or she is seeing and hearing a private scene. In conceiving of themselves as subjects
making discoveries, they become the objects of deception; they are not simply spectators, but spectacles of
their gullers. The gulling scenes emphasize how visible the supposed eavesdropper is; Benedick's access to
Don Pedro, Claudio, and Leonato's conversation in the orchard is based not on his success in “hid[ing] me in the arbour,” but his failure (II.iii.28). Three lines after Benedick conceals himself, Don Pedro asks Claudio “See you where Benedick hath hid himself?” (II.iii.32) and Claudio has, “very well, my lord” (II.iii.33). In the parallel scene involving Beatrice, Hero tells Ursula to “look where Beatrice like a lapwing runs / Close by the ground, to hear our conference” (III.i.24-5), and Borachio, describing the unrepresented scene at Hero's window, tells Conrade that “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” between himself and Margaret (III.iii.121-4). The discrepancy between their spectatorial position and the one they believe they occupy leads characters to accept what they hear as truth, and model themselves accordingly. With the sole exception of the watch's overhearing of Borachio and Conrade's conversation in act III, scene iii, all other represented eavesdropping occurs with the contrivance of those being overheard; the positions of performer and audience are reversed.

All of the upper-class male characters in Messina are quite aware of the possibility of deception; they recognize that the world around them is not transparent and that other characters may wish to show them a false version of events. Benedick twice considers and rejects the idea that he is being gulled, Borachio knows that Claudio and Don Pedro “will scarcely believe this [that Hero is false] without trial” (II.ii.30-1), and even the perennial dupe Claudio fears that Don Pedro praises Hero “to fetch me in” (I.i.165). But Claudio's very awareness that he may be deceived ensures that he will be, causing him to distrust his own experience of Don Pedro and Hero, and to accept both the news of Don Pedro's betrayal that he hears “in name of Benedick” and his observation spying on Hero's window (II.i.128). S. P. Cerasano claims that “the natural tendency of the residents of Messina is toward gullibility, inconstancy, unpredictability and slander,” but this gullibility is less a “natural tendency” than a product of characters' awareness of their vulnerability to deception.17

Eavesdropping, rather than conversation, is established as the accepted model for receiving credible information throughout the play; to see or hear an action and believe yourself to be unobserved or unrecognized is to see that action as authentic and unstaged. Most characters in Much Ado believe that the awareness of audience is what creates “performance”: people cannot act for an audience if they are unaware of it. Thus, assuming (correctly) that “Hero” is unaware that he is watching her window, Claudio reinterprets all of her previously displayed behavior as a staged action. The “exterior shows” cease to be an indicator of maidenhood and Claudio rereads Hero's blushes when he accuses her of unfaithfulness as “guiltiness, not modesty” (IV.i.35-7).

Claudio and his fellow eavesdroppers are correct in believing that the awareness of audience is what creates “performance,” but not in the way that they, as audiences who believe themselves invisible, suppose. Don Pedro and Don John both take advantage of the belief that eavesdropping constitutes authentic experience. As Anthony Dawson observes, “for most of the characters, eavesdropping … is a natural, spontaneous gesture,” a habit of placing themselves at one remove from conversation so that they can have the perspective that they believe guarantees access to truths that other characters would not tell them to their faces.18 In the parallel scenes in which first Benedick and then Beatrice believe themselves to be secretly observing the discussion of the other's passion, they assume that since the spectatorial position is one of power, they know more than the characters they watch because only they know of their presence at this private conference.

In both cases, the gullers insist that their victim should not be told of the other's love because they would “make a sport of it” (II.iii.134, cf. III.i.58). In gulling Benedick, Don Pedro and his assistants raise the specter of deception in order to dispel it; Don Pedro suggests that Beatrice “doth but counterfeit” so that Leonato may describe her passion (II.iii.92). Benedick's judgment that “this can be no trick” is based on outward signs of reliability (II.iii.181); he “should think this a gull, but that the white-bearded fellow speaks it: knavery cannot sure hide himself in such reverence” (II.iii.106-7). His explicit consideration of what constitutes reliable evidence emphasizes that belief is not a default condition in Much Ado; everything is open to the accusation of “counterfeit,” which must be explicitly refuted.
The circumstances of Benedick making his “discovery” convince him of its veracity, and lead him to reinterpret Beatrice and himself. Resolving to love Beatrice, Benedick explicitly reacts against the description he has heard of himself as a man who “hath a contemptible spirit” (II.iii.153-4), proclaiming that “happy are they that hear their detractions and can put them to mending” (II.iii.187-8). He constructs himself as a lover, resolving to be “horribly in love with her” (II.iii.191-2). Just as he redefines himself in opposition to the unflattering portrait he has overheard, Benedick reads in Beatrice's unaltered behavior toward him “some marks of love in her” (II.iii.199-200), reinterpreting her sentences to make their meaning consistent with what he has heard: “I took no more pains for those thanks than any pains you took to thank me: that's as much as to say any pains I take for you is as easy as thanks” (II.iii.209-11). Beatrice's language, like Hero's blush when Claudio refuses to marry her, is subject to reinterpretation to make it fit into the idea Benedick has received about her from outside agents. Benedick, having accepted Claudio, Don Pedro, and Leonato's narrative, reads Beatrice's avowed indifference as a form of acting which he, as an audience member with access to more information than she believes he has, can now penetrate and interpret correctly.

Benedick's labored reinterpretation of Beatrice's summons to dinner points not to the new clarity of his perception as he claims, but to his newfound determination to read her as Don Pedro, Leonato, and Claudio have suggested that he should. When Benedick, in asking Leonato for Beatrice's hand, tells him that he “with an eye of love requite[s] her,” Leonato seems justified in answering, “The sight whereof I think you had from me, / From Claudio, and the prince” (V.iv.24-6). Benedick's reading of Beatrice is socially constructed, and his shift in vision is the one Don Pedro arranges.

Don Pedro's plan for winning Hero for Claudio assumes a less complex response from her than from either Beatrice or Benedick. While he expects both of them to react against a negative reading of themselves, Hero is to be won almost without her consent. Don Pedro proposes to “take her hearing prisoner with the force / And strong encounter of my amorous tale,” implying that his speech will exercise absolute control over Hero (I.i.250-1); once he has taken her hearing prisoner, “the conclusion is, she shall be thine” (I.i.253). The possibility of failure, or even of a response from Hero, never crosses Don Pedro's mind. Hero, Don Pedro's audience, is to be molded by “the force / And strong encounter of my amorous tale” (I.i.250-1); her hearing, as separable from her reason as Claudio's “delicate desires” are from his, is to form her response (I.i.229). Don Pedro's confidence in the power of speech seems justified by the success of narratives throughout the play in changing their hearers' methods of interpretation. Benedick and Beatrice are persuaded to regard each other “with an eye of favor” (V.iv.21) through the conversations among their friends that they imagine they overhear by chance, and Claudio and Don Pedro accept the sight of Hero as “every man's Hero” after hearing Don John's account of what they will see (III.ii.78). But Don Pedro's success in winning Hero is not necessarily the testimony to his eloquence that he imagines; well before he takes her out to dance, Hero, as Leonato tells her, “know[s her] answer” to any proposal from the prince (II.i.49).

The theater audience, in the presence of Don Pedro and Claudio's explicitly “secret” communication onstage, supposes itself to have a more complete narrative than the play's other characters who are unaware of the scene (I.i.151). But this privilege is undermined throughout the first act, as Antonio's servant and Borachio, both invisible to the theater audience, Don Pedro, and Claudio, are retroactively introduced into the scene, and bring back varying reports to their masters. If Claudio and Don Pedro suppose their conversation secret, then so does the theater audience suppose its access to it unique. The two scenes following Don Pedro's revelation of his plot make the audience position progressively more crowded. By the time the first act has finished, the “secret” of Don Pedro's plan is known, in one form or another, to almost every character in the play, and the theater audience's position as privileged observer has come into question.

Despite Don Pedro's faith in his ability to manipulate perception through narrative, his impersonation of Claudio, which he believes will win Hero through “the force / And strong encounter of my amorous tale” wins her instead because of her obedience to her father (I.i.250-1). After Antonio tells Leonato what his servant has overheard, Leonato resolves to “acquaint my daughter withal, that she may be the better prepared for an
answer, if peradventure this be true” (I.ii.17-8). Hero's response is determined before the performance begins, not by Don Pedro's eloquence in the role of Claudio but by Leonato and Antonio's instructions to Hero, based on the assumption that Don Pedro is her suitor. The wooing scene which Don Pedro wishes to enact becomes a scene in which his audience knows far more than he supposes, and the presence of multiple narratives of Don Pedro's “secret” conversation with Claudio, which was not to produce any, allows Don John and Borachio to suggest to Claudio, plausibly enough, that Don Pedro “is enamored on Hero,” particularly when Don Pedro's performance of wooing Hero becomes a secret scene to which Hero alone, not Claudio and not the theater audience, has access (II.i.121-2).

When Don John and Borachio tell Claudio that Don Pedro woos for himself, the theater audience, although it can be sure of their motives, cannot have the immediate certainty that they are lying. Don John's claim that “Sure my brother is amorous on Hero, and hath withdrawn her father to break with him about it” (II.i.115-6) before he makes clear that he and Borachio are performing for Claudio causes editors to insert notes explaining that Don John does not actually believe this, and “Garrick's text (1777) makes this explicit by inserting 'Now then for a trick of contrivance’ at the beginning of the speech.” But the play text offers no such certainty; Don Pedro's courtship is inaccessible to any audience, including the paying one, until it is over. Claudio instantly believes, and Benedick later is willing to consider the possibility, that Don John and Borachio are telling the truth. The possibility of Don Pedro wooing for himself is at least voiced by every man at the ball except Don Pedro. Don John's falseness is no guarantee of Don Pedro's truth.

Believing that Don John and Borachio mistake him for Benedick and are thus transparent conduits of information, Claudio accepts without question their claim that Don Pedro woos Hero for himself, reasoning that “beauty is a witch, / Against whose charms faith melteth into blood” (II.i.135-6). Claudio supposes that rather than taking “her hearing prisoner with the force / And strong encounter of my amorous tale,” Don Pedro has himself been bewitched in looking at Hero (I.i.250-1). Hero's status suddenly and dangerously shifts, from the audience which can be controlled by what she hears, Don Pedro's words entering her ear, to the spectacle before which he is similarly powerless. But Hero's consistent position as a spectacle does not endow her with witchlike powers; it only allows the men who observe her to read her as having them.

Upon Don John's accusation, Claudio instantly reveals (or develops) a distrust of his own “agent” Don Pedro, claiming that “all hearts in love use their own tongues. / Let every eye negotiate for itself, / And trust no agent” (II.i.133-5). This is not only a disclaimer of the efficacy of wooing by proxy, but a distrust of proxies in general. The “negotiation” of the eye is the way in which the eye observes as well as the way in which it seduces. But in Much Ado, all eyes seem ultimately to “trust agents”; sights and sounds are filtered through the characters who first bring them to mind.

Although the characters of the play have great faith in their own abilities to “see a church by daylight” (II.i.59), the scene in which Claudio denounces Hero as “an approved wanton” (IV.i.39) is the most forceful reminder of how easily interpretation can be guided. The “eye of love” which Benedick claims he and Beatrice see each other with is something that can be “lent” (V.iv.23-4), as Leonato says. And it is lent in almost precisely the same way as “conjecture” is placed on Claudio, “to turn all beauty into thoughts of harm” so that “never shall it more be gracious” (IV.i.100-1). Borachio tells Conrade that Don Pedro and Claudio have been deceived “partly by [Don John's] 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” (III.iii.127-30). The possession by the oaths is the necessary precondition to everything else: what makes Borachio's “villainy” serve as “confirmation” in the same way as Beatrice's statement that she was not Hero's bedfellow the previous night although she had been at all other times becomes confirmation for Leonato of Hero's falseness rather than of the impossibility of Borachio's confession of “the vile encounters they have had / A thousand times in secret” (IV.i.87-8).
When Borachio claims that he “can at any unseasonable instant of night, appoint [Margaret] to look out at her lady's chamber window” (II.i.14-5), Don John sees this as an insignificant event, as Borachio agrees it is, but “the poison of that lies in you to temper” (II.i.17). The event will only have meaning that can “be the death of this marriage” if Don John provides Don Pedro and Claudio with that meaning (II.i.16). Both Borachio and Don John recognize that their main problem is to get Don Pedro and Claudio to believe Don John's story—the production of “proof.”

The visual proof that Borachio tells Don John to offer is identical to his narrative; the syntax of Borachio's sentence transforms Don John's promise of what Don Pedro and Claudio will see into what they will actually see:

tell them that you know that Hero loves me, intend a kind of zeal to both the prince and Claudio … 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 … and there shall appear such seeming truth of Hero's disloyalty, that jealousy shall be called assurance and all the preparation overthrown.

(II.i.26-37, my italics)

The deictic “this” refers to a scene that exists only in Don John's accusation: the sight of Hero with Borachio. The verbal “instances” that Don John is to offer become precisely the same as what he is to “bring [Don Pedro and Claudio] to see,” and what they, under the influence of his narrative, do see.

The absence of the theater audience from this scene prevents any knowledge of whether Margaret, in the guise of Hero, calls Borachio “Claudio” as the text insists, or not. The appearance of “Claudio” rather than the more logical (at least for Borachio and Don John's plan) “Borachio” can be explained, as the Riverside Shakespeare does, as “apparently a slip,” but forcibly demonstrates that no matter how often the theater audience may hear the events of “the very night before the intended wedding” described, it cannot know what Don Pedro and Claudio saw and heard, only what they were prepared to see and hear (II.i.33-4). In this instance, description and preconception replace sight on the most literal level. Indeed, the theater audience's conspicuous exclusion from the scene of Borachio and Margaret at Hero's window, combined with the seven distinct descriptions of the event that replace it, suggest both the uncertainty of the theater audience's position and the impossibility of any scene having a transparent meaning.

When Don John tells Don Pedro and Claudio of Hero's disloyalty, he does not, as Borachio instructs him, describe what they will hear, preferring to tell them what they will see: “go but with me tonight, you shall see her chamber window entered, even the night before her wedding day … If you dare not trust that you see, confess not that you know” (III.ii.82-8). Don John implies to Claudio and Don Pedro that “knowledge” is acquired through becoming a part of the same group of spectators, but what they see will be materially different from what Don John (or the theater audience, were the scene visually represented) sees.

Don John plays upon Don Pedro and Claudio's belief in their ability to understand what they see, to be in the position of power that eavesdropping implies. The deception works because he constructs it as a choice that they can make, based on the evidence of their senses, between himself and Hero. The choice offers Don Pedro and Claudio the chance to prove their own ability as observers, to see through the mask of Hero's “seeming” (IV.i.50). To see Hero's disloyalty is to confirm Don John's loyalty. Don John represents his speech as insufficient, insisting that Hero cannot be adequately represented in language: “she has been too long a-talking of,” “the word [disloyal] is too good to paint out her wickedness” (III.ii.76, 80). In promising to “disparage her [Hero] no further, till you are my witnesses,” Don John claims that Don Pedro and Claudio's acuteness as
spectators, rather than his suspect testimony, will prove Hero's unchastity (III.ii.95). As in the case of Don Pedro's plan to have Benedick “overhear” the discussion of Beatrice's love and his own misgovernment, the promise of the ability to see through a deception—Hero's chastity, Beatrice's indifference—assures the interpretation for which the spectator has been prepared.

In the first description the theater audience (and the watch, “stand[ing] close” in the play's only instance of successful eavesdropping [III.iii.88]) hear of the incident at the window after it has happened, Borachio tells Conrade that Claudio and Don Pedro are deceived “partly by [Don John's] 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” (III.iii.127-30). The action only serves as confirmation; Don Pedro and Claudio have previously been possessed by Don John's story. Placed as they are “afar off in the orchard” in the dark night, Don Pedro and Claudio's senses are as unreliable as Don John's oaths, but their senses and his story, neither of which can be believed, confirm one another (III.iii.123).

In telling Conrade (and the watch) what has just occurred in Leonato's orchard, Borachio illustrates the shift from spectator to spectacle that threatens all of the play's audiences; he first tells Conrade that he has “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” (III.iii.118-21). To this point, he describes what he saw, but realizes this is insufficient to explain how he has earned a thousand ducats from Don John, and backs up to explain that “the Prince, Claudio, and my master planted, placed and possessed, by my master Don John, saw afar off in the orchard this amiable encounter” (III.iii.121-4). This is the unrealized perspective of the theater audience; Borachio speaks first as the object of scrutiny that Don Pedro and Claudio think him, the spectacle unaware of observers, then as the omniscient audience member, aware of how all of the characters involved in the scene see it.

The theater audience's exclusion from the scene at Hero's window insists that its members must, like the characters in the play, accept narratives which color their interpretation. The scene at the window is finally inaccessible, vanishing behind the screen of multiple narratives which are never quite in agreement.\(^{25}\) The theater audience's relationship to Hero is established as one of observation; its position is established through its access to the information that will allow it to read Hero correctly—Don John and Borachio's plot to show Don Pedro and Claudio “Hero” at the window. But this is precisely the scene to which the theater audience is denied access. At other points in the play, the theater audience sees the same scene as the designated audience (Beatrice or Benedick, for instance), but is able to interpret it differently because it knows that the scene is staged only so that the designated audience will hear it. But the most crucial staged action is not staged for the theater audience—and as it is reported seven separate times for seven distinct audiences, the theater audience's knowing exactly what happened becomes increasingly impossible.

Almost all critical descriptions of the scene at Hero's window mention that Margaret is wearing Hero's clothes, as if this is the sign that explains Claudio's credulousness. And it may be; for an audience observing the action from “afar off,” costume is an exceedingly useful indicator of who is who.\(^{26}\) But this piece of information does not come to light until Borachio confesses to Leonato in act V, when the theater audience has already judged Don Pedro and Claudio's spectatorship. Claudio's immediate response to this revelation is to return to his original idea of Hero: “now thy image doth appear / In the rare semblance that I loved it first” (V.i.220-1). Hero remains a visual construct, now purified by her retroactive absence from the scene; Claudio simply switches from one way of seeing, which he now perceives as incorrect, to his earlier view.

Claudio's understanding of Hero in purely visual terms is obviously problematic in that it allows the success of Don John and Borachio's plot, but only Beatrice seems to have any other way of understanding her. Even at the very beginning of the play, when Leonato makes the old joke “Her mother hath many times told me so” in answer to Don Pedro's “I think this is your daughter” (I.i.76-8), Don Pedro takes Hero's physical appearance, not the word of Leonato's wife, as a guarantor of her paternity.\(^{27}\) Despite Beatrice's best efforts to convince
Hero to have some voice in choosing her husband, Hero seems to accept her father's choice: “if the prince do solicit you in that kind, you know your answer” (II.i.48-9). Despite Leonato and Beatrice's attempts to put words into her mouth, Hero never directly responds to the debate around her. The silence that leaves appearance as the only indication of female significance is established as culturally and socially desirable; Claudio praises Hero for being “modest” (I.i.121) and Benedick at first ignores Beatrice's beauty because he “cannot endure my Lady Tongue” (II.i.207-8). But, in the absence of speech, and thus in the absence of narrative, interpretation becomes ever more important, particularly since female characters are then only to be looked on as spectacles. In this model, to be exclusively a spectacle is to have no power, to be completely subject to interpretation as Hero is at the wedding.

Hero's appearance, rather than her words, speaks for her; Claudio accuses her of being “but the sign and semblance of her honor: / Behold how like a maid she blushes here” (IV.i.28-9). Certain visual cues, outward appearances, are assumed to signify truth; when Benedick speaks of Leonato's credibility, he bases this not on personal knowledge of Leonato but on his white beard, the “reverence” in which knavery cannot hide itself (II.iii.106-7). Claudio's condemnation of Hero is particularly violent because he identifies her as “the sign and semblance of her honor,” as being “like a maid” without being one. Hero cannot defend herself from this charge because only her physical exterior has been available; if this is a lie, no clear way to read her exists.

Readings of *Much Ado* that focus on right and wrong methods of interpretation generally find the model for proper interpretation in Beatrice's certainty of Hero's innocence and in Friar Francis's “noting of the lady” (IV.i.150). Richard Henze says that “this combination of intuitive trust and careful observation seems to be the one that the play recommends,” but to whom and under what circumstances? How is one to make judgments simultaneously based on faith and careful noting? According to Henze's argument, if Claudio is wrong about Hero, and Beatrice and Friar Francis are right, then they look in the right way and Claudio looks in the wrong way. But Friar Francis's “noting” consists of interpreting the meaning of Hero's blushes, just as Claudio's and Leonato's do. Until Friar Francis allows Hero to speak, quite late in the scene, her body is the only available object of interpretation.

All of Hero's accusers, but especially Claudio, are preoccupied with the disparity in what they have seen “Hero” do and what her outward appearance suggests. Claudio insists that she is “but the sign and semblance of her honor” and remains preoccupied with her exterior (IV.i.28): “Would you not swear / All you that see her, that she were a maid, / By these exterior shows?” (IV.i.33-5), “O Hero! What a hero hadst thou been, / If half thy outward graces had been placed / About thy thoughts and counsels of thy heart?” (IV.i.93-5). Claudio's experience outside Hero's bedroom window has led him, by accepting Don John's version of ocular proof, to distrust his sight and the appearances of those around him. As a result, he says that “on my eyelids shall conjecture hang, / To turn all beauty into thoughts of harm, / And never shall it more be gracious” (IV.i.99-101). Claudio has learned a new way of seeing, one in which appearance is now branded as seeming, and everything must be observed through the filter of “conjecture”; Don John is no longer necessary as an external creator of preconception because he has been replaced by “conjecture,” a purely internal filter which assures that Claudio's eyes are no longer his own.

Even assuming that “any man with me [Hero] conversed, / At hours unmeet” (IV.i.175), Claudio's accusations that she is

more intemperate in your blood,
Than Venus, or those pampered animals,
That rage in savage sensuality

(IV.i.53-5)
and “knows the heat of a luxurious bed” seem to have little to do with what he saw (IV.i.36). Don Pedro, although much less hysterical, still accuses Hero of being “a common stale” (IV.i.59). Hero's supposed, and Margaret's actual, “crime” has been to place herself on view—to, as Borachio says when describing his plan in the most neutral way possible, “at any unseasonable instant of the night … look out at her lady's chamber window” (II.ii.14-5). Gosson's warning that “you can forbid no man, that vieweth you, to note you and that noteth you to judge you” becomes a threat in this context. But while Hero cannot forbid the “noting of the lady” in which Claudio, Don Pedro, Don John, Friar Francis, and Leonato engage, and is as vulnerable to ill report as may be imagined, the play is not comfortable with this vulnerability of spectacle (IV.i.150). Claudio and Don Pedro's view of the situation seems skewed, especially for a theater audience that did not see any woman “talk with a ruffian at her chamber window” (IV.i.85).

Hero's accusers, particularly Claudio, are, as Beatrice forcefully insists, not only incorrect but cruel; their accusations are out of proportion with what they have actually seen. They respond not to their own observation but to Don John and Borachio's narratives, and to their own fears of being disgraced. In accusing Hero, Don John, Don Pedro, and Claudio provide very limited descriptions of what they saw the previous night; their focus on vituperation outweighs any desire to convince others of the justice of their accusation. Claudio spends nearly fifty lines abusing Hero before he provides a specific accusation, and Don Pedro only says

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
Who hath indeed like a most liberal villain,
Confessed the vile encounters they have had
A thousand times in secret.

(IV.i.83-8)

The final proof that Don Pedro offers is Borachio's confession, a confession unnecessary to confirm what they have seen, but necessary, as it confirms the implications of Hero speaking to a man outside her window. Once again, a narrative gives meaning to an ambiguous staged event, and Hero, who has never produced narratives except those Don Pedro told her to in the gulling of Beatrice, is faced with Claudio's, Don Pedro's, and Don John's readings of her—readings her own father accepts with startling readiness.

In accepting Claudio and Don Pedro's reading, Leonato asks, “Could she here deny / The story that is printed in her blood?” (IV.i.114-5). Like Claudio's rhetorical questions, “Leonato, stand I here? / Is this the prince? Is this the prince's brother? / Is this face Hero's? Are our eyes our own?” (IV.i.63-5), Leonato's questions establish his certainty, even as their possible answers establish the problems with his interpretation. The structure of the question whose speaker thinks it is rhetorical reveals the assumptions he will not question. Despite Hero's insistence thirty-five lines previously that she “talked with no man at that hour,” Leonato is sure that he can read “the story that is printed in her blood” (IV.i.80). Her characteristic silence becomes another reason for believing her accusers: “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” (IV.i.164-6). Hero's rescue in this scene comes when the friar speaks of his “noting of the lady” (IV.i.150); again, this is an observation of physical signs: the thousand blushing apparitions [that] 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.

(IV.i.152-7)
Friar Francis is one of a group of men who read Hero's body, and that he is correct can be read as chance. Carol Cook observes that “Benedick's act of ‘marking’ [Beatrice] is clearly a projection, but the question then arises whether the friar's marking of Hero is not equally so.”\textsuperscript{33} Much can be said in Friar Francis's favor, but, if his observation is privileged, it is through his willingness to let Hero speak in her own defense, not his “careful observation.”

The friar's reading of Hero's appearance ultimately leads him to question her after stating his belief in her innocence; and her answer, not Friar Francis's faith, is what finally removes Leonato's certainty of her guilt, although the certainty of her innocence does not immediately follow. Leonato's acceptance of the testimony of “the two princes” whose social position authorizes their accusation, exemplifies some of the most problematic viewing in the play, as he chooses to read Hero in light of their accusation although he has not seen the proof they have (IV.i.145). Leonato never asks for Hero's story; from the moment Don Pedro and Don John join Claudio in his accusation, Leonato sees her as having “fallen / Into a pit of ink, that the wide sea / Hath drops too few to wash her clean again” (IV.i.132-4), asking “Would the two princes lie, and Claudio lie” (IV.i.145). In the face of two opposing readings, Leonato is unable to decide:

\begin{verbatim}
I know not: if they speak but truth of her,
These hands will tear her, if they wrong her honour,
The proudest of them shall well hear of it.
\end{verbatim}

(IV.i.183-5)

Although his eventual determination to believe Hero is obvious in act V, his last word on the subject as he leaves the wedding scene is that the “smallest twine may lead me” (IV.i.243); belief in either version seems to him equally well, or poorly, grounded.

Comparing the ways in which Don Pedro and Claudio look at Hero with the ways in which Beatrice and Friar Francis do ultimately seems impossible because none of Hero's defenders has seen what Don Pedro and Claudio have, and, if Benedick and Beatrice will accept a less well-supported tale of the other's love, Don Pedro and Claudio's belief in Don John and their own eyes indicates more of a problem with the vulnerability of spectatorship in general than a fault particular to those two. Benedick's acceptance of the words of his friends (although his trust seems based on Leonato's participation rather than that of Don Pedro), describing a scene he has not seen and his rereading Beatrice's speech to conform to what he has heard, exemplifies the same problems as Leonato's initial acceptance of the accusations against Hero, in which he reinterprets Hero's silence as guilt.

In representing Margaret at the window only verbally, and in leaving the content of the dialogue that occurs at the window entirely obscure, \textit{Much Ado} avoids a number of problems for the theater audience. To observe a staged action that one recognizes as such is to be complicit, voluntarily or involuntarily, with the character who produces that action, sharing knowledge that the represented audience does not possess. The position of shared superior knowledge defines the represented audience's position as credulous. The problem is acute in \textit{Much Ado} because, if Margaret were represented at the window, the theater audience would be in a position to decide exactly how credulous Don Pedro and Claudio are and how good the deception is. Like Don Pedro's and Claudio's, the theater audience's view of Margaret will be from “afar off,” and the question arises of exactly how much Margaret looks like Hero. Costumes are primary markers of identity on the early modern stage (hence the unbreakable disguise convention), and Margaret in Hero's clothes may look enough like Hero to convince an unprepared (or differently prepared) audience of Hero's guilt—or she may look enough unlike her to suggest that observation has no power over narrative.

The scene of Borachio and Margaret at Hero's window has not always remained inaccessible in production. Michael Friedman discusses Michael Langham's 1961 Stratford-upon-Avon production, which featured a
dumbshow in which Don John, Don Pedro, and Claudio saw Borachio climb up to the balcony where he was
joined “by ‘Hero.’” In fact, the actress on stage was not Margaret disguised as Hero, but Hero herself,
“heavily cloaked [promptbook's phrase], pretending to be Margaret pretending to be Hero.”34 This
interpolation justifies Claudio to the point of making Don John's accusation accurate. But the absence of the
chamber window scene from the play makes this sort of identification with, or sympathy for, Claudio's
position at the wedding rather improbable. A slightly less determined, but probably more influential, attempt
to excuse Claudio's behavior through the representation of the window scene, appears in Kenneth Branagh's
1993 film of Much Ado. Branagh explains his decision to include the scene on the grounds that “if we saw this
occur on screen, it would add a new dimension to our understanding of Claudio,” saving him from being
dismissed for his gullibility.35 But this anxiety about Claudio's gullibility seems to leave him peculiarly
vulnerable to it; the actress playing Margaret in Branagh's film bears almost no physical resemblance to the
actress playing Hero. And Claudio's gullibility is not unique to him but part of a larger range of issues of
problematic forms of spectatorship.

If Margaret is represented as very similar to Hero, Claudio and Don Pedro's reaction at the wedding becomes
understandable, although not laudable. More significantly, deception becomes impossible to detect visually,
an uncomfortable position for a play whose resolution depends on Friar Francis's “noting of the lady”
(IV.i.150), Claudio's willingness to accept Leonato's offer of his niece, “Almost the copy of my child that's
dead” (V.i.256), and Beatrice and Benedick's seeing each other with the eyes of love Leonato says their
gullers “lent” them (V.iv.23). One of the reasons Don Pedro and Claudio believe Don John is that “his lie …
easily passes in Messina as a truthful reading of women,”36 but if the visual proofs he gives them are
irrefutable at the distance of a theater audience member from the acting area above the stage, then his lie will
pass anywhere, and the position of spectator is no more one of control than that of spectacle.

Notes
1. Stephen Greenblatt, Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare (Chicago: Univ. of
2. John Northbrooke, A Treatise wherein Dicing, Dauncing, Vaine Playes or Enterluds … Are Reproved
by the Authoritie of the Word of God and Auntient Writers, ed. Arthur Freeman (New York: Garland
(New York: Scholars' Facsimilies and Reprints, 1941), sig. F4v.
4. The representation of audiences, rather than mirroring the behavior of theater audiences, presents
reception codes in an exaggerated form for scrutiny in the same way that inset spectacle presents
performance codes. For a discussion of performance code, see Keir Elam, The Semiotics of Theatre
and Drama (London and New York: Methuen, 1980), pp. 49-97. Michele Willems discusses how
inset plays present performance code for scrutiny in “‘They do but jest’ or do they? Reflexions on the
Ambiguities of the Space Within a Space,” in The Show Within. Dramatic and Other Insets, English
Renaissance Drama (1550-1642), ed. Francois Laroque (Montpellier: Publications de Universite
Paul-Valery, 1990), pp. 51-64, 53.
Press, 1988), IV.i.63-5. Further references will appear parenthetically in the text.
7. Gosson, sig. G4
8. Gosson, sig. G5. Laura Levine argues that the Bacchus/Ariadne passage suggests not only that
“watching leads inevitably to ‘doing’ … [b]ut … the more radical idea that watching leads inevitably
to ‘being’—to assuming the identity of the actor” (Men in Women's Clothing: Anti-theatricality and
9. Levine argues that the antitheatrical writers envision “a self which can always be altered not by its
own playful shaping intelligence, but by malevolent forces outside its control” (p. 12).
11. Gosson, The Schoole of Abuse, sig. F2. For a discussion of the letter “to the Gentlewoman Citizens of London” appended to the end of The School of Abuse, arguing that Gosson’s anxiety is motivated as much by the possibility of women looking at their fellow theaergoers as by the way that male theaergoers look at them, see Jean Howard, The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 76-80.
13. The only character in Messina to encourage female speech directly is Don Pedro, who tells Beatrice that “Your silence most offends me” (II.i.252). This response to Beatrice’s “I was born to speak all mirth, and no matter” (II.i.251) suggests a sanctioned form of female speech, but one that cannot construct the narratives that shape perception. I am grateful to the anonymous reader for SEL for drawing my attention to this exchange.
15. Laurie Osborne observes (“Dramatic Play in Much Ado about Nothing: Wedding the Italian Novella and English Comedy,” PQ 69, 2 [Spring 1991]: 167-88) that “the purpose [of staged actions] is not to manipulate events so much as to control the way that others perceive them” (p. 184).
19. See, for instance, Mares’s edition of the play, p. 72.
22. Margaret is here represented as an observer herself, but to “look out at her lady's chamber window” is to be seen at that window (II.iii.15). As in Gosson's formulation of the female theaergoer, to be a spectator is to become a spectacle.
24. For a discussion of Don John's use of and representation of language, see Dawson, p. 214.
25. Taylor argues that “the play focuses our attention on [the] blank space[s of Don Pedro's wooing and the scene at Hero's window] as a way of showing how various characters perceive themselves in that blank spot” (p. 5).
27. Claire McEachern observes, “Hero's physical resemblance to her father guarantees her mother's fidelity, and with it her father's honor” (“‘Fathering Herself’: A Source Study of Shakespeare's Feminism,” SQ 39, 3 [Autumn 1988]: 269-90), but I think it significant that Hero must “father herself” with her body rather than her mother's words. Michael D. Friedman, in “‘Hush'd on Purpose to Grace Harmony’: Wives and Silence in Much Ado About Nothing,” TJ 42, 3 (October 1990): 350-63, discusses the stage directions in both the quarto and folio texts which give an entrance in act I, scene i and act II, scene i to “Innogen [Leonato's] wife,” and the possibilities of staging Hero's
perfectly silent and unacknowledged mother.

28. For discussions of the relationship between silence and gender roles in Much Ado, see Howard, pp. 65-70 and Friedman.


31. Many of the accusations against Hero are couched in terms of rhetorical questions. In addition to the examples above, Claudio asks, “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?” (IV.i.32-5). Leonato finds confirmation in asking, “Would the two princes lie, and Claudio lie, / Who loved her so, that speaking of her foulness, / Washed it in tears?” (IV.i.145-7). Hero's attempt to use this structure, asking “Is it [my name] not Hero? Who can blot that name / With any just reproach?” (IV.i.74-5), collapses when Claudio instantly answers her, “Marry, that can Hero” (IV.i.75).


33. Cook, p. 192.


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**Criticism: Themes: Maurice Hunt (essay date 2000)**


[In the following essay, Hunt studies the characters' usage of patriarchal speech in Much Ado about Nothing, demonstrating the way in which this type of speech establishes social dominance through the transformation, dismissal, or oppression of the words and thoughts of others.]

Interpreters of Much Ado about Nothing have often remarked that Shakespeare focuses in this middle comedy upon the faculty of hearing. And indeed “nothing,” in its senses of listening and eavesdropping, does much to complicate and unravel the play's fable. What is rarely noted in accounts of Much Ado is the dependence of hearing upon speaking, the possibility that Shakespeare may also dramatize the potential of speech to exasperate and resolve humankind's wishes and schemes, especially as they involve romantic love. Repeatedly the language of Much Ado illustrates the fact that expression often becomes disjoined from meaning. “The body of your discourse is sometime guarded with fragments [trimmed with odds and ends],” Benedick tells jesting Don Pedro, “and the guards are but slightly basted on neither” (1.1.265-66). Anne Barton takes Benedick's quip to mean that “the trimmings” of Don Pedro's speech “are very insecurely stitched on too (i.e. they have little connection with what is being said).” A. P. Rossiter has remarked that in Much Ado Cupid does not work by slander, but by hearsay. “Of this matter / Is little Cupid's crafty arrow made,” Hero pronounces, “That only wounds by hearsay” (3.1.21-23). The word has two parts. In Much Ado, “[l]ove by
hearsay,” according to René Girard, “means love by another's voice.”

Love arises when stratagems of eavesdropping make Benedick, Beatrice, and Claudio fall either in or out of love, but they do so only because of what other characters say, only because of the speech uttered and the attitude of members of the trio toward it. One would assume that a gap of some kind naturally exists between Beatrice's, Benedick's, and Claudio's original self-generated (in some cases faint) amorous inclinations and the romantic love created by others' speech and the speech of lovers molded by their utterances. It is another version of the disjunction between inward meaning and spoken words that we hear in Benedick's quip about the “slightly basted” rhetorical “trimmings” of Don Pedro's speech.

At stake in these examples is what we are accustomed to call the truth. Shakespeare unforgettably invites the question of the relation of spoken language to the truth by showing how easily the words of others cause Benedick and Beatrice to fall in and out of love. In Much Ado, Shakespeare suggests that the desire to exert power over another in a way that flatters or amuses the wielder often determines both the use of speech and the control of conversation and monologues. To achieve and exercise personal power, Don Pedro, Benedick, Claudio, and other male characters in Much Ado capitalize upon inherent disjunctions between expression and meaning, upon auditors' distrust of an interlocutor's words, and upon speakers' inability to govern their tongues (and thus the language they speak). In this process, patriarchal speech almost always triumphs by mandating its construction of the truth. Marked by irreverence, aggressiveness, and an authoritarian tone and content, Shakespearean patriarchal speech is designed to establish social dominance by twisting, dismissing, or oppressing the words and ideas of others. Moreover, it is not exclusively the property of men. In Much Ado, Beatrice's acerbic speech, compared to the qualities of patriarchal language, appears at times more conventionally male than conventionally female. Because the seekers after power in the play often cannot manage problematic language or rule their own tongues, they generally become the verbal and literal victims of someone else's power stratagems, and social prestige shifts distressingly within the community of Messina.

Early in Much Ado, Shakespeare represents a paradigmatic image of exemplary speech and speaker. In act 2, scene 1, Beatrice wittily conceives of authentic manhood in terms of moderate speech. “He were an excellent man,” she quips, “that were made just in the mid-way between [Don John] and Benedick: the one is too like an image and says nothing, and the other too like my lady's eldest son, evermore tattling” (2.1.6-9). Beatrice's assertion sets up a standard of modulated, tempered speech that she herself cannot practice. “By my troth, niece,” Leonato tells sharp-tongued Beatrice, “thou wilt never get thee a husband, if thou be so shrewd of thy tongue” (2.1.16-17). Nevertheless, Beatrice's linguistic analysis applies, strictly speaking, to the attainment of excellent manhood. Thus the tempering of speech that she recommends could possibly rectify certain absolutist traits of patriarchal speech. But self-destructive consequences entailed by the compulsion to acquire and exert social and physical power over others preclude the attainment of this temperance. At least they do so until, suffering adversity, characters such as Benedick learn to modulate significantly their quest for power and thus the speech associated with it. The relatively sanctified, integrated speech of the powerless Hero and that of Friar Francis, who has piously relinquished the pursuit of self-congratulatory power, become guides toward this end for Shakespeare's audience. An appreciation of the melding of their expression and intended meaning depends upon initially grasping the extent of Shakespeare's depiction of the manifold, subtle foibles of language.

Patriarchal speech is often edgy, distrustful, because male speakers frequently imagine that male interlocutors may have competitive designs upon them, or because they are hyperconscious of losing among men a masculine persona. When Claudio asks Benedick, “Is [Hero] not a modest young lady?” (1.1.153), Benedick's response reveals his habitual distrust of the wholesome, straightforward meaning of a friend's speech: “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?” (1.1.154-57). Benedick implies that he has two kinds of speech—an honest, simple discourse, rarely spoken, and a customary caustic, witty idiom that (by the logic of his own question) is dishonest and false. Benedick has cultivated the reputation of being a tyrant to women in order to enhance his stature (his power) primarily among his male friends. Yet he has
become an ironic victim of this strategy, a prisoner of his circulated, anti-feminist sayings. With a life of their own, these witty sayings have created a persona that he believes he must inhabit and maintain. To venture outside of it (as he here intimates he might) is to gamble the loss of a self-fashioned identity and imagined respect. In the present case, Benedick suggests that the risk of simple, relatively honest speech is too great. When Claudio protests, “I pray thee speak in sober judgement,” Benedick jokes, “Why, i’faith, methinks she's too low for a high praise, too brown for a fair praise, and too little for a great praise: only this commendation I can afford her, that were she other than she is, she were unhandsome, and being no other but as she is, I do not like her” (1.1.158-64). Benedick's clever paradoxes are sufficiently ambiguous to keep Claudio uncertain of the speaker's feelings. “Thou thinkest I am in sport,” the thoroughly frustrated Claudio complains; “I pray thee tell me truly how thou lik'st her” (1.1.165-66). Benedick's linguistic suspicion proves deep-seated, however. He asks Claudio, “But speak you this with a sad brow, or do you play the flouting Jack, to tell us Cupid is a good hare-finder, and Vulcan a rare carpenter? Come, in what key shall a man take you to go in the song?” (1.1.169-73). Benedick's concluding metaphor suggests his notion that talk with Claudio amounts to no more than a kind of duet valuable for its harmony rather than its content, a creation in which one finds one's part in conjunction with other artistes of language.

Benedick never does directly answer Claudio's question about Hero's modesty. (He says instead that he sees no sweetness in her.) His reluctance to conform to Claudio's expectation of the rules governing conversation constitutes a comic, poetically just punishment of Claudio. “God help the noble Claudio!” Beatrice has exclaimed concerning Benedick's company; “[i]f he have caught the Benedick, it will cost him a thousand pound ere a be cured” (1.1.80-82). In terms of our subject, Claudio can be said to have “caught the Benedick,” for he himself shares his companion's distrust of forthright speech. Responding to Claudio's qualified declaration of love for Hero, Don Pedro pronounces, “Amen, if you love her, for the lady is very well worthy” (1.1.204-5). “You speak this to fetch me in, my lord” (1.1.206), Claudio anxiously replies. “By my troth, I speak my thought” (1.1.207), Don Pedro assures him. When Claudio responds, “And in faith, my lord, I spoke mine” (1.1.208), Benedick cannot resist joking about the extralinguistic guarantee of their words that Don Pedro and Claudio seek in Christian invocations: “And by my two faiths and troths, my lord, I spoke mine” (1.1.209-10). Whatever effective communication Don Pedro and Claudio have achieved gets derailed by Benedick's ingenious witticism about his (and humankind's) double—deceitful—faith and truth. His joke—in his mind, at least—for the moment makes him the dominant speaker among male friends wary through speech of giving auditors an advantage.

The masked ball of Much Ado provides characters suspicious of direct speech an opportunity to speak without hesitation or subterfuge, simply because they believe that their visors absolve them from the responsibility of owning their utterances. No longer do they feel compelled to worry about how their words might gain or lose them respect. In such a context, they risk speaking imagined truths. Recognizing Benedick behind his mask (but thinking that he does not recognize her), Beatrice unleashes the aggression that her anxious feeling of vulnerability to men has created by directly, painfully telling him of the foolish ass his self-conceit makes him (2.1.127-33). In other words, she powerfully compensates for her usual secret sense of powerlessness in a decidedly patriarchal society. Admittedly, Beatrice's frustrated affection for Benedick contributes to her aggressiveness, her criticism a personally safe attempt to encourage him to reform himself and his language. But the painful extremity of her portrait of him reveals the deeper source of her aggression in the dynamics of power and powerlessness, which distort the truth of her utterances. “She speaks poniards,” Benedick complains, “and every word stabs” (2.1.231-32). Benedick has his flaws, but her verbal portrait of him as “the Prince's jester, a very dull fool; [whose] only gift is in devising impossible slanders” (2.1.127-28) misrepresents—skews—the whole man. Beatrice's criticism of Benedick's “gift,” moreover, could just as easily apply to her everyday, ridiculing self.

Characters' inability to control their speech, their failure to shape it to their wills, can be heard throughout Much Ado. Benedick's “double” faith reflects his “double tongue”; at least, it does so in Don Pedro's report of Benedick's opinion of Benedick's verbal duplicity. When Don Pedro tells Benedick that he praised Benedick's
knowledge of foreign languages to Beatrice ("’Nay,’ said I, ’he hath the tongues’’), he says that she responded, ‘’That I believe … for he swore a thing to me on Monday night, which he forswore on Tuesday morning; there’s a double tongue; there’s two tongues’’ (5.1.164-66). Benedick's double tongue, a characterization reminiscent of that of Demetrius in A Midsummer Night's Dream, manifests itself not only in his swearing and forswearing of love for Beatrice, but also in his punning jests, which require the ability to speak two disruptive meanings at once. Swearing, forswearing, and punning in Much Ado, as in life, usually involve the imagined acquisition or consolidation of social prestige. The stress in this judgment falls upon the word “imagined.” Often punning jokes escape the jester's control, wounding him in the poor opinion of others, even as his swearing and forswearing painfully work eventually against the swearer's image in others' eyes.

Few characters in the Messina of Much Ado consistently rule their tongues to their advantage. Underscoring this impression is that of Beatrice's and Benedick's runaway tongues. Both of these characters suffer from logorrhea. “I wonder that you will still be talking, Signior Benedick,” Beatrice quips; “nobody marks you” (1.1.107-8). She, however, in Benedick's chauvinistic opinion, is “my Lady Tongue” (2.1.258), a “dish” whose garrulousness makes her unpalatable. Surprisingly, the play's memorable analysis of humankind's inability to govern its tongue belongs to its low-life personage, Borachio. Concerning Borachio's claim that he can tell a story of intrigue, Conrade, uttering a phrase repeated later in The Tempest, exclaims, “and now forward with thy tale” (3.3.99-100). The pun latent in this statement—the notion of putting forward something naturally belonging to the rear (“tale” / “tail”)—predicts the preposterousness (literally, the backward-firstness) of Borachio's narrative. The beginning of Borachio's tale—“Therefore know, I have earned of Don John a thousand ducats” (3.3.106-7)—is actually its conclusion: the reward that the trick to be narrated brought him. Then, by holding forth on the truth that “the fashion of a doublet, or a hat, or a cloak, is nothing to a man” (3.3.114-34), Borachio makes Conrade complain, “But art not thou thyself giddy with the fashion too, that thou hast shifted out of thy tale into telling me of the fashion?” (3.3.136-38). Thus rebuked, Borachio explains that he has just wooed Margaret by the name of Hero and that she repeatedly bid him good night from the window of Hero's bedchamber. Despite this conformity to Conrade's request, Borachio catches himself up: “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” (3.3.143-47). Borachio has giddily gone forward with his tale, again telling a later part first. Throughout Much Ado, Shakespeare uses forms of the word “giddy” to refer to humankind's invertebrate inconstancy (its defining trait, according to the Player King in act 3, scene 2 of Hamlet). “For man is a giddy thing, and this is my conclusion” (5.4.106-7), Benedick summarizes near the end of Much Ado. Humankind (especially mankind), in this play, reveals its essential giddiness chiefly in inconstant, fickle speech, which often entails the loss of control over logical discourse. Giddy Borachio exemplifies this phenomenon with his wordy, backward-first tale. His loss of linguistic control amounts to a semicomic instance of the flaw that Benedick and Beatrice mutually accuse each other of committing in the form of subversive, irrelevant jests.

The inevitable ambiguity of public speech complicates in Much Ado problems of linguistic distrust and loss of control. Beatrice's and Benedick's verbal cleverness allows them to both inject and read what they will into an inherently imprecise symbolic medium of communication. Believing that Beatrice secretly loves him, Benedick often misinterprets her utterances. “Against my will I am sent to bid you come in to dinner,” she tells Benedick; when he thanks her for her pains, she coldly replies, “I took no more pains for those thanks than you take pains to thank me” (2.3.238-42). Left alone, Benedick's fertile imagination falls prey to his self-conceit working on the mismatch between a speaker's apparent intention and the broad language that never exactly registers it. “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.' If I do not take pity of her, I am a villain; if I do not love her, I am a Jew. I will go get her picture” (2.3.248-54). The inherent imprecision of language thus serves an anxious need to magnify the self's importance. Having taken pleasure in his double tongue (see above, 1.1.209-10), Benedick suffers the poetic justice of misconstruing to his later embarrassment the radical double meaning of Beatrice's speech. At this point, my reader might object that Benedick has in fact not
misconstrued the basic tenor of Beatrice's utterance; he or she might argue that Beatrice's hostile and neutral statements serve to mask her conflicted but nevertheless authentic attraction to Benedick and that he intuitively has picked up on this concealed resonance and somehow heard it for what it affectionately is. While this argument carries weight, I would point out that the inevitable ambiguity of Beatrice's and Benedick's dialogue, working with feelings of self-importance, causes each of them much more suffering and public embarrassment concerning their hidden feelings for each other than relatively unambiguous, trusted words of affection would. This is true simply because in the latter case a mode of communication which the world assumes, even if it does not usually practice, would allow their love to bloom naturally.

The physical and social contexts of utterances can significantly affect the designs of speakers intent on using ambiguous language to forge or strengthen social identities. Antonio states that his servant, “in a thick-pleach'd alley in mine orchard” (1.2.9-10), overheard Don Pedro telling Claudio that he plans to propose to Hero. Evidently the density of the foliage warps or muffles Don Pedro's speech, permitting Antonio's man to hear only part of the truth (that Don Pedro woos Hero on behalf of Claudio). In this instance, the context of an utterance determines its meaning as much as the simple mode of hearing does. That the villain Borachio hears the whole truth about Don Pedro's wooing indicates that the arras behind which he hides in a musty room, unlike the garden's foliage, does not in this case significantly damage acoustics. Hero's gentlewoman Margaret demonstrates the extent to which a speaker sometimes goes to neutralize a distorting interpretive context and recover an imagined integrity of self. When Margaret jokes that Hero's heart will “be heavier soon by the weight of a man,” Hero exclaims, “Fie upon thee, art not ashamed?” (3.4.25-26). Somewhat indignant, Margaret disavows the bawdy meaning of this jest: “Of what, lady? of speaking honorably? Is not marriage honorable in a beggar? Is not your lord honorable without marriage? I think you would have me say, saving your reverence, 'a husband.' And bad thinking do not wrest true speaking, I'll offend nobody. Is there any harm in ‘the heavier for a husband’? None, I think, and it be the right husband, and the right wife; otherwise 'tis light, and not heavy” (3.4.29-36). Margaret tellingly makes the point that a jest's innocuousness lies in the ear of the auditor. If a wife genuinely loves and respects her husband, nothing necessarily salacious attaches to her expression of the thought of her husband's weight during sexual intercourse. “A jest's prosperity lies in the ear / Of him that hears it,” Rosaline authoritatively pronounces in Love's Labour's Lost, “never in the tongue / Of him that makes it” (5.2.861-63). Margaret revises this truth so as to suggest that the existential context of a speaker's and auditor's thinking invests the broad ambiguity of speech with relatively accurate meaning.

Still, Margaret has made an obscene jest (to Hero's and our ears, at least), and the troublesome instability of speech has allowed her to escape responsibility for a possibly coarse intention. That Margaret should articulate the above-described principle of language interpretation is heavily ironic. Her bidding Borachio “a thousand times good night” (3.3.142-43) in the name of Hero (given her by Borachio) corrupts Claudio's faith in his beloved. Language is so imprecise that an auditor, suspiciously hearing it in a vile context, can wrench it to conform to a fantasy. Margaret vainly takes pride in her linguistic virtuosity and ability to wiggle out of responsibility for her words' meaning, but she suffers the consequences of Borachio's duplicity when her honestly meant good night (she seems to care for Borachio) goes awry and Leonato later faults her for her part in Hero's slander (5.4.4-6).

Such a nonessential property is speech that socially empowered characters such as Don Pedro and Leonato can appropriate (steal) subordinates' voices, reducing Claudio and Hero to either ventriloquism or silence. In the patriarchal hierarchy of Messina, empowering voices tend to concentrate in the Prince of Aragon, Don Pedro, and Leonato, the governor of Messina and Hero's father. Don Pedro autocratically wrenches Claudio's words of courtship away from the young lover. “Thou wilt be like a lover presently,” he tells Claudio, “And tire the hearer with a book of words”: “If thou dost love fair Hero, cherish it, / And I will break with her, and with her father, / And thou shalt have her” (1.1.286-90). Not only will Don Pedro conduct Claudio's suit to Leonato (a typically Elizabethan patriarchal arrangement), but he will also, unconventionally, speak Claudio's words of love to his beloved's own ears. Claudio's muteness includes the nonverbal signifier of his face, pale with love, which he thinks speaks his meaning far better than his own words could. “How
sweetly you do minister to love,” he gratefully tells Don Pedro, “That know love's grief by his complexion!” (1.1.292-93). Still, he would like to speak on his own behalf: “But lest my liking might too sudden seem, / I would have salv'd it with a longer treatise” (1.1.294-95). Don Pedro, however, peremptorily silences him: “What need the bridge much broader than the flood?” (1.1.296). The “flood,” of course, is Claudio's imagined passion for Hero; by saying that the lover need not describe it, and that he might briefly “bridge” it, Don Pedro patronizingly suggests that Claudio's love is narrow, relatively unsubstantial. What Claudio could never have supposed when he agreed to Don Pedro's “gracious” offer is the prince's plan to woo Hero on Claudio's behalf from behind a mask, a situation that makes his words of love indistinguishable from Claudio's to Hero's ear. “And in her bosom I'll unclasp my heart,” he tells Claudio, “And take her hearing prisoner with the force / And strong encounter of my amorous tale” (1.1.303-5). Don Pedro's powerful metaphor of the tyranny of speech includes as its victim not simply Hero, but Claudio too. Don Pedro has robbed Claudio of his voice in a way that neither Hero nor Claudio could ever have supposed.

Hero's father Leonato and her uncle Antonio generally dictate her speech and enforce her silence. Beatrice makes clear that Antonio's advice to Hero—“Well, niece, I trust you will be rul'd by your father” (2.1.46-47)—chiefly pertains to her speech. “Yes, faith,” Beatrice sarcastically responds: “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'” (2.1.48-52). Beatrice's facetious putting of words in silent, obedient Hero's mouth serves to stress the verbal dependency of Claudio's beloved in a patriarchal society. The second imputed utterance—“'Father, as it please me'”—strengthens this negative impression, mainly because no one, onstage or off, could imagine dutiful Hero voicing it. Recognizing Beatrice's insubordination, Leonato coarsely tries to quell it: “Well, niece, I hope to see you one day fitted with a husband” (2.1.57-58). As the obscene connotation of the word later more extensively indicates in Cymbeline, “fitted” implies a physical conformity of shape to the complementary male phallus that symbolizes female subordination in a patriarchy. In effect, Leonato crudely suggests that Beatrice's husband will one day, through the effect of his sexual power, reform her language. Cast as a solicitous wish, Leonato's utterance is in fact a harsh threat. That Beatrice ignores this warning and continues her witty, mutinous protest in no way liberates Hero's speech. Ignoring Beatrice's rebellion, Leonato reminds Hero that he has scripted the language of her courtship: “Daughter, remember what I told you: if the Prince do solicit you in that kind, you know your answer” (2.1.61-62). That we never hear Hero's response to this reminder—Beatrice speaks up again, telling Hero that she should “dance out the answer” to Don Pedro (2.1.63-73)—confirms Leonato's linguistic supremacy and her voicelessness.

The presence of socially privileged speakers continues to mute Claudio and Hero even in their betrothal. After Don Pedro has told Claudio that he has “woo'd in thy name” and won both Hero's and her father's consent to the wedding (facts that Leonato immediately confirms) (2.1.298-304), Beatrice must prod the lover: “Speak, Count, 'tis your cue” (2.1.305). Claudio's all-important pledge of love, however, minimizes the agency of language: “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 away myself for you, and dote upon the exchange” (2.1.306-9). Regarded in light of his distrust of other speakers' words, Claudio's opting for silence in the midst of several potent, linguistically aggrandizing men is understandable. As is Hero's. She speaks not an audible word in reply to her lover's proposal. “Speak, cousin,” irrepressible Beatrice urges, “or (if you cannot) stop his mouth with a kiss, and let not him speak neither” (2.1.310-11). All that shy, dutiful Hero can do is whisper; “My cousin tells him in his ear that he is in her heart” (2.1.315-16), Beatrice remarks. “And so she doth, cousin” (2.1.317), Claudio confirms. Suddenly Hero's silence, which has become a sign of patriarchal oppression in playgoers' minds, acquires positive value. Beatrice and Benedick's previously quoted dialogue indicates that Hero's unheard whispers constitute a private language whose privateness insures the communication of the purity of her thoughts and insulates them from the degradations of a totalitarian codification of verbal meaning. At this moment in the public context, Hero's language is, paradoxically, an eloquent silence. At the beginning of King Lear, Cordelia represents (and preserves) an integrity of speech in the midst of a rigged totalitarian discourse. But while attractive, her frank, public utterances begin a disastrous chain of events. Hero, in an admittedly
different context, succeeds where Cordelia fails because she forgoes public speech. For the moment she escapes danger because she enfolds a fine private language within an expressive public silence, a strategy apparently unavailable to Cordelia.

Paradoxically Hero’s clipped, unconventional language of the heart positively contrasts with the more attractive (because amusingly witty) effusive language of Beatrice that delivers her over to and imprisons her within a patriarchy. After some “masculine” banter with Don Pedro, Beatrice begs his pardon for its license. “I was born to speak all mirth and no matter” (2.1.330), she explains. “Your silence most offends me, and to be merry best becomes you” (2.1.331-32), Don Pedro patronizingly replies. Beatrice’s male banter paradoxically works to subordinate her in a male circle. Obviously the prince applies a double standard here. The socially presumptuous banter that a woman like Beatrice engages in with men would be offensive in Hero, whereas a silent wiseacre like Beatrice would deprive him and his comrades of amusement. Leonato firmly puts Beatrice in her place when he abruptly says, “Niece, will you look to the things I told you of?” (2.1.337-38). Beatrice’s submissive reply—“I cry you mercy, uncle. By your Grace’s pardon” (2.1.339-40)—reveals that at this moment she adopts an early modern woman’s idiom and accepts her socially and linguistically subordinate role.

The public nature of Hero’s nuptials precludes an integrity-preserving private language; consequently, she finds herself forced to participate, with personally disastrous results, in a compromising public dialogue ruled by men with masculinist assumptions. Patriarchal attempts to control the wedding ceremony immediately become apparent. When Friar Francis asks Claudio, “You come hither, my lord, to marry this lady,” and the groom abruptly answers “No” (4.1.4-5), the linguistic autocrat Leonato takes charge and reinterprets his blunt reply: “To be married to her, friar: you come to marry her” (4.1.6-7). Uncertainty about the relation of speech acts to one another, and the plausibility of hearing an utterance within related but different social contexts, make language interpretation ambiguous. This fact permits Leonato to hear Claudio’s negative in an ingenious but incorrect way, prompting him to remind the friar that the speech act of marriage is properly the churchman’s and not Claudio’s. Rattled, Leonato appropriates Claudio’s voice when the ceremony reaches a potentially dangerous requirement:

FRIAR:
If either of you know any inward impediment why you should not be conjoin’d, I charge you on your souls to utter it.

CLAUD:
Know you any, Hero?

HERO:
None, my lord.

FRIAR:
Know you any, count?

LEON:
I dare make his answer, none.

(4.1.11-17)

This patriarchal appropriation of speech sends Claudio into the rage that shatters the wedding ceremony and ends in his cruel claim that Hero has fornicated with Borachio. Claudio’s following words incidentally
describe Leonato's presumptuous theft of his own speech as much as they do Borachio's bold stealing Hero's honor: "O, what men dare do! What men may do! What men daily do, not knowing what they do!" (4.1.18-19). Leonato's appropriation makes Claudio feel powerless, and he compensates by redirecting his angry frustration onto Hero, who seems generally powerless and so someone lesser than himself at this moment. Thus he explodes against the supposed fornicator perhaps before he had planned to do so. In keeping with the play's emphasis on the appropriation of speech, even body language is seized upon and misconstrued. During their wedding ceremony, Claudio claims that Hero is “but the sign and semblance of her honour”:

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.

(4.1.32-41)

Hero does not even get to translate the “speech” of her blushes—that she is shyly modest. Interpreted by angry Claudio, her vascular language proclaims blood corrupted by guilty lust. Likewise, disconsolate Leonato later exclaims, “Could she here deny / The [supposedly damning] story that is printed in her blood?” (4.1.121-22). Privileged males rob mute Hero even of the speech of her body—yet it was that physical language, in the form of Margaret's embrace of Borachio, that they were all too ready to “hear” and credit, to Hero's demise.

Labeled a “rotten orange” (4.1.31), Hero manages only one utterance in the midst of Leonato's and Claudio's dialogue concerning her supposed promiscuity. When Claudio asserts that he loved Hero as a brother might, with “Bashful sincerity,” she protests, “And seem'd I ever otherwise to you?” (4.1.54-55). Her remark, however, only serves to launch Claudio into a condemnation of her imputed seeming. Finally, Don John insists that Claudio's nasty allegations are true (4.1.67). Picking up Don John's last word, stunned Hero can only echo “‘True’! O God!” (4.1.68). This three-word utterance captures the essence of Hero's integrity. Ironically, the exclamation “O God!” reflects the piety that makes Hero's utterances true. Her three words “speak” her nature as no other words could. And yet they include a man's word (“true”) put in her mouth, in this case by false Don John.

Hero's discourse, even in this utterance that genuinely expresses her, thus partly derives from a socially privileged male statement (Don John's). More important, when heard within the public arena of masculinist prejudgment and condemnation, Hero's exclamation can be misheard as an admission of guilt. When the agonized Hero asks, “What kind of catechizing call you this?” (4.1.78), Claudio coldly replies, “To make you answer truly to your name” (4.1.79). Claudio would fit Hero with the name “common stale,” but she protests that her name reflects her inner purity. Only in her name does Hero find a word her own, all her own: “Is it not Hero? Who can blot that name / With any just reproach?” (4.1.80-81). It can do so because the name of Hero, in Claudio's estimation, is “now the name of an unchaste woman.” Viewed from one perspective, the Hero of Marlowe's Hero and Leander (1598) appears an idealized heroine of love (e.g., ll. 1-50, 117-30). But the celebrated Elizabethan epyllion took the representation of Ovidian eroticism to new extremes, and the on-a-pedestal heroine also appeared a gamesome young woman (e.g., ll. 494-96, 502-16, 529-36). In fact, like the name Cressida, Hero in a matter of months during 1598 had come for Shakespeare's playgoers to denote a commonplace—a literary stereotype—of an idealized woman of surprisingly erotic behavior.
Hero could be considered a “stale” in two senses: as Claudio's whorish woman and as a familiar commonplace of eroticism. In this latter case, Hero's very name (a staleness) conspires against her, muffling in Claudio's ears the singular integrity of her utterances. Stripped finally of even the protective grace of her name, Hero in despair swoons in a death-like trance. “Hath no man's dagger here a point for me?” (4.1.109), her father moans just before her collapse. Men's words, however, have amounted to seemingly lethal equivalents in his daughter's case. Hamlet's spoken daggers in the ear threaten to become an equally lethal metaphor in *Much Ado about Nothing*.27

Granted Shakespeare's portrayal in *Much Ado* of the several inadequacies and failures of speech analyzed in the preceding pages, the play's audience wonders how words, which after all constitute a primary medium of drama, can effect the prosperous outcome of comedy. The reification of language, first as a talismanic name and then as authoritative writing, appears to offer a solution. Throughout *Much Ado*, characters insist upon virtues inherent in name, initially understood to be that of reputation. Concerning Leonato's question about gentlemen lost in the recent battle, a messenger responds, “But few of any sort, and none of name” (1.1.6). Later, during the gulling of Beatrice, Ursula says that “For shape, for bearing, argument, and valour,” Benedick “Goes foremost in report through Italy” (3.1.96-97)—a fact (rather than a fabrication) that urges Hero to say, “Indeed he hath an excellent good name” (3.1.98). The powerful condensation of reputation in name leads Claudio, albeit wrongheadedly, to try to make Hero, in the tradition of church catechism, “answer truly [in a negative spirit] to [her] name” (4.1.79).

Historically, the prince's name compresses many more efficacious virtues than simply that of his reputation. Most of these additional attributed virtues in late medieval/early modern cultures possessed quasi-supernatural properties. At first Shakespeare in *Much Ado* skeptically dramatizes this dimension of the word. In the punchy dialogue of Dogberry with the Watch, the playwright appears intent on satirizing characters' stereotypic trust in the magical nature of the royal name. Told that they are to “comprehend” (apprehend) all vagrants, the Watch hears Dogberry conclude that they “are to bid any man stand, in the Prince's name” (3.3.25-26). But the supposed talismanic power of the prince's name disappears in the ridiculous dialogue which follows Dogberry's injunctions:

2. Watch:

> How if a will not stand?

DOG:

> Why then, take no note of him, but let him go, and presently call the rest of the watch together, and thank God you are rid of a knave.

VERG:

> If he will not stand when he is bidden, he is none of the Prince's subjects.

(3.3.27-32)

Here the Second Watchman, George Seacole, the literate neighbor, reveals a distrust of the purportedly essential force of the prince's name. This skeptical attitude gets reinforced by Dogberry's and Verges' absurd advice that the Watch should ignore a vagrant commanded to stop in the prince's name who instead walks away from them. Despite this skeptical staging, later, when Seacole “present[s] [represents] the Prince's own person” (3.3.73) and orders Conrade and Borachio, “in the Prince's name, stand!” (3.3.159), the villains obey his command. Since the Watch (Seacole included) immediately reveal to the villains their stupidity by believing that Deformed is a flesh-and-blood thief, and since Conrade and Borachio meekly obey the order to accompany the constable, playgoers deduce that the arresting force lies not in these obvious bumpkins, but in the prince's name. To the considerable degree that the play's comic resolution hinges on the apprehension of
Borachio and his forthcoming recorded admission of guilt, the prince's name uttered by his deputy proves redemptive.29

Seacole's ability to reify a truth-producing word is not limited to his role as the prince's deputy. “To be a well-favoured man is the gift of fortune,” Dogberry tells him, “but to write and read comes by nature” (3.3.14-16). By nurture—not nature—Shakespeare and his contemporaries would most likely say. By being able to freeze through writing the evanescent, shifting, unreliable word, Seacole adumbrates a remedy for the near-tragedy wrought in Much Ado by slander and inherently imprecise speech.30 It is his “pen and inkhorn” (3.5.54) that fix the verbal testimony of Borachio and provide the record by which Leonato, Don Pedro, and Claudio conclusively learn that an innocent woman has been roundly slandered.31 “Only get the learned writer to set down our excommunication [examination, communication],” Dogberry ebulliently commands Verges, “and meet me at the jail” (3.5.58-60). Shakespeare stresses the salvatory effect of the reified word by staging the written transcription of testimony in act 4, scene 2, the comic episode of the malefactors' examination.32 Despite the egregious malapropisms of Dogberry and company on this occasion (a reminder of the play's several problems of language), the Watch's indictment is recorded (4.2.39-59).33 And it is done so, appropriately enough, in the prince's efficacious name: “Masters,” Dogberry addresses the Watch, “I charge you in the Prince's name accuse these men” (4.2.37-38). Nevertheless, one must realize that the pronouncement of the prince's name in Much Ado does not, strictly speaking, ideally state the truth or contain a truth; rather, it is an agent of secular power that helps discover or determine the truth. Shakespeare throughout his plays implies that the exercise of secular power to some degree always diminishes or impairs some kind of truth. The marks of physical abuse apparent on the pinioned Conrade's and Borachio's faces at the beginning of the interrogation scene in Kenneth Branagh's recent film version of the play tell audiences that the power of the prince's name may have limits, may need an even more powerful supplement for the complete revelation of a social or a romantic truth. Violated sadistically in this case is a truth about Christian charity (or one about humane treatment). More promising for the reclamation of language in Much Ado than the prince's name is the written poetic word.

The beneficial results of freezing unreliable, unconfirmable speech by writing it down also appear in Benedick's and Beatrice's tumultuous courtship. At play’s end, Don Pedro's plot to cause the pair to fall irrevocably in love through hearsey comes to nothing when they tell one another that their reported and overheard protestations of love meant nothing. The unconfirmability of uttered speech, vanished into air without a trace, holds hostage the actually affectionate but once again distrustful pair. That is, it does so until Claudio and Hero produce stolen love sonnets of Benedick and Beatrice (5.4.85-90). Their secret writings arrest their words for all to read, conclusively trapping them and giving them the blessed relief of being able to acknowledge their genuine but hitherto denied love. “A miracle! here's our own hands against our hearts,” Benedick exclaims; “Come, I will have thee, but by this light I take thee for pity” (5.4.91-93). Rather than showing their hands against their hearts, however, Beatrice's and Benedick's amorous handwriting complies with the hidden yearnings of their hearts. The concord that the written legal record creates for the community of Messina has its counterpart in the relatively integrated personalities that the written poetic word makes possible in Beatrice and Benedick. In keeping with its biblical—especially Johannine—power, the imaginative word in Much Ado can make a man and woman, in the sense that the lovers' poetry gives them the first basis for the ultimate confidence to recreate themselves through the sacrament of marriage into one sanctified flesh. If spoken slander undoes them, the written poetic word promises their recreation.

But does spoken language have any restorative capability in Much Ado? Answering this question involves the subject of physical language. Friar Francis' ability to read the “words” of silent Hero's face leads to a declaration that ultimately saves her marriage. Whereas Claudio misinterprets the message of Hero's blushes (4.1.33-41), the friar correctly “hears” what they “utter”:

I have

A thousand blushing apparitions
Friar Francis silently reads the words “encoded” in the “book” of Hero’s face.  

Benedick was fooled by Leonato’s white beard as the guarantor of Hero’s father’s words (2.3.118-20).  

The friar, however, explicitly invokes the nonverbal signifiers of his own advanced age, his priesthood, and the facts of his scholarly, reverent life as validators of his uttered judgment. He, of all the principal male characters in the play, is least caught up in the power games that distort and falsify what is said and heard. Playgoers gather that his piety, his wise chastity of life, determines his ability to perceive and speak the truth. Leonato initially rejects the friar’s conclusion, perhaps because the churchman’s authority does not derive from the political/sexual patriarchy that Hero’s father represents. Nevertheless, Leonato eventually credits the friar’s scheme for either reviving Claudio’s love for Hero or disposing of her among a religious sisterhood. This scheme entails the advice that Leonato broadcast Hero’s “death,” the report prompting Claudio’s imagination to revalue what has been lost. Friar Francis’ formulation of the dynamics of revaluing what has been lost amounts to the most eloquent, moving speech in Much Ado (4.1.210-43). It does, with Benedick’s urging, win over Leonato, and it is a qualified success.  

These facts testify to the source of the speech’s authority, a learned, relatively pure speaker, disinterested in whether his scheme might bring him social prestige. In this respect, he contrasts sharply with his counterpart, Friar Lawrence in Romeo and Juliet, whose similar scheme is hatched partly to bring him credit for reconciling the Capulets and Montagues. Its failure theoretically is in keeping with the impurity—the vanity—of its conception.

The qualified success of Friar Francis’ language contradicts Leonato’s opinion about the ineffectuality of similar spoken advice. This opinion deserves quotation. Suffering from the imagined sin of his daughter and the ruin of his name, Leonato tells his brother Antonio that he could only credit the uttered counsel of a man exactly like himself, one who has been wronged by the sexual lapse of a daughter once dearly loved. “But there is no such man,” Leonato moans,

Can counsel and speak comfort to that grief  
Which they themselves not feel; but tasting it,  
Their counsel turns to passion, which before  
Would give preceptial medicine to rage,  
Fetter strong madness in a silken thread,  
Charm ache with air, and agony with words.  
No, no, ’tis all men’s office to speak patience  
To those that wring under the load of sorrow,  
But no man’s virtue nor sufficiency  
To be so moral when he shall endure  
The like himself. Therefore give me no counsel:  
My griefs cry louder than advertisement.

(5.1.20-31)
Leonato has apparently forgotten that a man most unlike himself, Friar Francis, counseled patience in language so charged that Leonato agreed to defer immediate judgment and participate in the saving plan proposed. A relatively dispassionate priest who has never had a daughter successfully inculcates a patience within Leonato that gives the friar's plan time to work. In one sense, Friar Francis' sayings have proved medicinal.

Given the role of the friar's language in Leonato's ultimate rehabilitation, playgoers conclude that Hero's father's part in the subsequent linguistic process of Claudio's recreation of Hero is fitting. As part of the friar's stratagem for renovating Claudio's love, Leonato commands the young man to compose a poetic epitaph, hang it on Hero's tomb, and “sing it to her bones” (5.1.279), actions which amount to recompense for participating in potentially lethal slander. Act 5, scene 3 stages this ritual behavior. Claudio's epitaph immortalizes Hero through the proclaimed fame of her chastity, slandered by villains. Like those of Shakespeare's sonnets, the text of Much Ado has survived time's ravages. In both cases, the poetic word grants a kind of eternity—to the Young Man of the sonnets and to Hero, “praising her [even after the Renaissance Claudio is] dumb” (dead) (5.3.10). Claudio's recreative words compensate for his earlier destructive language. His song has an effect both cathartic (for the speaker) and resurrectional (for the subject):

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.

(5.3.12-21)

The notion that this song should be sung “Till death be uttered” has purgative overtones. While “uttered” may mean “fully expressed, i.e. adequately lamented,” the word also connotes “finally articulated, finally expelled.” The idea that speech can triumph over mortality gets reinforced by the proximate command that graves open to yield their dead. The conceit entails enlisting wraith-like mourners who can augment the volume of laments. By circling the tomb chanting the song and vowing to repeat the ceremony yearly (5.3.23), Claudio and Don Pedro, through incantatory means, intend to purge their sin and cast out (off) death. This last effect involves not so much a miracle as it does permanent release from feelings of morbidity and despair.

Nevertheless, metaphoric resurrection gets attached to Claudio's and Don Pedro's conceit in the suggestion of death's expulsion. Playgoers sense that privileged speech (elevated by being sung poetry) is beginning to work in Claudio's mind the resurrection of Hero. Intellectually, the charming effects of this self-begot language stimulate Claudio's imagination in the idealizing of Hero's image and the reclamation of his love. What was dead comes alive. And it does so through the force of poetic words, further empowered by their utterance in a ritual context. Late in the play, when Claudio and Don Pedro insist that Antonio's “daughter” is “Another Hero!” “The former Hero! Hero that is dead!” (5.4.62, 65), Leonato calmly explains, “She died, my lord, but whiles her slander liv'd” (5.4.66). His remark reemphasizes the main fact of the epitaph scene—that Hero was reborn when near-magical words of repentance and catharsis superseded (killed) the slander with which Hero's loss was synonymous.

Likewise, adversity and the self-examination that arises from it reform, partially at least, Benedick's speech. Together they work to dissolve the self-importance that distorts and inflates language. Benedick experiences an uncharacteristic impoverishment of speech as a result of Claudio's brutal destruction of the marriage ceremony and slander of Hero: “For my part I am so attir'd in wonder,” he admits, “I know not what to say”
(4.1.144-45). Related to this inarticulateness, his love for Beatrice makes him realize, perhaps for one of the first times in his life, that he can have feelings that the most clever playing with language cannot convey. Attempting to express his passion for Beatrice in the form of a sonnet, he discovers, “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, nor I cannot woo in festival terms” (5.2.34-40). The “halting” sonnet that Benedick finally manages to write is valuable as inscribed public proof of his love rather than as an adequate conveyor of that love. In this respect, he contrasts with Claudio, renovated through the vehicle of poetry. Nevertheless, love—as it does in a somewhat different way for Claudio—joins with adversity to correct, that is to say, to chasten and simplify Benedick's speech.

Like Shakespeare’s King Henry V with regard to Katherine Princess of France, Benedick eschews “festival terms” and becomes disposed to woo Beatrice in plain, direct, unequivocal language. This plain idiom is heard almost immediately in Benedick's unprecedented declining a match of jests with Beatrice. When he says that only foul words passed between himself and Claudio and demands a kiss, she jokes: “Foul words is but foul wind, and foul wind is but foul breath, and foul breath is noisome; therefore I will depart unkiss’d” (5.2.49-51). Benedick, however, protests, “Thou has frighted the word out of its right sense, so forcible is thy wit. 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” (5.2.52-56). Significantly, Benedick objects for the first time in Much Ado to the disruptive, scornful jesting that has distinguished his language. The key phrase in Benedick's quoted protest is “tell thee plainly”—a mode of speech auditors would never have predicted from Benedick. His criticism of jesting necessarily entails an abatement of the vain need to call attention to himself through the supposedly amusing (but actually hostile) punning disruption of others' speech meanings. Don Pedro earlier foresaw Benedick's capacity for authentic speech. “He hath a heart as sound as a bell,” Don Pedro asserted, “and his tongue is the clapper; for what his heart thinks, his tongue speaks” (3.2.11-13). While in its local context Don Pedro's remark has slightly negative overtones (Benedick lacks an internal censor of impulsive speech that consequently rings a bit brazenly), his judgment forecasts Benedick's ability to articulate genuine heart-felt speech that is not overly calculated.

The negative connotations of Don Pedro's statement suggest that speech in Much Ado can be tempered but not wholly reformed. Benedick could be said, at play's end, to approximate roughly Beatrice's model of a tempered speaker midway between Don John's sullen silences and terseness and an uneducated Benedick's disruptive, oblique garrulousness. Benedick does not completely exorcise his jesting spirit after his criticism of Beatrice's punning word associations (see, for example, 5.2.82-86, 5.2.102-4, and 5.4.48-51), but his manifestation of a new confidence to withstand barbed witticisms without responding in kind reflects his tempering of a problematic speech trait. Hearing Don Pedro tease him with being “‘Benedick, the married man’” (5.4.98), he steadfastly pronounces, “I'll tell thee what, Prince; a college of wit-crackers cannot flout me out of my humour. 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” (5.4.99-107).

Benedick realizes that a person may with genuine impunity contradict one of his or her previous statements, as long as the speaker understands that the fault lies not in language but in the essentially inconstant humanity of the speaker. This inconstancy—this “giddiness”—will always preclude the ideal tempering of one's speech. Nevertheless, a less-than-perfect tempering of speech and the kind of verbal contradiction represented by Benedick can be harmless and blameless as long as speakers' self-awareness of their own inconstancy breeds the humility in everyone not to make too much of a linguistic inconsistency or fault. Coupled with this humility is the self-respect that allows scornful jests to never influence one's settled opinions and behavior, ridiculous though these attributes at times may be. Benedick, with these insights expressed in relatively unadorned, direct speech, fulfills in Much Ado the secondary etymology of his name: “Speak Well”
While Benedick's name will never achieve the talismanic power of the Prince of Messina's, it does at last truly capture and express a palpable new understanding refined in the crucible of hearsay and slander.

Notes

3. Anne Barton, introduction to Much Ado about Nothing, in The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 369. Since the word “guarded” for Shakespeare's contemporaries could mean both “protected” and “ornamented,” the secondary connotation of the word in Benedick's quip ironically conveys the speaker's use of puns and facetious speech to protect a vulnerable, straight-thinking, straight-talking self. Here he imagines that Don Pedro uses jests for the same purpose.
4. A. P. Rossiter, Angel with Horns and Other Shakespeare Lectures, ed. Graham Storey (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1961), 65-81, esp. 68: “Cupid is not responsible for calumny; but ‘hearsay’ is a main force in both love-plots: each is about its effects on proud, self-willed, self-centered and self-admiring creatures.”
6. Carol Thomas Neely, in Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), notes that “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’ (1.1.183)” (44).
9. For the dramatic importance of this idea in The Tempest, see Maurice Hunt, Shakespeare's Romance of the Word (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1990), 117-19.
12. Mark Taylor, in “Presence and Absence in Much Ado about Nothing,” Centennial Review 33 (1989): 1-12, has argued that Borachio's violation of chronology in telling his tale merely betrays the Spanish etymology of his name—“borracho” (drunkard). But while Borachio may have just emptied several cans of ale, he remains sufficiently sober to make his purported digression on fashion illustrate humankind's propensity for giddiness, for inconstancy in all things. When impatient Conrade interjects, “But art not thou thyself giddy with the fashion too, that thou hast shifted out of thy tale into telling me of the fashion?” (3.3.136-38), Borachio carefully answers, “Not so, neither; but know that I have tonight wooed Margaret, the Lady Hero's gentlewoman, by the name of Hero”
(3.3.139-41). Borachio’s reply strongly implies that he calculated his anatomy of fashion to exemplify the universal trait of inconstancy that Margaret practices when she abandons loyalty to her mistress for participation in her lover’s strange charade of switching names. In other words, Borachio’s strategy may be partly designed to excuse Margaret’s behavior. For other arguments that Borachio’s account of fashion does not constitute a digression, see John A. Allen, “Dogberry,” Shakespeare Quarterly 24 (1973): 35-53, esp. 40-43; and David Ormerod, “Faith and Fashion in Much Ado about Nothing,” Shakespeare Survey 25 (1972): 93-105, esp. 93-95.

13. “In the sixteenth century,” Margreta de Grazia argues, “it was assumed that defects in man brought about confused speech; in the seventeenth century, it became widely held that confused speech brings on many of the defects in man” (“Shakespeare’s View of Language: An Historical Perspective,” Shakespeare Quarterly 29 [1978]: 381). De Grazia’s judgment is uncannily justified by the facts that Much Ado most likely straddles the two centuries and that in it, Shakespeare depicts both of the relationships that De Grazia describes.


15. Anthony B. Dawson, in “Much Ado about Signifying,” Studies in English Literature 22 (1982): 211-21, esp. 215, also claims that this dialogue is about Benedick’s preoccupation with making others’ words mean what he would have them signify. Dawson asserts that “[i]n general [in Much Ado], language, as a system of messages, is consistently, comically, called into question: further messages are intercepted, misinterpreted, overheard in a variety of ways that move the plot forward and pose problems of interpretation for the characters” (212).


17. The Riverside Shakespeare (See note 3).

18. Camille Wells Slight has argued that Much Ado “is centrally concerned with the social nature of language—with the power of language and with language as an articulation of power” (“The Unauthorized Language of Much Ado about Nothing,” in The Elizabethan Theatre XII, ed. A. L. Magnusso and C. E. McGee [Toronto: P. D. Meany, 1993], 116). Slight anticipates several of my points—such as that about this comedy’s characters’ “talk about the problematics of language” (114) in the play’s opening scenes (113-15)—but her line of argument and evidence remain essentially different from mine.

19. Michael Taylor, in “Much Ado about Nothing: The Individual in Society,” Essays in Criticism 23 (1973): 146-53, argues that the dialogue presently under analysis (2.1.46-52) joins with other passages in the play to associate certain traits of Beatrice with more extreme, pernicious counterparts in Don John: “Like Don John, she appears to be totally antagonistic to any compulsion from without, jealously guarding the freedom of her individual will” (146-47). I would add that in the present case, that freedom involves the right of a woman to speak and be heard in her own right, a deserved liberty that makes Beatrice’s rebellion different in kind from Don John’s.


21. David Ormerod alternatively judges that Leonato’s harsh remark (2.1.57-58), “if we discount the lewd joke, is tantamount to saying that a man is no more than the clothes he wears” (“Faith and Fashion,” 96)—in this case the “fashionable” woman “fitted” to him.

22. Citing these lines, John Drakakis claims that Leonato “transforms Hero’s body into a ‘writing’ … lamenting her loss of value as a signifier in the masculine discourse of possession” (“Trust and
23. The quoted opinion is that of Anne Barton in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 386.
25. Like Drakakis, Slichts concludes that Hero, “dehumanized by being deprived of language … to her father's eyes becomes not a speaking subject but the objectified printed text of the story Claudio has told: 'the story that is printed in her blood'” (“Unauthorized Language,” 121)—printed also, I would add, in a text written by Christopher Marlowe.
26. Jean Howard concludes that “when Hero hears herself named whore at her wedding, she does not contest that construction of herself; she swoons beneath its weight. It is as if there were no voice with which to contest the forces inscribing her in the order of fallen ‘woman’ women. … What Claudio gets [at play's end] is the still-silent Hero, the blank sheet upon which men write whore or goddess as their fears or desires dictate” (“Renaissance Anti-theatricality and the Politics of Gender and Rank in *Much Ado about Nothing*,” in *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*, ed. Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor [New York: Methuen, 1987], 179 and 181).
27. The motif of imperfect speech in *Much Ado* symbolically condenses in Balthasar's claim that his “bad … voice” slanders the musical songs that he sings (2.3.44-45). After he sings “Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more,” Benedick jokes, “And he had been a dog that should have howled thus, they would have hanged him, and I pray God his bad voice bode no mischief” (2.3.79-81). Benedick confirms the notion of a bad voice ruining an exquisite message. The episode assumes an emblematic significance in the flawed Messinian world of words.
28. Focusing upon Genesis 2:19-20, wherein God parades the animals by Adam to encourage him to name them, early modern commentators such as Richard Mulcaster (1582) and Joshua Sylvester (1592) extrapolated the idea that Adam's intuitive naming the creatures instantaneously gave him knowledge of their essences. (For the historical development of this idea, see William C. Carroll, *The Great Feast of Language in *“Love's Labour's Lost”* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976], 12-13). *Richard II* constitutes Shakespeare's fullest analysis of the theory that the ruler's name (and his naming) have supernatural properties and effects. In respect to this, see James L. Calderwood, *Metadrama in Shakespeare's Henriad: “Richard II” to “Henry V”* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 13.
29. Phoebe S. Spinrad, in “Dogberry Hero: Shakespeare's Comic Constables in Their Communal Context,” *Studies in Philology* 89 (1992): 161-78, judges that “[s]ince Dogberry invokes ‘the Prince's name’ when briefing his deputies, he is obviously aware of the bureaucrat channels to which he is responsible” (165). My analysis, however, indicates that this invocation involves much more than bureaucratic deference. Nevertheless, René Girard asserts that “there is one more reason for the general instability of opinion in *Much Ado about Nothing*. This is the prince himself, around whom everyone revolves, but who cannot provide a stable center for the very reason that he is just as decentered and mimetic as everybody else” (“Love by Hearsay,” 88). My analysis concludes that while the Prince of Messina may to some degree be “decentered,” his name becomes a central deed in the play. In this respect, he contrasts with Don John who, as John Drakakis has pointed out, lacks a legitimate name, a fact which precludes the lasting power to name socially or create verbally (“Trust and Transgression,” 73).
30. Jonathan Goldberg, in *Writing Matter: From the Hands of the English Renaissance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), provides extensive evidence for the early modern English belief that the word inscribed by handwriting invests the oral word with diverse social energies and efficacies.
31. While 3.5.53-55 clearly indicates Shakespeare's intention to make Seacole the recorder of the malefactors' examination, the staging of that event (4.2) suggests that the Town Clerk (or sexton) may have performed the role in original performances. While Seacole is present in this latter episode, Dogberry exclaims, “where's the sexton? Let him write down ‘the Prince's officer coxcomb’” and “O
that he [the Town Clerk] were here to write me down an ass!” (4.2.67-68, 72-73). (Dogberry's second utterance occurs moments after the Town Clerk's exit, at 4.2.63.) Nevertheless, my point about the value of the written as opposed to the spoken word in Much Ado's subplot stands irrespective of the identity of the transcriber in act 4, scene 2.

32. Spinrad remarks that Dogberry does not appear “to be liable to an unpopular constable's problem of having literate but malicious neighbors falsify what they are reading and writing for him. Dogberry's literate deputies obey his orders, and the Sexton (or Town Clerk) who transcribes the testimony in the examination of prisoners is careful to guide the testimony into the correct channels” (“Dogberry Hero,” 164).

33. Throughout his career Shakespeare implies that truth in speech has something to do with rationality and then something to do with qualities beyond (or apart) from rationality: qualities such as the madness of King Lear, the stupidity of Bottom, and the piety, virtually muted in Hero's case, of Leonato's daughter and of Friar Francis in Much Ado. In his denseness and malapropisms, Dogberry invites comparison with Bottom, but a search of the text of Much Ado turns up no speech of Dogberry's comparable to Bottom's garbled yet nevertheless authoritative echo of passages from 1 Corinthians in his awestruck formulation of supernatural mysteries that he has experienced (A Midsummer Night's Dream, The Riverside Shakespeare 4.1.203-17). Shakespeare gives certain marginalized characters—the biblical last who will one day be first—an inside track on true speech (which is close to silence) because their authority appears guaranteed by something other than socially privileged male statements, in short, by God. Dogberry joins Friar Francis and Hero as one of the more pious characters in Much Ado (God's name is repeatedly on his lips), and he approaches the truth-speaking of the other two characters but he does not quite match their achievement, perhaps because a vain insistence on social prestige (power) afflicts his speech. The nature of Dogberry's comic malapropisms betrays his pitiful desire that auditors perceive him to be more educated and socially prominent than he will ever be (e.g., 4.2.75-83). Jean Howard has concluded that Dogberry's and Verges' “gift of intuition is bought at the price of speech and rationality. Dogberry and Verges exist almost outside of language, and this displacement denies them any real social power” (“Renaissance Antitheatricality,” 177).


35. Benedick receives comic poetic punishment for his engrained distrust of others' speech when, during the scene of the trick played upon him, Leonato's white beard seems to him to confirm the truth of the old man's actually deceitful words of Beatrice's amorous behavior. “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). But knavery does lurk behind this cliché of truthfulness. Despite his verbal acumen, Benedick labors under some mistaken stereotypes of kinds of speakers and their language, one of which is that elderly years and the whiteness of a beard always promise the truth of speech by a possessor of these attributes. In this respect, Benedick appears verbally naive.

36. The friar predicts that Claudio will revalue Hero when he hears that “she died upon his words” (4.1.223). In fact, he repairs his idea of her only after he learns from Borachio that she was the victim of Don John's slanderous plot (5.1.225-46). The report of her wronged innocence, not the narration of her death from his rejection, moves Claudio to reimagine her worth. “Sweet Hero!” Claudio concludes; “Now thy image doth appear / In the rare semblance that I lov'd it first” (5.1.245-46). This notorious discrepancy does not override Claudio's general conformity to the friar's psychological script. Among the many commentators on the play who have remarked this discrepancy are Barbara K. Lewalski, “Love, Appearance, and Reality: Much Ado about Something,” Studies in English Literature 8 (1968): 235-51, esp. 249-50; Carol Cook, “‘The Sign of Her Honor’: Reading Gender Difference in Much Ado about Nothing,” PMLA 101 (1986): 186-202, esp. 196-97; and Neely, Broken Nuptials, 51-53. Neely remarks that “only in Antony and Cleopatra and Cymbeline does the mock death by itself lead to the guilt, penitence, and forgiveness predicted by the Friar [of Much Ado]” (52).

38. My argument for the importance of the tomb/epitaph scene for the potential success of Claudio and Hero's later marriage questions the negative overtones of Neely's claim that “Claudio performs a ritualistic but impersonal penance” (*Broken Nuptials*, 55).

39. Several critics have charted a reformation of Benedick's character in the latter acts of *Much Ado*. Among them is Jensen, who notes that “[s]omewhere between Beatrice's account of Benedick as boaster, coward, trencherman, and affliction and the messenger's report of a ‘good soldier’ and one who ‘hath done good service … in these wars’ … exists the Benedick who will emerge later in the play” (*Shakespeare and the Ends of Comedy*, 50).

40. Lewalski identifies Benedick's play-ending assessment of humankind's “giddiness” as an insight comparable to the Neoplatonic mode of knowledge that love brings: “Benedick explicitly renounces foolish consistency, and his observation that ‘man is a giddy thing’ (V.iv.108) signals the lovers' new affirmation of the whole range of human life and activity” (“Love, Appearance, and Reality,” 245).

41. Critics generally agree that the primary Latin etymology of Benedick's name is “‘Benedictus,’ he who is blessed” (Humphreys' Introduction of *Much Ado* 87), a counterpart to “‘Beatrix,’ she who blesses” (88). Considered in light of the two characters' painful mutual gibes, the complementary primary etymologies appear highly ironic.

**Much Ado about Nothing (Vol. 67): Further Reading**

**CRITICISM**


*Investigates the role of messages in the play, including an examination of the characters who deliver the messages, and the ways in which the messages are received, interpreted, and misinterpreted.*


*Studies the thematic and structural relevance of Christian doctrine relating to the treatment of humility and faith in Much Ado about Nothing.*


*Offers a mixed appraisal of the 1998 Stratford Festival production of Much Ado about Nothing, 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.”*


*Suggests that in Much Ado about Nothing Shakespeare intended to incorporate the range and fluidity found in The Merchant of Venice and the harmony found in the various elements of A Midsummer Night's Dream.*

Explores the role of the social forces at work in Messina, suggesting that all the characters, not just Don John and/or Claudio, share in the responsibility for what transpires in the play.


Noting that their assessment of the play is at odds with most critical views, the critics assert that the theme of the play is honor, the play's spirit is more reflective than joyful, and that courtship is depicted as a serious threat to masculine honor.


Applauds a 2001 South Coast Repertory production of Much Ado about Nothing directed by Mark Rucker, commenting that in style, the production resembled a film from Hollywood's Golden Age.


Argues that Much Ado about Nothing reflects Shakespeare's harshest criticism of the weaknesses inherent in romantic love.


Examines several absences or silences within the play, noting that within these absences characters such as Claudio see concealed aspects of themselves revealed.

**Much Ado about Nothing (Vol. 78): Introduction**

**Much Ado about Nothing**

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 “cuteley 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 forswn 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:

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.
Boys, apes, braggarts, Jacks, milksops! ... 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 Elizabthan 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:

Confirm'd, confirm'd! O, that is stronger made
Which was before barr'd up with ribs of iron!
Would the two princes lie? And Claudio lie,
Who lov'd her so that, speaking of her foulness,
Wash'd it with tears? Hence from her! Let her die.

(IV.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 disdain'd of all than to ...

CON.

Can you make no use of your discontent?

JOHN.

I make all use of it, for I use it only.

Enter Borachio.

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 I can give you intelligence of an intended marriage.

JOHN.

Will it serve for any model to build mischief on? What is he for a fool that betroths himself to unquietness?

(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
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-pac...
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 such kind of men, the less you meddle or make with them, why, the more is for your honesty.

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 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.

VERG.

You have been always called a merciful man, partner.
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.

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 murmur 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.

**Criticism: Overviews And General Studies: 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 ridiculing parody 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 naturalistically 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 extremities 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 goot 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 ancienry; 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 disparagement 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 avoids them with great discretion, or undertakes them with a most Christian-like fear.

(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 anticomic 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 foolers.

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!
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-fool dialectic turns, in a riot of ironic misprisins. 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 nature 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.
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

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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
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(4.1.158–64)

and his proposal is to allow time and the rehabilitating “study of imagination” to bring

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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
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(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 wisdons 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:

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O noble sir!
Your overkindness doth wring tears from me.
I do embrace your offer, and dispose
For henceforth of poor Claudio.
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(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.

**Criticism: Character Studies: Lodwick Hartley (essay date May 1965)**


*In the following essay, Hartley argues that many of Claudio's purported character inconsistencies in Much Ado about Nothing are actually quite consistent when seen as the actions of a soldier rather than of a courtier.*

*Much Ado About Nothing* has generally posed more problems to the reader than to the spectator, who has been too busy enjoying the play to bother. But in spite of its great success on the stage, there have remained those who have been disturbed by the alleged tenuous motivation of Don John, who seems to act merely like a stock machiavel, and by the unexplained indiscretion of Margaret, who allows herself to be a party to a nefarious
plot and to remain naively unconscious of her involvement. The greatest difficulty, of course, has been with Claudio, that handsome, valiant young man who ultimately seems to act so discreditably—however unfairly he may have been tricked.

All kinds of epithets have been applied to him like cub and cad. A kinder judgment is that he is “a badly plot-ridden character … [whose] actions do not conform to his character, but are forced upon him by the plot.” 

Clearly, however, an assumption that a character in a play is something other than his actions make him out to be involves such a lack of logic as to make any connection between character and action meaningless. Could it be, one is impelled to ask, that the “inconsistencies” of Claudio are forced upon him not so much by the plot as by what critics of the play have erroneously expected him to be? Or, to put the question another way, could it be that Claudio's actions maintain a consistency within the framework of the play, even though his actions are in our eyes not always admirable?

In the examination of this basic issue, it will be wise at this point to forego any look at the sources or any consideration of such theory of the composition of the play as, for example, that which explains the lacunae in the Claudio-Hero plot by assuming a revision of the original play in which an expansion of the Benedick-Beatrice portion necessitated lopping off some details of the former one. Nothing really essential to the characterization of Claudio seems to be left out. Thus a consideration of what he represents can proceed without attention to knottier problems.

“When I find Much Ado About Nothing beginning with a talk of a battle in which those killed are ‘few of any sort, and none of name,’” Harold Jenkins has remarked, “I may infer that Shakespeare intended to write a comedy and not a realistic one at that.” Indeed, he is writing a comedy, and he is doing so within a framework in which at least a part of what Professor Jenkins has observed is of first importance. The immediate setting is that of two kinds of war—one happily finished and another happily continuing—the products of which are to stand in contrast in the relationship of soldier and courtier.

Mention of the first of these comes in the initial brisk moments of the opening scene. Claudio, we learn, is a valiant Florentine who has taken his military career seriously and “has borne himself beyond the promise of his age, doing in the figure of a lamb the feats of a lion.” To the second we are introduced more elaborately. Benedick, too—the report goes—has “good service … in these wars”; but, though we instantly sense the bias of the commentator, we recognize from Beatrice's delightfully acerbic remarks that he is a young man of quite a different stamp. “Signior Mountanto,” she calls him, implying from the fencing term that he fits more gracefully into the pattern of a gentlemanly sport than into that of the grim business of war; and she elaborates her assumption that he might better engage in contests of long-range archery than in dreams (in Mercutio's words)—

Of breaches, ambuscadoes, Spanish blades.

The two kinds of war that will influence the characterization of the two heroes of the play have by now been firmly established. Benedick's war is “the merry war of wit.” It is still active, and it is to be the really dynamic force in the play. Claudio's war is, for lack of a better term, an unmerry war, which although on one level has been brought to a successful conclusion outside the play remains on another as a determinant of the “plotted” action of the play. The important thing, however, is that these two kinds of war provide a contrast which, early established and consistently maintained up to the crucial action of the play, should provide an index to the way in which both heroes should be regarded. The contrast is a comic contrast; and, though there may be tragic possibilities enough in the actions of Claudio, it is well to remember that he is always a character in a comedy. It is only through taking him out of context that his “inconsistencies” can mislead us.
From the outset Claudio as a successful young soldier is denied any possibility of being successful at romantic love-making or at wit. His circuitous approach to a revelation of his feeling for Hero to Benedick and his reluctance to make a direct admission to Don Pedro (“You speak this to fetch me in, my lord”) reflect something more fundamental than simple modesty. Certainly, a statement like “That I love her, I feel” was never intended to suggest anything very substantial in the way of passion. Claudio finally reveals both his bias and his inadequacy when he says of Hero to Don Pedro:

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.

If such is the way Claudio regarded his love at the outset, one remembers that he was later to offer to accompany his commanding officer, Don Pedro, to Aragon even at the expense of his honeymoon.

Quite plainly, whatever wound he may have received from the eyes of Hero before his first victorious military campaign, the arrow had not penetrated very deeply. His soldier’s eye had had adequate protective armor plate. His situation upon his return from the campaign was easy for any Elizabethan (and for anybody else, for that matter) to understand. As a typical young Renaissance gentleman should, he had entered honorably on a military career, had fleshed his blade, and had proved his valor. He had flown to war and arms, embracing a sword, a horse, a shield, chasing his first foe as a new mistress, and so on. Having proved that he “loved honor more,” he now felt that he must fulfill himself in another area necessary to a gentleman who would perpetuate his line. Obviously, he must marry—and, preferably a beautiful girl with a rich and powerful father. The situation is little short of routine.

It is not too pat to say that Claudio is a soldier first and a lover second and that Benedick is a lover first (in spite of his spirited disclaimer) and a soldier second. Herein, at any rate, lies a truth underlying the essential comedy of Much Ado.

As Paul A. Jorgensen has ably demonstrated, most Elizabethans were well aware of the courtly tradition stemming from Castiglione’s The Courtier and other courtesy books that held in contempt the soldier who was unable or unwilling to forget his soldierhood when in female company. Shortly after he wrote Much Ado, Shakespeare with comic irony was to exploit in Henry V the traditional difficulties of the soldier in a romantic situation where the plain stout heart of the Englishman triumphant in battle is momentarily handicapped in a procedure in which the courtliness of the defeated and decadent French might have enabled him to perform glibly. In Hotspur, Shakespeare had depicted a high-spirited, imaginative young man whose pose as a plain soldier in love (“… when I am a-horseback I will swear I love thee infinitely”) convinces neither his wife nor us that he is not actually capable of being a romantic lover.

If the courtesy books spoke in contempt of the soldier as a lover, there were those who spoke in defense. Barnaby Rich, for example, defended the plain soldier, pointing out the virtues of military men as husbands and expressing regret that gentlewomen are not infrequently deceived by accomplished “love makers, suche as can devise to please women with new fangles, straunge fassions, by praising of their beauties.” In the debate in Farewell to Military Profession in which a man defends the soldier as lover, a woman argues for the courtier “with philed phrases, with sweet musicke, and with twenty amorous devices.”

Let me say quickly that Claudio and Benedick are assuredly not stereotypes of the soldier and the courtier. Claudio was not unhandsome as the typical “plain soldier” was, nor was his ineptness such as to make him the subject of derisive laughter in social situations. Benedick, unlike the typical courtier, admitted deficiencies in the appreciation of music, performed clumsily as a poet, and insisted that he was unable to “woo in festival terms.” His “philed phrases” have reverse English on them, and they wind up as prose rather than poetry and
as devices of scorn (at least on the surface) rather than of love. But in a comedy as sophisticated as *Much Ado,* Shakespeare was not likely to resort to stereotypes. And by keeping the soldier-courtier balance at least partially subliminal he increased its subtlety.

If Claudio distrusted his own eloquence in romantic affairs, as the traditional plain soldier might, his willingness to accept Don Pedro's good offices in wooing for him is perfectly consistent. (One might also say, with perhaps less pertinence, that as a military man he found it perfectly normal to communicate "through channels." )¹ His temporary confusion over Don John's suggestion that Don Pedro is wooing Hero for himself might understandably arise out of a soldierly lack of confidence in a romantic situation—as well as out of a kind of youthful innocence. Of direct significance is a bit of interplay involving Claudio's reply "I wish him joy of her" to Benedick's information that "the Prince hath got your Hero." "Why that's spoken like an honest drovier," Benedick rejoins. "So they sell bullocks—" The ineptness in Claudio that Benedick indicates is certainly more nearly typical of the plain soldier than of the courtly lover and gentleman.

Benedick later describes Claudio in love in terms that directly involve the soldier and the courtly lover:

> 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 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. He was wont to speak plain and to the purpose, like an honest man and a soldier; and now he has turned orthography; his words are a very fantastical banquet, just so many strange dishes.

(II. iii. 13 ff.)

But this is Claudio as Benedick elects to see him, not as we see him. As a matter of fact, when Benedick is engaging in this fantasy, Claudio is busier with playing a practical joke on Benedick, the self-styled rebel against love, than he is in pursuing his own love affair.

It is, of course, Benedick himself who, once convinced of what he has longed to believe, develops all the symptoms of the love malady attributed to the courtly lover, finding his brightness and wit displaced by a sober and dull disposition and being able to manage only a lame "I have a toothache" as a defense against the laughter of his friends.

At this point, we should turn for a moment to Don John, that baleful by-product of the "unmerry war." It is idle to observe that Don John lacks the motivation of sexual jealousy that impelled Girondo Olerio Valenziano to trick Timbreo di Cardone into believing the infidelity of Fenicia—as Bandello, Belleforest, and several others have told the story. Actually, Don John's motivation is convincing enough for Shakespeare's purpose. Like Edmund to come he resents his bastardy. Like Iago, whom he more nearly resembles, he resents Claudio's position as first-lieutenant to Don Pedro. Professor A. P. Rossiter and others have agreed that it is not too far-fetched to see in Claudio a sort of embryonic Othello. Is not Claudio a military man with inadequacies in the arts of peace who falls victim to a deception involving "ocular proof" and who ultimately "kills" his beloved? And does not Don John's influence upon him assume a method similar to Iago's influence on Othello? (Don Pedro and Claudio, of course, foreshadow an aspect of the Othello-Cassio relationship.) Had Shakespeare been making a tragedy of the Claudio-Hero story, Professor Jorgensen's summation of *Othello* might have served with minor revisions for it, too:

> The tragedy is, then, not simply a conflict between stereotyped versions of war and court. It is a conflict between a simple, but ennobled, soldier and a non-military situation aggravated by a villain who has inside knowledge of the potential weaknesses of the soldierly temperament and the court. ²
But Shakespeare is not attempting tragedy; thus Don John does not need to be a fully developed villain, and his “inside knowledge” about his victims does not need to be made explicit. If he speaks very seldom (as all critics have remarked), his sinister presence can be and has been frequently suggested well enough by the stage business. When he does speak, he speaks to the point and with nice design.

Observe his language when he plants the all but fatal suspicion in the minds of Don Pedro and Claudio. “The lady is disloyal,” he says. “The word is too good to paint out her wickedness. I could say she were worse; think you of a worse title and I will fit it to her.” A purely rhetorical question is implied. Don John has calculated his word—and his auditors. He who himself has been disloyal and the cause of a war of sorts is only too well aware of the meaning of his language to the military mind. Conviction of such a crime against honor makes perfectly consistent Claudio's resolution to shame Hero in church at the wedding ceremony. On the field of battle and in the presence of his company the disloyal soldier is stripped of his insignia of rank. Hero is simply to suffer a kind of “military” punishment.

The “proof” is to be forthcoming—necessarily, for Shakespeare's purpose, off stage; and Claudio is set up for his big scene in which his sense of violated honor causes him to act so deplorably. Misguided young man! Swinburne thought that he was more to be pitied than censured. The bluntness of his action and the vulgarity of “rotten orange” as an epithet for Hero can only attest that he was, again, speaking more nearly out of the impulses of a plain soldier than those of a courtly gentleman, whose rhetoric might have been differently allusive and more elaborate. The victimized lover in Bandello and Belleforest leaves the dirty work to a messenger.

Claudio's rhetoric improves as he progresses in the scene, but he convinces nobody that he has any other feeling than that of injured pride—the idea that he should “knit [his] soul to an approved wanton.” Even so, his reaction is more readily conceived as a response to the violation of a code, military or civil, than it is to a more fundamental kind of honor that is wrapped up with deep feelings of love and family. Curtis Brown Watson has suggested how much deeper, for example, is the passion of Leonato facing what seems to him to be a violation of family honor.

With the denunciation scene, the soldier has played out his principal role, has done his best—which is also his worst. He has little else to do now except perform his penitential offices in the denouement. The rest of the play clearly belongs to Benedick and Beatrice. In order to win in love, the courtier must prove his manhood. He must demonstrate that his sword can, if necessary, be as sharp and as effective as his tongue. In short, the winning of the “merry war” depends on the ability to cope with some of the realities of an unmerry one. When Benedick at first demurs from Beatrice's demand that he kill Claudio, his mistress couches her disappointment in terms of scorn for the whole courtly tradition. “But manhood,” she says, “is melted into courtesies, valour into compliment, and men only turn'd into tongue, and trim ones, too.” The proof that the true courtier can effectively turn soldier is, as everyone knows, not to be withheld too long. It comes, of course, in the challenge. If the actual duel did not take place, it was the turn of events and not Benedick's lack of valor that prevented it. Claudio's reaction to the challenge is indicative only that he had failed to understand both Benedick and himself, as he had failed to understand almost everybody and everything else.

“Deception by appearances in love,” A. P. Rossiter suggests, “is patently what most of Much Ado is ‘about.’” This is perhaps as perceptive a summary as one needs. The possibility of this deception obviously exists for quite different reasons in Claudio and Benedick. To the misprision which exists in the Benedick-Beatrice plot (the misapprehensions of themselves and of each other) and to “Claudio's contrived misprision of Hero” can also be added Claudio's brief but significant misprizing of Benedick—whom, until he finally realizes the seriousness of the situation, Claudio persists in regarding as the amusing object of a practical joke.

Love in Much Ado is in its most charming form a matter of the marriage of not only true but also witty and flexible minds. The “merry war” of the play had provided for Benedick the kind of discourse that Francis
Bacon prescribed for the “ready man.” The other kind of war had failed to develop the same kind of readiness in Claudio.

It should be plain that had it not been for Claudio's acting throughout more like a plain soldier than like a courtier, the final proving of Benedick would not have been necessary or possible. Thus the soldier-courtier contrast in the characters of the two heroes justifies its structural purpose as one of the significant factors in the unity of the play.

Notes


Criticism: Character Studies: John A. Allen (essay date winter 1973)


[In the following essay, Allen proposes that Much Ado about Nothing's comic, self-important, and utterly preposterous constable, Dogberry, is not the only character in the play with an inflated ego.]

It is safe to assume that Dogberry, the “right master constable” of Much Ado about Nothing, would appear in anyone's Who's Who of memorable comic characters in Shakespeare; yet he seems largely to have baffled, or at any rate escaped, serious critical attention. Commentators frequently convey the impression that his peculiarities are more to be wondered at than analyzed.1 However, on the principle that Shakespeare seldom wasted an opportunity to turn his material to full dramatic account, we may suspect that Dogberry, intriguing as he is merely as a preposterous phenomenon, is more than that.

Surely Dogberry would not make so lasting an impression if he were artistically as well as personally inscrutable. Comic characters invite analysis no less than others do, and much has usefully been said, for instance, of Malvolio to point his close connection with the principal concerns of Twelfth Night. On inspection, he emerges as the egregious instance of absurd pretension in a play which features insubstantial dreams, all of which except his own convert in time to viable realities. Like Dogberry, Malvolio is pompous and inordinately self-admiring, but he differs from the cryptic constable in being both intelligent and lucid; and, as a result of overhearing the soliloquies in which he preens himself as “Count Malvolio,” we learn what he covets secretly and are prepared by this superior knowledge to enjoy the stratagem which turns his grave censorious visage into a simpering travesty of himself as fortune's darling. But no convenient route gives access to the inner Dogberry. He eschews ambition of the vulgar sort and is content, while going about his everyday affairs, merely to manifest what he devoutly thinks of as his natural superiority. Although he is attentive to his duty as he sees it, he is the most benign of officers, permissive to a fault. To be sure, on one occasion his moral indigination rivals that which is habitual with the sour Malvolio, but none would deny that public decency demands harsh measures when a villain calls the most distinguished of “the poor Duke's officers” an ass. In normal circumstances, when his gifts receive their due respect, he radiates a mild
benevolence toward every honest man.

All of the above and more can, with some earnestness, be said in praise of Dogberry, but irony is implicit in the fact that to the objective observer this same paragon is nothing less than a connoisseur's delight of the ridiculous and bizarre. It would be difficult to imagine a finer exuberance of comic invention than is manifest in Dogberry's mode of thought, expression, and behavior; yet the very brilliance of the conception threatens to divert the critic from investigating its intent as caricature and thus establishing both Dogberry's relevance to his dramatic context and his kinship with the common run of men. The inflated ego, like the sun and foolery, shines everywhere; and surely the laughter which begins as soon as Dogberry makes his ponderous entrance may be attributed, at least in part, to recognition of sure marksmanship directed at a well-defined satiric target. Specifically, the source of Dogberry's immediate comic triumph is the coexistence in his person of the air and mannerisms of a veritable sage with utterances and behavior so inane as to produce a splendidly bathetic contrast. When he grandly gives instructions to his Watch, the effect is comparable to what we might experience if an actual ass, suitably attired, were to hold forth in the pulpit or address a class in criminology or ethics. Dogberry's aim is to exemplify and foster virtuous conduct. He is much concerned with Christian doctrine and morality and is, in fact, a moral philosopher in somewhat the same sense that Bottom, playing in Pyramus and Thisbe, is an actor. Where his own most treasured accomplishments are concerned, he is joyfully and completely subject to illusion.2

If Dogberry is the nonpareil of beatific self-appreciation, he is not alone in the world of Much Ado.3 Shakespeare peopled his play with characters who exemplify in varying degrees the infatuation of the ego with itself. Don John, the outright villain, stands as Dogberry's opposite number in that he prides himself on his misanthropy as much as Dogberry does on his benevolence. Don John is a bumbling minor-league Iago, relishing the “mortifying mischief” which he finds within and scorning to be cured of it by “moral medicine” (Lii. 10-11).4 He would rather “be disdained of all than to fashion a carriage to rob love from any” (ll. 25-26), and, when all his machinations have failed to advance the cause of evil, he presumably congratulates himself on the harvest of opprobrium which sets him apart from ordinary men. On the other hand, the cheerful egotists, Beatrice and Benedick, for all their protestations of unmatchable superiority, succumb to the fascinating notion that another loves them as they love themselves. Their pairing off provides a necessary balance to the unsavory affair of Claudio and Hero, whose romanticism barely survives their discovery that alliance can impose expense upon the sovereign ego—a fact which Hero's father, Leonato, finds no less disturbing from the paternal point of view. Before he has recovered from this ugly shock, he appears progressively more foolish as his self-righteous horror at Hero's supposed corruption modulates into senile rage against her detractors, Claudio and Don Pedro. As for the latter pair, we shall have much to say below concerning Claudio's notorious priggishness and the sensitivity to “honor” which deforms the otherwise attractive figure of Don Pedro. Even Hero, whose misfortune properly disarms our criticism, bears an aura of genteel complacency. She is the perfect model of the fashionable ingénue, obedient to her father's wish that she marry advantageously and apparently more concerned with the fashion of her wedding gown than with her feelings for the bridegroom, Claudio. It is no accident, then, that Dogberry is native to Messina, for he is the gross exemplar of an attitude which is endemic there. In order to convey the reverent tenderness of self regarding self, the actor who assumes the role of Dogberry should display his godly girth majestically and speak his lines with the rhetorical emphasis appropriate to one who knows himself to be not only just and merciful but also wise and learned, handsome, witty, patriotic, wealthy, and, above all, full of dignity. When this portrayal is successfully achieved, Dogberry will impress the audience at once as fully and immutably in character—a comic everyman as egotist, in whom a bland self-ignorance maintains its unimpeded sway.

Where Dogberry's intellectual pretensions are concerned, he reminds one of various false pedants who appear elsewhere in Shakespeare. Holofernes in Love's Labour's Lost is an example, and the scholarly jargon employed by Feste in Twelfth Night and Polonius in Hamlet comes to mind. But Dogberry is not intended as a parody of the professional man of learning, and his locutions are not intentionally garbled for comic effect, as Feste's are, nor laden with the moral clichés and fashionable phrases which are affected by Polonius. At one
level Dogberry's pronouncements frequently appear to be bare nonsense, as when he says that for his sins the villainous Borachio should properly “be condemned into everlasting redemption” (IV.ii.51-52). Here the editor may be relied upon to gloss “redemption” as a mistake for “damnation”—a conjecture which is sound enough as far as it goes. But Dogberry is no ordinary ignoramus, and he is not so easily translated. As is frequently true of his malapropisms, this one yields a kind of sense just as he utters it. It is an appropriate expression of complete moral confusion exactly comparable to his statement that Borachio, who has truthfully revealed the knavish practice of Don John, is guilty of “flat perjury, to call a prince's brother villain” (IV.ii.38). Indeed, one can go further than this and argue that the notion of being condemned into redemption is not actually nonsense at all but is a familiar Christian paradox—to be found, for instance, in the Donnesque conceit in which the sinner's heart becomes a boon because it is drawn, like iron, to the magnet, God. Taken in this way, the remark applies quite aptly to Borachio, who shows distinct signs of going straight after he has been caught red-handed in his dirty work. Obviously, Dogberry is entirely unaware of this, but Shakespeare was not as he frequently put words of wisdom, intentional and otherwise, into the mouths of children and fools. Dogberry blunders into truth just as he blunders into apprehending the malefactors in the play. And once at least, as we shall see, he speaks with genuine insight quite intentionally, as other mortals sometimes do. In this and other ways, when Dogberry is taken not as a flesh-and-blood person but as a character in a play, he becomes a source of illumination as well as of laughter; and he is all the funnier when he is understood to be, after a fashion, quite comprehensible.

Dogberry's function in the plot of Much Ado, as distinct from his particular kind of oddity, is altogether clear and has long been recognized. With the assistance of his Watch and the Sexton, he uncovers and reports the slanderous device by means of which Don John and his henchman, Borachio, have sought to blacken the reputation of Hero. This enables her, after a confused interval, to marry Claudio as originally planned, and the play ends upon a suitably festive note. To be sure, it appears for a time that Dogberry will contrive to bungle the simple task assigned him, but his shortcomings as a constable are of service to dramatic strategy. Claudio must continue to believe in Hero's guilt until he has carried through his plan for publicly repudiating her, for this event is the dramatic center of the play; yet, as Dogberry has meanwhile fortuitously gained possession of the facts which will establish Hero's innocence, the audience is set at ease concerning Hero's ultimate vindication, knowing that the forces of law and order, though oddly implemented, will prevail in the end.

If, as seems likely, the character of Dogberry in broad outline was suggested by the requirements of the plot of Much Ado, that sufficiently accounts for the presence in the play of an incompetent constable, but not for the full range of his peculiarities. Dogberry is generically similar to other Shakespearean characters of his calling—Constable Dull in Love's Labour's Lost and Elbow in Measure for Measure—yet he is a far more memorable character than these. This is, of course, partly the result of his strategic function in the plot. He serves as a special kind of deus ex machina, and as such may be compared with nobler figures who appear in that capacity in other plays—for instance, Duke Vincentio in Measure for Measure and Prospero in The Tempest, both of whom, like Dogberry, are moral philosophers and champions of justice. Nor do the resemblances end there. In testing his supposedly upright deputy, Angelo, Vincentio might almost say with Dogberry that “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.54-56). Certainly Angelo, given free reign, shows himself what he is—namely, an incipient tyrant—and Prospero relies upon the conscience of Alonso and his other sometime enemies to provoke them into penitence and restitution. One cannot say whether Don John, who steals out of the company of those whom he has wronged in Much Ado, is capable of penitence, but Borachio is, and, being caught, he publicly avows his shame and says that he desires “nothing but the reward of a villain” (V.i.231).

As for those who have been so readily deceived by Don John and Borachio, they have certainly shown themselves what they are, but their penitence is open to some question. Leonato seems to recognize that he has been at fault—to judge by his eventual forgiveness of the once and future bridegroom, Claudio, for this is an act of generosity which suggests acknowledgment of common guilt—but one has doubts about Claudio himself and equally about his friend, Don Pedro. Both of these gentlemen, after being obliged to admit that
they have done Hero grave injustice, proceed at once to rationalize their blunder, chorusing “Yet sinned I not / But in mistaking” (V.i.261-62). Certainly, this is not a gracious or convincing mea culpa. But deficiencies of sensibility are so much the rule in Much Ado that they must be accepted philosophically. Besides, they are apparently incorrigible—a point which has a special relevance to Dogberry who is proof against the smallest glimmer of self-knowledge. Nor can we find it in our hearts to wish it otherwise. We share the delight of those whose plot is the undoing of Malvolio in Twelfth Night. His bubble must be pricked and is, with the result that he is made to see himself, if only for a moment, as the utter ass that his detractors take him for. But for Dogberry to recognize himself for what he is, if that were conceivable, would be intolerably pathetic. It would seem that our indulgence is invited not only for Dogberry himself but for the Dogberry-like qualities of other characters in the play and even, by extension, in ourselves.

It is precisely because of the complex interconnection of the Dogberry episodes and the main events of Much Ado that we cannot reach an understanding of Dogberry by focusing our attention upon him alone. Like Dogberry himself, when faced with a difficult examination, we must recognize that “the eftest way” of getting at the point is sometimes not to approach it directly but to “go about” with it. To return to a suggestion made above, Dogberry does resemble several of the more exalted characters in Much Ado not only in point of egotism generally but of a firm and quite unfounded confidence in his superior wisdom. The comparison is made explicit by Borachio when he remarks that the plot which all the wisdom of Hero's friends and relatives could not discover has been brought to light by “shallow fools” (V.i.222), by which he means, of course, Dogberry and the Watch. The irony of this observation could hardly be more devastating. Inasmuch as Dogberry, alas, deserves Borachio's epithet, it falls with hyperbolic force upon the heads of Leonato, Claudio, and Don Pedro. This Borachio is a curious anomaly. Although he both conceived and executed the device which temporarily blackened Hero's reputation, he is by no means indifferent to moral values; and, as his generous exoneration of his friend Margaret suggests, he is not without a certain magnanimity. Being a thoughtful chap, satirically inclined, he notes with some asperity the easy rationalizations and self-righteous airs of those who are most willing to excuse themselves at his expense. No one is more aware than he that these supposedly judicious persons, faced with the flimsiest circumstantial evidence, have displayed a true Dogberrian witlessness in failing to perceive its fraudulence. He has deceived their very eyes, not because he is a dedicated villain but because, human nature being what it is, villainous deeds are easily accomplished and well paid. It is his drunken discourse upon this and related subjects, being overheard by Dogberry's Watch, that supplies the constable with his evidence against the conspirators. Having allowed himself to abet the devious processes of justice in Messina, Borachio may be contrite, but he cannot resist an opportunity to puncture the complacency of honorable men. The question, as he earlier pointed out to Conrade, is why “villainy should be so rich” (III.iii.104); and the answer seems to be that villains thrive because their victims are deceived with such astonishing ease. Happily, however, although Borachio does not know it, his success is qualified by the superior insight which permitted Hero's cousin Beatrice and Friar Francis stoutly to take sides with Hero from the first; then Benedick, under the benign influence of his new-found love for Beatrice, became the lady's champion; and Leonato, although belatedly, came around and soon was followed by Antonio, his brother.

The only persons who remained altogether deluded by Don John's plot until Borachio and Dogberry laid the matter bare were the bridegroom, Claudio, and his patron, Don Pedro. Faced with an awkward lapse on the part of two characters who seem to require our acceptance or even admiration, commentators have suggested that Shakespeare, by implication, exonerated Claudio by causing the behavior of the attractive nobleman, his friend, to be equally culpable. The prevalence of error in high places may indeed be taken as a hint that one should not be too severely critical either of Claudio or the Prince, but this should not obscure the fact that Don Pedro's code of conduct is found conspicuously wanting when it is tested at the moment of Hero's greatest need. Anyone can make an error in judgment, but surely no one in whom genuine courtesy is operative would venefuly conspire to shame an unhappy noblewoman publicly, however certain he might be that she was guilty as accused. If Claudio emulates the manners of Don Pedro, that does something to account for his shortcomings, but it tends to suggest the inadequacy of the fashionable mores of which both gentlemen are
exemplars rather than to free them from all blame for their deficiencies in perceptiveness and charity.

To be sure, Claudio is not a very agreeable hero, but one can argue that he is nevertheless a good match for Hero who is as tamely subject to the dictates of fashionable behavior as he is. The influence of fashion in social intercourse, as opposed to that of genuine character, is a major target of the satiric arsenal in *Much Ado*. This should be apparent from the woeful lapses of the fashionable Claudio and Don Pedro, but if we find it tempting to be no more critical of them than they are of themselves, we can rely upon Borachio to put us right. On the occasion when he has just brought off his trickery with astonishing success, he tells his colleague, Conrade, what he thinks of his employer and those whom he has hoodwinked. All, he says, are subject to the tyranny of fashion. The burden of his remarks on this important subject, despite the fogginess induced by his admitted drunkenness, is clear enough, and what he says not only makes good sense in itself but has an important bearing on the principal events and characters of the play.

Fashion, as Borachio sees it, signifies the conception of one's self which one presents, or wishes to present, to the public eye. Of course, it “is / nothing to a man” (III.iii.109-10), but in their ignorance all men are more concerned with the impression which they make on others than with their actual qualities of mind and spirit. Like a “deformed thief” (l. 115), fashion steals from men their knowledge of themselves, reducing them to posturing automatons who nourish the illusion of their individuality while actually possessing none, because they do not even choose the fashions they will wear but, whether they will or no, are fashioned to them. Borachio's thief may sometimes do no worse than cause his victims to strike foolish attitudes—as he does with lovers who, to quote the report of Benedick on the lovesick Claudio, will “lie ten nights awake carving the fashion of a new doublet” (II.iii.16-17)—but his effects can be more damaging. Enraged by the shallowness of Claudio and Don Pedro, Beatrice laments that crass hardheartedness can masquerade as conduct worthy of a gentleman, but “manhood is melted into cursies, valor into compliment, and men are only turned into tongue, and trim ones too” (IV.i.313-15). The spoils of fashion are most frequently the qualities which, in the Shakespearean sense, are “natural”—that is, which nurture and solidify essential interpersonal bonds. In *Much Ado* such thievery abounds. According to Beatrice, Benedick wears his faith “but as the / fashion of his hat; it ever changes with the next block” (I.i.66-67), and Hero shrewdly explains that Beatrice cannot love because “her wit / Values itself so highly that to her / All matter else seems weak” (III.i.52-54). Fortunately fashion itself is vulnerable to stratagems which on two occasions succeed in restoring to the owners stolen hoards of love and faith. Don Pedro, aspiring to the role of Cupid, sees a possible match between Beatrice and Benedick and frames a plot to “fashion it” (II.i.328) by making each believe that the other has secretly succumbed to love; and when Hero has been disgraced, Friar Francis undertakes to “fashion the event” (IV.i.233) in such a way that the slandered girl will come in time to be “lamented, pitied, and excused / Of every hearer” (II.214-15).

That the ego is not necessarily at odds with humane impulses is demonstrated, after all, by Dogberry's bumbling benefactions, undertaken in the public interest and entirely consonant with his conception of himself as a fine-honed instrument of justice. Particularly worthy of note is his devotion to duty in connection with Deformed, an imaginary character whose genesis requires a word of explanation. While Borachio is acquainting Conrade with the role of fashion in distorting judgment and abetting slander, a nameless member of Dogberry's eavesdropping Watch is seized by inspiration. He is as familiar with the “deformed thief” mentioned by Borachio as though the culprit's picture hung on the notice board in every post office. “I know that Deformed,” he tells his cohorts firmly (III.iii.116), and from that moment, in the minds of the Watch, a metaphor becomes a thing of flesh and blood. Deformed, it seems, “has been a vile thief this seven year,” and what is still more shocking, “a goes up and down like a gentleman” (II. ll. 116-18). No wonder, then, that the Watch—having taken Borachio and Conrade into custody—inform the suspects that they must supply the full particulars about this masquerading criminal. The representatives of the law are hot on the trail of the character who is in fact the prime bad actor in Messina, and it is inevitable that Dogberry, when the Watch have faithfully submitted their report, perceives that he is the destined adversary of Deformed. Shakespeare could not have hit upon a wittier device, or a more telling one, to dramatize fashion's skill at the confidence
game whose neatest gambit is to make unwitting allies both of the easy mark and of the police. Perhaps the
greatest stroke of comic art in *Much Ado* is that by which the apprehension of Deformed is assigned to a
custom whose very confidence in his powers is no less than fashion's masterpiece. Because not even
Dogberry can quite contrive to free a villain who informs upon himself, the worthy constable will recover
Hero's purloined reputation from the public enemy; but no informer lives whose testimony can prevail on
Dogberry to note the thieving hand at work in his own exchequer.

Properly understood as a pun, the title of *Much Ado* provides a valuable hint for the interpretation of the play.
It is concerned with nothing (i.e., false appearances) and also with noting (i.e., forming opinions about people,
either by hearsay or by observing them directly). In order to reach an understanding of these phenomena as
they are dramatically presented, one must note the influence of fashion upon the attitudes of all the
characters—in particular of Claudio, Don Pedro, and Leonato—together with the parody of that influence
which it is Dogberry's function to provide. Claudio may conveniently be dealt with first, because the
successive roles which he adopts (or which adopt him) in the course of his strange, eventful courtship
are so closely parallel to those outlined in Borachio's thumbnail sketch of fashion's way with gallants. “Seest thou
not,” Borachio says, addressing Conrade,

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?

(III.iii.121-28)

Freely interpreted, fashion first creates the model soldier, gorgeously arrayed but overconfident and bent on
vengeance as a means of gaining honor; then it supplies him with the outward attributes of one who cherishes
a sacred trust, although he secretly abuses it; and finally it ushers in his destined role as an uxorious lover,
tricked by appetite into an unmanly servitude which passes for devotion to his female captor. This is a
jaundiced history, to be sure, but a suggestive one in context. It is fashion which, in a benevolent guise,
converts Claudio's "soldier's eye" (I.i.266) into one which notices, on short acquaintance, "how fair young
Hero is" (l. 272). Then, like magic, when Don John's device deceives his very eyes, Hero is transformed for
him from a young lady of exemplary modesty into a wanton comparable to "pamp'red animals / That rage in
savage sensuality" (IV.i.58-59). When all allowance has been made for the fact that Claudio's rejection of
Hero is induced by the imposture of Don John, one nevertheless feels strongly that this sudden change from
love to vindictive hatred indicates a radical deficiency of faith and charity in Claudio.

Claudio's defense would be far easier to undertake if he had justified the expectation of Friar Francis that his
hardheartedness would yield in time, by inner prompting, to remorse. The idea of Hero's life the Friar
optimistically believes will "sweetly creep" into Claudio's "study of imagination" (IV.i.222-23) and cause him
to regret his denunciation of the lady, even though he should continue to believe her guilty. The Friar is both
wise and sensitive to human qualities—in fact, he modestly enjoys possession of the very attributes which
Dogberry imagines in himself—but he is deceived in Claudio, who shows no sign whatever of moderating his
severe judgment upon Hero, even when he is led to believe that she died of a broken heart as a result of his
unkindness. Claudio seems almost to enjoy his role of the offended lover, and he stubbornly persists in error
down to the moment when his vision is at last restored by Dogberry's discovery. To be sure, Claudio can see
his lady's visage once again “In the rare semblance that [he] loved it first” (V.i.239), but this is not the result
of a change of heart but only of a change of verdict which, under the circumstances, neither he nor any other
man could fail to make. Like Dogberry, Claudio has blundered through to truth despite, and not because of,
the qualities in himself which seem to him so admirable. That such confusion, under less propitious
circumstances, can become the stuff of tragedy is apparent from *Othello* where Iago steals away the faith and
love of the magnanimous Moor. But Othello differs from Claudio in that he is, to begin with, nobler than the
common run of men, and ultimately his painful recognition of the loss he has incurred more than adequately
balances his error and reaffirms both Desdemona's value and his own. While Claudio does not love or suffer
and repent with much conviction, neither is he guilty of irremediable wrong. The presence of Dogberry in
Messina makes possible an evenhanded comic justice: Claudio retains his self-esteem and wins his bride—but
at the price of being linked with Dogberry in our minds forever—and for our part we share the unearned
happiness of Claudio, together with such unacknowledged debts as we may owe to the constabulary which the
fates have mustered to come between disaster and ourselves.

In contrast to that of Dogberry, the overriding self-esteem of Claudio, Don Pedro, and Leonato is at first
concealed by the amenities of courtly behavior. However, as the play proceeds it becomes apparent that the
failure of these cultivated persons to react humanely to the plight of Hero is primarily the result of wounded
vanity. Borachio, in outlining to Don John the plot which he has devised, shrewdly suggests that outraged
“honor” can be used to achieve the transformation of an offensively girl into an “approved wanton,” fit to be
scorned and cast away. In his role as dutiful informer, Don John should “intend a kind of zeal both to the
Prince and Claudio,” as though he were the guardian of his “brother's honor, who hath made this match, and
his friend's reputation, who is thus like to be cozened with the semblance of a maid” (II.ii.30-34). Don John
faithfully takes the hint in warning Claudio that it would “better fit” his honor to put sentiment aside and
break off his intended marriage before the cozening has taken place (III.ii.100-101). The mere suggestion of
damage to his self-esteem is sufficient to inspire in Claudio, as his first reaction and prior to the introduction
of any supposed evidence whatsoever, his resolve to shame the unsuspecting Hero at the altar—an expedient
which is immediately accepted by Don Pedro. So angry are these gentlemen at the fancied blot upon their
reputations that they are more than half-convinced by Don John's word alone, and one is not surprised that
they have only to overhear a conversation in the dark between Borachio and Margaret, pretending to be Hero,
in order to consider Hero's guilt established beyond question.

If possible, the behavior of Leonato is even more blatantly determined by his rage at the thought that Hero has
dared to tarnish his repute. It would be hard to imagine a more crass reaction to a daughter's putative disgrace
than that of Leonato. No sooner has he heard the accusation than he is wishing passionately that she were not
actually his flesh and blood:

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’?

(IV.i.129-33)

What kind of father have we here? If we are in doubt, a glance at Shakespeare's probable source for the plot of
Much Ado should be instructive. In Bandello's version of the story, the reaction of the father, Idonato, differs
significantly from Leonato's. Idonato is indignant at the cruelty of the disenchanted bridegroom's charge,
although here it is delivered privately rather than staged at the wedding ceremony itself. He accepts the fact
that the match is broken off but reasonably believes that he knows his daughter better than her accuser does.
Surely, he says,

… if he repented of his promise to make her his wife it would have been sufficient for him to
declare he did not want her, and not to have laid against her this injurious charge of
whoredom. It is indeed true that all things are possible, but I know how my daughter has been
reared and what her habits are. God who is our just judge will one day, I believe, make known
the truth.15
In making Leonato dwell exclusively upon the injury which he imagines to his own dignity, while ignoring both the suffering of Hero and the possibility that she has been unjustly charged, Shakespeare converted the father into a defenseless pawn of fashion and thus strengthened the tacit association between Leonato and Dogberry—one which was insinuated in an earlier scene which we must now examine in detail.

The satiric point of *Much Ado* owes a great part of its mordancy to the fact that Don John's plot should have been exposed and rendered impotent soon after Dogberry received intelligence concerning it. When he and his partner, Verges, come to Leonato with the intention of reporting the discovery of the Watch, the stage is set for disabusing Claudio and Don Pedro of their false belief and for relieving Claudio of his compulsion to describe the bride-to-be in public as “a rotten orange” (IV.i.30). Appropriately, the lady has been shown in the immediately preceding scene receiving compliments on the “most rare fashion” of her wedding gown (III.iv.13-14) and choosing the most suitable rebato to be worn with it. She would be spared the trauma which is in store for her if only Dogberry were capable of delivering a simple message plainly, or if Leonato were not excessively preoccupied with the impending ceremony. But lucidity is never Dogberry's longest suit and, on this occasion being intoxicated with the notion of himself engaged on an important mission, he becomes involved in a digressive exercise in protocol while Leonato rapidly exhausts his small supply of patience. “Neighbors, you are tedious,” he exclaims (III.v.17), and Dogberry, taking this for an unusual compliment, graciously commends the Governor upon his spotless reputation and offers to bestow all of his tediousness upon him. When Verges tries to return the derailed conversation to its point, Dogberry is enraged and caustically remarks that old men “will be talking” (l. 32). All that villainy can do to prey upon the inoffensive and the credulous cannot compete for Dogberry's attention with a threat to the prerogatives of his office and the necessity that his dignity and wit be recognized. “An two men ride of a horse,” he points out with significant emphasis, “one must ride behind,” for “all men are not alike, alas” (ll. 35-38). His triumph is assured when Leonato, realizing that an affirmation is required of him, observes, “Indeed, neighbor, he comes too short of you.” Dogberry accepts the encomium with reverent satisfaction: “Gifts that God gives” (ll. 39-40). This matter having been resolved, Dogberry touches at last on the purpose of the interview. But it is too late. The impatient Governor is off to the wedding, and he pauses only long enough to assign to Dogberry the task which he would normally undertake himself: the examination of the “two aspicious persons” whom the Watch has “comprehended” (ll. 42-43). This is an event which “discerns” (l. 3) Leonato more nearly than either he or Dogberry suspects. He is about to demonstrate that he can comprehend neither an “aspicious” person nor an innocuous one, although Don John is notoriously “composed and framed of treachery” (V.i.236) and Hero has done nothing to suggest that she would commit a breach of etiquette, much less engage in sensual orgies. Elsewhere in the play Benedick remarks of Leonato that “knavery cannot, sure, hide himself in such reverence” (II.iii.116-17), but as it happens he is mistaken. If, on one occasion, Leonato can connive at changing Benedick's fashion as “a professed tyrant” to the female sex (I.i.149) into that of a confirmed lover, on another he himself proves vulnerable to fashion's underhanded knavery.

The opening scene of *Much Ado* contains a seemingly innocuous line which can be taken as a clue to the anatomy of fashion which informs the play as a whole. “Good Signior Leonato,” Don Pedro tells his host, “The fashion of the world is to avoid cost, and you encounter it” (I.i.85-87). The first clause of this conventionally courteous remark concisely states a truth which becomes increasingly apparent in the action which ensues, and the second grows ironic in the light of Leonato's subsequent experience. He is most willing to incur expense in the name of hospitality, particularly when his guest is a distinguished nobleman and overlord, but he cannot find it in his heart to spend even the smallest quantity of kindness when his loyalty to Hero comes into conflict with his belief that she has squandered a certain portion of his hoarded self-esteem. By a fine stroke of satiric art, Shakespeare assigned to his indomitable comic everyman the most direct and eloquent expression of the principle from which such stinginess of spirit is, in sober fact, derived. Just before making his final exit, Dogberry urges upon Leonato the necessity for tracking down Deformed, a malefactor who has now acquired, in Dogberry's imagination, a specific mark of identification, for he “wears a key in his ear, and a lock hanging by it” (V.i.295-96). The affected fashion of the dangling lovelock exactly conveys the notion of excessive vanity; and where the lock appears, there also is the key. Deformed is always ready to
admit as evidence all that he notes, or seems to note, concerning the erroneous ways of others, and he is acutely sensitive to disparaging remarks about himself. Suddenly we realize how well we are acquainted with this personage. But it is the activity which Dogberry attributes to Deformed as confidence man which unmistakably establishes his character. He is not only unkind in himself but is the cause of unkindness in others, for he

borrows money in God's name, the which he hath used so long and never paid that now men grow hardhearted and will lend nothing for God's sake.

(296-98)

“Pray you,” Dogberry earnestly requests of Leonato, “examine him upon that point” (ll. 298-99). And he exits with a felicitation which, in his familiar style, is pertinently ambiguous: “I wish your worship well. God restore you to health!” (309-10). As a parting wish for the welfare of Leonato, inadvertent as it is in part, the sentiment is both generous and appropriate, for it is offered to a gentleman whose IOUs have not always been payable on demand but who now seems willing voluntarily to return at least some part of the money he has borrowed in God's name.

Having observed that Dogberry shares with Borachio the distinction of speaking some of the lines that lie at the satiric heart of Much Ado, we should now be ready to assess the sense-in-nonsense which is to be found in his notorious instructions to the Watch. Considered in isolation from their dramatic context, Dogberry's opinions on the subject of law enforcement have been praised for the splendid lunacy which they undoubtedly possess; yet one does well to remember at the outset that “Except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain” (Ps. 121). The Watch, says Dogberry, may appropriately sleep while they are on duty, “for I cannot see how sleeping should offend” (III.iii.38). The “most peaceable way” for them is not to “meddle or make” (ll. 54, 49) with vagrants, drunkards, thieves, or delinquent nursemaids, for their principal concern is to preserve the peace, offending no man, and this is best accomplished by making no arrests, as “it is an offense to stay a man against his will” (ll. 75-76). All of this and more is in itself excellent foolery, but seen only as that it loses much of its humor and all of its dramatic point. Its meaning becomes apparent when we look beyond its whimsicality to its wit and notice that the apparent idiocy of Dogberry, like a grotesque choral prelude, serves to introduce the equally irrational actions of a number of important characters who will soon encounter lawlessness and bleakly fail to apprehend it.

If Hero's father and her lover are both blind to her true qualities and insensitive to her need and her distress, then they can take no action against villainy, whether its source is Don John or their own delinquent hearts. If a child cries in the night, says Dogberry, and its nurse cannot be persuaded to attend to it, then the child must wake the nurse with crying, for “the ewe that will not hear her lamb when it baes will never answer a calf when it bleats” (ll. 65-66). To be sure, an actual nurse, if not a female sheep, can be obliged by a policeman to get on with her neglected duties, and therefore Dogberry, when he is taken literally, speaks contrary to the fact. But we are dealing here with a metaphor, the tenor of which is amply borne out by the play: moral responsibility is not subject to compulsion; if it does not arise spontaneously at need, neither persuasion nor coercion can supply it. The observation forcefully applies to almost every character in Much Ado, and in particular to Leonato. Late in the play, while mourning the misfortune of a “lamb” whose “baes” he had failed to heed, he comments on the inefficacy of moral counsel when it is offered to someone whose emotions resolutely tend another way. Men, he tells Antonio,

Can counsel and speak comfort to that grief  
Which they themselves not feel; but, tasting it,  
Their counsel turns to passion, which before  
Would give preceptial medicine to rage,  
Fetter strong madness in a silken thread,  
Charm ache with air and agony with words.
Certainly, Friar Francis was unable to arouse Leonato's emotional support for Hero, and Antonio now finds it equally futile to recommend that he suffer his grief with patience: “For there was never yet philosopher / That could endure the toothache patiently” (ll. 35-36). But when Antonio suggests that his brother should “Make those that do offend [him] suffer” (l. 40), he strikes a responsive nerve, and soon thereafter Leonato challenges Claudio and Don Pedro, in all seriousness, to mortal combat. Yet the experience of Leonato suggests that even an apparently invulnerable heart may be touched by humane impulses when these arise spontaneously and operate from within. Just as the Friar predicted, the anger which had made Leonato deaf to charitable counsel has modulated into remorse, and this emotion has restored his faith in Hero. “My soul,” he says, “doth tell me Hero is belied” (l. 42). To apply the metaphoric language of the Dogberry episode, Leonato has been both a thief and a victim of thievery, for he has permitted Don John to make away with Hero's reputation, thus robbing himself of his own better judgment. Now, however, time and sorrow have permitted him to recover his power of moral discernment, and the return of Hero's good repute will follow as soon as Don John's trickery comes to light and it is learned that he has fled from Messina “upon this villainy” (l. 237). Dogberry and Friar Francis are in substantial agreement that a thief, if left to his own devices, will eventually “show himself what he is, and steal out of your company” (III.iii.55-56), and their confidence would seem to be supported by events. But the prognosis needs to be qualified in one important particular: although Leonato is aware that a theft has taken place, he does not know or will not admit that he himself is implicated in the crime.

Let it be granted that moral sensitivity and responsibility are gifts that God gives and that they are not subject to compulsion. Nevertheless, as many who have read or witnessed Much Ado can testify, we feel an obligation on the part of people who are tested for these qualities and found wanting to admit their error and accept the blame for such ill effects as have resulted from it. Naturally, Leonato, and in particular Claudio and Don Pedro, are reluctant to acknowledge that they have displayed, relative to Hero, a shocking lack of spiritual generosity—the quality which Chaucer honored as “gentilesse.” It is far more convenient for them to assert and believe that they have sinned only in mistaking. But this half-truth fails to appease the offended critic who has traditionally taken his revenge on Claudio, if not on the others, by regarding him at best as shallow, vain, and priggish, or at worst as an egregious and incurable cad. Some indeed have gone so far as to pronounce the play itself radically imperfect in that its hero seems unworthy of his share in the happy amnesty which all the characters except Don John enjoy at the final curtain.16

But the critically important point about Much Ado is surely not its failure unequivocally to celebrate essential human goodness but its success in cutting through appearance with its satiric wit. The play supplies abundant evidence that its author calculated its effect with characteristic shrewdness. The rationale for the staunch self-ignorance of Claudio is suggested in the course of Dogberry's remarks on the proper handling of delinquent citizens. According to Verges, Dogberry has “been always called a merciful man” (III.iii.57). “Truly,” Dogberry agrees, “I would not hang a dog by my will, much more a man who hath any honesty in him” (ll. 59-60). But Dogberry's advocacy of laissez-faire in law enforcement, although it bears a certain resemblance to the policy of wise forbearance recommended and practiced by Friar Francis, does not arise from charitable impulse nor is its source to be found in mere indifference to moral issues.17 Rather, it reflects the insistent urge of the ego to protect itself. With regard to thieves, says Dogberry, “the less you meddle or make with them, why, the more is for your honesty” (ll. 49-50). This can be vouched for on the basis of scriptural authority, for “they that touch pitch will be defiled” (ll. 53-54). It is because they fear contamination that Claudio and the others shrink from Hero—a reaction, be it noted, which converts them into accessories of the master thief, Deformed. When their pride is hurt, they warm to the task of scourging moral evil, as Hero finds to her abundant sorrow, and Dogberry faithfully reflects their pharisaical zeal when, subsequently, he invokes the full severity of the law against the “naughty varlet” who has called him ass. The point is vital to the play's satiric impact. So long as Dogberry as everyman is constable (and everyman as Dogberry wears a key beside the lovelock at his ear), the rampant ego, like Spenser's Blatant Beast of slander, need not fear
imprisonment.

If the first movement of Much Ado, which concludes with Claudio's denunciation of Hero, turns on fashion's egotistical avoidance of expense, the second is concerned with its proclivity for seeking vengeance to assuage the pangs of wounded honor. It has been pointed out with some justice that Beatrice is as unreasonable in demanding that Benedick “Kill Claudio” (IV.i.285) for shaming Hero as Claudio is in committing his unfortunate faux pas. But Beatrice is surely the least reprehensible of the advocates of vengeance in the latter part of the play. Her anger is entirely free of that spitefulness which is the reflex of the injured ego. It proceeds from genuine concern for her cousin's anguish and from a legitimate sense of outrage at her accusers' smug self-righteousness and of frustration at her inability to make them see that they have erred. “O, on my soul, my cousin is belied” (IV.i.144), she says, when all except Friar Francis are too willing to believe the slanderous charge. Under the circumstances, the audience cannot fail to respond with gratitude to the generosity of her love, and it is significant that Benedick, who could normally be expected to side with his friends Don Pedro and Claudio, demonstrates the effect of his newly acknowledged love for Beatrice by joining the side of the faithful. Admittedly, there is an intentional irony in the spectacle of the reformed misogynist suddenly converted to knight-errantry. One can see the force of Don Pedro's sarcasm after Benedick has challenged Claudio to combat: “What a pretty thing man is,” he says, “when he goes in his doublet and hose and leaves off his wit!” (V.i.192-93). He can recognize the mark of fashion in another, even if he cannot see it in himself. However, Benedick's concern for the damage done to “a sweet and innocent lady” (l. 184) stands in pleasant contrast to the cynicism which he earlier showed when he believed that Don Pedro had betrayed Claudio by wooing Hero for himself. Then he was so little offended by apparent treachery that he made Claudio's misfortune the occasion for the bluntest kind of raillery (II.i.167 ff.). Nevertheless, it goes without saying that to kill Claudio in a duel is hardly the ideal means of correcting his shortcomings or of making amends to the lady whom he has wronged, especially as Benedick must pretend that Hero has actually died as a result of shock and grief—which is happily untrue. As Leonato later puts it, “She died … but whiles her slander lived” (V.i.66), and when all is well with her, Benedick can shrug off Claudio's taunts with a cheerful, “Come, come, we are friends” (V.iv.115).

Leonato does not fare as well as Benedick. As we have seen, his first thought upon learning of Hero's supposed depravity is of himself; and his second thought is of revenge. If Claudio and Don Pedro have wronged his daughter, he declares,

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Time hath not yet so dried this blood of mine,} \\
\text{Nor age so eat up my invention,} \\
\text{Nor fortune made such havoc of my means,} \\
\text{Nor my bad life reft me so much of friends,} \\
\text{But they shall find awaked in such a kind,} \\
\text{Both strength of limb and policy of mind,} \\
\text{Ability in means, and choice of friends,} \\
\text{To quit me of them throughly.}
\end{align*}
\]

(IV.i.191-98)

When we next encounter him, his intuition has caught up with the more incisive faculty of Beatrice, but the immediate effect of his new-found belief in Hero's innocence is to bring his rage at her detractors to the boiling point. He is prepared at the first opportunity to challenge Claudio and Don Pedro (now in his mind become assassins) to the “trial of a man” (l. 66). We are now obliged to witness a pathetic display of petulance and bravado as Leonato and Antonio, oblivious of encroaching age, vie with each other in heaping offensive provocation on the heads of the able-bodied younger men. As Antonio, who is literally palsied with age (II.i.101), attempts to outdo his brother in pugnacity and invective, we are forcefully reminded of the earlier competition between Dogberry and Verges to communicate their message to the impatient Leonato. Both pairs of old men are sufficiently ridiculous, but while we are amused by Dogberry and his henchman, whose
fatuity is invulnerable to scorn, we grow increasingly embarrassed by the unseemly antics of reverend gentlemen who should be as noble in demeanor as in rank. Not only is their rude display the death of dignity in itself but it makes us doubly conscious of the fact that Leonato, at the moment of Hero's need, was neither more nor less remiss than were the “fashion-monging boys” (V.i.94) whom Antonio now execrates. In many other plays Shakespeare shows the criminal destructiveness of personal revenge, but in *Much Ado* he makes the ego, lashing out at its antagonists, appear both ludicrous and impotent.

The essential foolishness of fashion in its guise as personal revenge is hammered home in *Much Ado* by means of Dogberry's conversion from a man who would not hang a dog by his will into a fire-breathing nemesis of a villain who has dared to call him ass. Dogberry begins the examination of Borachio and Conrade with his usual benign incompetence; indeed, had the Sexton not seen fit to intervene, it seems likely that the prosecutor would have found the defendants altogether blameless. “Masters,” he says, neatly inverting the usual processes of judgment, “it is proved already that you are little better than false knaves, and it will go near to be thought so shortly” (IV.ii.19-21); but when the prisoners deny the charge, Dogberry perceives that they “are both in a tale” (II.28-29) and, duly impressed by this coincidence, is about to make their self-styled innocence a matter of official record. This procedure is quite in keeping with his opinion that “the watch ought to offend no man” (III.iii.74-75), but his permissiveness is about to crumble in response to slander of unprecedented insolence. When the Sexton, having completed the examination, has recorded the confession of Borachio and made his exit, the incident might have been closed, but Conrade objects to being taken in hand by Dogberry. “Off, coxcomb,” he exclaims, “Away! you are an ass, you are an ass” (IV.ii.63, 67). Dogberry's response deserves its reputation as one of the great comic speeches in dramatic literature. “Dost thou not suspect my place?,” he asks, “Dost thou not suspect my years?” (ll.68-69). He is in agony to think that the learned Sexton is no longer present to record the infamous epithet and thus assure the condemnation of a villain who is “full of piety” (l.72); but Conrade's crime will nevertheless be “proved upon [him] by good witness” (ll.72-73). Meanwhile, Dogberry's rebuttal holds the stage, and it is not so much a defense of his nobility as a solemn celebration of it:

> 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!

(ll.73-80)

Like other characters in the play, Dogberry responds with passion to depravity when it assaults his self-esteem. Although a crude untruth is powerless to dull the luster of his person, learning, wisdom, and estate, his anger vibrates with determination that its perpetrator shall not go unpunished. All who have eyes to see must now declare themselves the partisans of justice. Yet what would become of the best of us if justice in this sense were to prevail? Savoring the effect of a stupendous irony, Dogberry calls upon his neighbors to fulfill their solemn duty: “Though it be not written down, yet forget not that I am an ass” (ll.70-71).

Dogberry's catalogue of attributes which the world must note if it is to appreciate the enormity of Conrade's slander is, in itself, a comic tour de force; but it gains immensely in satiric point from its resemblance to the inventory made by Leonato on his own behalf in the preceding scene (IV.i.191-98, quoted above). The Governor's wealth and good repute, his powerful friends, his strength of limb and policy of mind—all these, he declares, are ready at need to square accounts with the guilty parties should it prove that his daughter has been belied. Yet while he meditates upon revenge, he has turned his back on the only adequate antidote to slander—faith in the innocence of Hero—and he has followed the fashion of the world, avoiding cost, while blustering about the power of his rank and station. In short, like Dogberry, he has unwittingly proclaimed himself an ass. The point is plain enough, but it is made still plainer by a second parallel. As it happens, a
standard against which the aberrations both of Dogberry and Leonato can be measured is supplied by Friar Francis. He can see at first glance that Hero has been slandered; however, he is not concerned with tracking down and taking vengeance on her secret enemies but rather with restoring vigor to the feeble sensibilities displayed by certain of her friends. Their capacity for humane feeling, he believes, will be restored when their anger cools and they begin to recognize the value of the prize which they have lost. For the present, it is enough that he declare a confidence in Hero which he modestly supports by citing his professional credentials. “Call me fool,” he says to Leonato, Beatrice, and Benedick,

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.

(IV.i.162-68)

The Friar knows, but does not pride himself upon, his ability to note the human spirit accurately. His powers are truly “gifts that God gives,” for they proceed from dedication to his sacred calling; and, on this occasion, his “book” is the only reliable authority upon which a just and charitable verdict can be based—the face of Hero herself, whose “thousand blushing apparitions” (l. 157) to his acute perception testify not to her shame but to her “maiden truth” (l. 162).

The parallel between Leonato and Dogberry comes to an end with Leonato's abandonment of his proposed revenge when Hero is vindicated and Claudio, believing her dead, is willing to go through the form at least of mourning for her loss. Of course, Leonato's change of heart is necessitated by the decorum of comedy, but one likes to think that it provides some justification for the belief of Friar Francis in the power of time to nurture the more magnanimous impulses of the human spirit. In a play which makes dramatic capital of the fact that even the best disposed of persons sometimes behave ungenerously, an amnesty on recriminations is in order, for the alternative is endless litigation. It is proper that Claudio should have the “resurrected” Hero for his bride, as he is not a monster after all, and the lady seems content with him. It is also not only proper but inevitable that Dogberry should preserve his outsized ego unimpaired and leave the stage entirely satisfied that he has done his duty well in apprehending Don John and Borachio, in spreading the alarm for the elusive thief, Deformed, and in maintaining his own transcendent excellence in the face of derogation by a most aspicious knave. If we can laugh at Dogberry—and heaven help the man who cannot—then we can share the acceptance of ego's blundering way which is implicit in the wry and humorous anatomy of that phenomenon in Much Ado. However the play does give a hearing to one adamant perfectionist—Dogberry himself. He never slackens in his determination to arrest and prosecute Deformed. His final words to Leonato, when translated from his idiom into that of the playwright who speaks, as it were, over Dogberry's head, seem to suggest a wish that Leonato's present access of clear-sightedness may prove a lasting gain: “God save the foundation!” he exclaims (V.i.304), accepting the gratuity offered by Leonato in terms appropriate to a charitable institution. And after expressing a hope that God will restore Leonato to health, he adds: “I humbly give you leave to depart; and if a merry meeting may be wished, God prohibit it!” (ll. 310-12). It is no doubt too much to expect that no future “merry meeting” will take place between the Governor and his constable—either in the literal or the psychological sense. There will certainly be further meetings, and it is proper that they should be merry, for a valuable comic camaraderie is nurtured by the fact that Dogberry is no stranger to the veriest graybeards of our experience. This being granted, we must submit that Much Ado does not deserve its reputation as a disagreeable play. Its view of human nature, for all the barbs of satire which it looses, is a tolerant one; and surely none of us would hang an honest comedy by our wills, much more a play which hath the familiar and incomparable Dogberry in it.

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1. For example, T. W. Craik, at the strategic moment in a detailed analysis, announces that he takes “The comedy of Dogberry's instructions to the watch … to exist rather for its own sake than for any contribution it makes to the play as a whole” (“Much Ado about Nothing,” Scrutiny, XIX [1953], 304).


3. The point is vigorously made by James Smith, one of the few critics who has suggested a comprehensive view of Dogberry's significance: “Dogberry has perfectly accommodated himself to those on whom he depends, making their ideals his own. … It needs little acquaintance with the Leonato circle to realize that for them too it is a principal concern that everything, so far as possible, shall remain ‘handsome about them’” (“Much Ado about Nothing,” Scrutiny, XIII [1946], 244).


5. For James Smith, it is impossible that Verges and Dogberry “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” (p. 243).

6. S. C. Sen Gupta attributes Dogberry's delay in disclosing Don John's plot “to a peculiarity in his character which cannot be described as asinine density of intellect”; in casting about for an alternative explanation, however, he can only say that Dogberry “lives in a fantastic world of his own with its peculiar notions about man's character and his duties in relation to society” (Shakespearian Comedy [Calcutta, New York, 1950], p. 151).

7. Bertrand Evans offers a list of parallel characters and observes most justly that “Dogberry is no Portia!” Of course, I agree that “It is one thing to share our vantage-point with an Oberon, a Portia, a Vincentio, a Prospero—and quite another to share it with a Dogberry …” (Shakespeare's Comedies [Oxford, 1960], p. 79).

8. Cf. Smith: “The figures of Dogberry and his kind are necessary in the background, to reduce the figures in the foreground to the required proportions of apes … for whom no tricks are too ferocious, too fantastic” (p. 246).

9. Craik has it that “In reality, Claudio is exonerated, chiefly by the facts that Don John (as villain) draws all censure to himself and that Don Pedro (hitherto the norm, the reasonable man) is also deceived” (p. 314). A similar view is detailed by Kerby Neill in an elaborate apologia for Claudio—“More Ado about Claudio: an Acquittal for the Slandered Groom,” SQ, [Shakespeare Quarterly] III (1952), 91-107.

10. An excellent definition of courtesy as Chaucer and Spenser appear to have understood it is provided by C. S. Lewis: “We are to conceive of courtesy as the poetry of conduct, an ‘unbought grace of life’ which makes its possessor immediately lovable to all who meet him, and which is the bloom (as Aristotle would say)—the supervenient perfection—of the virtues of charity and humility” (The Works of Edmund Spenser: A Variorum Edition [Baltimore, 1932-57], VI, 347). This prescription seems to me entirely consonant with Shakespeare's view as it may be inferred from Much Ado and other of his plays.

11. Significant references to fashion in Much Ado have been assembled and convincingly interpreted by Elizabeth T. Rose in “The Subject of Fashion in Much Ado about Nothing,” Hollins Symposium (Spring 1967), pp. 91-96.

12. Everyone in Messina, says Smith, deals charmingly in appearances, and “there is a danger that faculties, exercised exclusively on appearances, may incapacitate themselves for dealing with, or even 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” (p. 245).

13. Claudio, says Sen Gupta, “is not a man with an individual personality but is only a conglomeration of romantic postures” (p. 146).
17. Such a view is suggested, for example, by A. Fred Sochatoff: “We embrace and take to our hearts this individual who provides so joyful a basis for irresponsibility!” (“Much Ado about Nothing,” *Shakespeare: Lectures on Five Plays* [Pittsburgh, 1958], p. 12).
18. Craik considers Beatrice's speech “an uncontrolled violent outburst” and regards her behavior as “the triumph of emotion over reason” (p. 304).
19. It is perhaps significantly ironic that Conrade, so far as we know, is not guilty of any misdemeanor except his affront to Dogberry.

**Criticism: Character Studies: C. O. Gardner (essay date October 1977)**


*In the following essay, Gardner argues that Beatrice and Benedick in Much Ado about Nothing are not always given their full due as lively, exciting, and even weighty characters.*

Another essay on Beatrice and Benedick! … This one is offered, needless to say, in the belief that there is still more to be said about them. It is not offered, however, in the belief that most of what has been said so far is false. On the contrary, my impression is that, though misinterpretations and inadequate accounts have of course been perpetrated, a fairly large proportion of what has been written about these two characters—and perhaps indeed about Shakespeare's work in general—is valid. Shakespeare was, as Coleridge has said, myriad-minded; many different intuitions about the plays and many different points of view seem to be able to complement one another (though I don't believe, as some recent critics seem to, that two quite contradictory interpretations of a play are permissible). Moreover Shakespeare has called forth, as one might have expected, the liveliest imaginativeness in many of those who have tried to articulate their response to him.

If then this essay is in any sense a 'revaluation' of Beatrice and Benedick, it is certainly not an attempt to present a completely new assessment of these two characters and their significance. I am attempting, rather, to revalue them in the sense in which the word is now used by economists: I hope to increase their value, or rather (in literature it amounts to the same thing) to increase our awareness of their value. And indeed—particularly at a time when in the affairs of the mind and the heart as well as in the field of finance devaluation seems usual—there is perhaps some point in setting forth once again the notion that the best task of criticism is to add to our ability to apprehend, and our reasons for valuing, the greatest literature.

My subject is Beatrice and Benedict rather than *Much Ado About Nothing* as a whole. The reason for this is not that I believe that the two most important characters in the play can be completely detached from their context, but simply that it is about them—or, to be more precise, about the parts of the play which they appear in or affect—that I have something to say. A great deal has been written in the last twenty-five years about the play as a whole; the chief question that has been discussed is the success or failure of the Claudio-Hero plot. I do not propose to reopen the discussion here. I myself am content—or almost content—to acquiesce in the view of those who hold that the play* is* effectively unified—that it does indeed 'come off.'

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What I wish to suggest is that, for all the perceptive and admiring comments they have evoked, Beatrice and Benedick have still not been given their full due. No critic, as far as I have been able to discover, has
sufficiently recognized and accounted for the excitement and the fellow-feeling that from the very first—it
seems to me—they arouse in reader or audience. We do not associate ourselves with them entirely, of course:
we know that they are only partly conscious of what they are doing—playing an aggressive paradoxical game
in which, fairly clearly, for both of them, failure and success are going to coincide. But there is, within and
beneath their ‘merry war,’ a node of magical, almost Dionysian delight which has not yet been given proper
critical definition.

There has never been any difficulty in appreciating the liveliness, the intelligence and the wit of Beatrice and
Benedick; but critics have failed properly to detect the undercurrents out of which the jets of life and humour
erupt. We find J. R. Mulryne, for example, saying in a recent study:

Critics have never been in doubt as to the dominant figures of the play’s first movement. …
Nor is there dispute about the type of experience these two figures convey. ‘The mirth of
Beatrice (and no less that of Benedick) is an outbreak of the joyous energy of life’ (Dowden);
‘… the exuberant quality of lively minds which strike fire by scoring off each other …
competitive vitality’ (Rossiter); ‘gay, light-hearted critics of every illusion’ (J. R. Brown).
These are phrases typical of the agreed response: abundant vitality, gaiety, self-confidence, a
brilliantly witty command of language, are the qualities all of us respond to, and which bulk
large in our experience of the play’s initial movement.¹

These descriptions of Beatrice and Benedick are clearly very far from being false; indeed they seem to me
vivid and eloquent. But they fall short of true comprehensiveness, I believe, in placing so much of their
emphasis upon the spirit implied in ‘mirth,’ ‘competitive,’ ‘light-hearted,’ ‘gaiety’: they do not suggest the
stature and the weight of the two comic-heroic (not mock-heroic) protagonists.

An earlier critic, George Sampson, recognizes something of this weight when he declares that ‘it is not a
paradox to say that the comedy of Beatrice and Benedick is the only serious part of
Much Ado.’² But then he
goes on to say that ‘it is the best of human comedy, because it is near to tragedy’ and to suggest that the two
‘fine spirits’ are ‘conscious of each other’s powers and therefore instinctively hostile through fear’—thus
(while hitting part of the truth) misjudging the confident self-delighting energy which animates both of them
at almost every moment, and which maintains a pressure and a tone that we know are never really in danger of
becoming tragic.

A few recent critics bring us somewhat closer to what seems to me a fuller account of the interplay between
Beatrice and Benedick. David Horowitz quotes Professor Andrew Chiappe as saying:

    Benedick and Beatrice rail at each other, which is proper for civilized people in love, because
    love implies the greatest of indignities to be suffered: to give oneself.³

Horowitz himself adds, later: ‘The very basis of their resistance to the notion of human love was their precise
knowledge of what was at stake;’ and: ‘Their critical realism gives to the bond that is between them a resilient
strength.’⁴ Valuable as these remarks are, however, Horowitz does not tell us very much about the state of
mind and heart from which such resistance and such ‘realism’ spring. We are told considerably more both
about the protagonists and about their effect upon us by R. A. Foakes:

    Perhaps it is not so much the quality of their witty exchanges that makes them such powerful
    and vibrant figures, as the energy and skill with which they parry each other, and so preserve
    a stance of tough-minded independence.⁵

The words ‘powerful,’ ‘vibrant,’ ‘energy,’ ‘skill,’ and perhaps ‘parry’ take us towards the core of the
relationship; but ‘preserve a stance,’ though it is of course partly justified by the deceptions and
self-deceptions that are an important aspect of what makes us laugh, fails to convey the reality of the desire, or partial desire, for ‘tough-minded independence.’ Foakes seems (to me) unable to conceptualize what he has intuitively felt. Later in his essay he slips into a more conventional and limited account of the play's concerns:

The supremacy of intelligence, or wit, in the values of the world of the play helps to account for both its brilliance, and its prose. The brilliance is achieved centrally in Beatrice and Benedick, but a price is paid for it; there is a coolness about the gaiety of this world, where to score a point in conversation matters most.6

Perhaps the best brief account of the significance of Beatrice and Benedick is that of G. K. Hunter. In his formulations we sense a responsiveness that is both highly sophisticated and thoroughly lively:

Beatrice is admirable … as an independent person, whose high spirits express an individual control over her own happiness. It is not for her, in following the downward path described by Congreve's Millamant as ‘by degrees dwindl[ing] into a wife,’ to have the independence knocked out of her by masculine violence, however jovial.7

… The wariness and defensive banter of Beatrice and Benedick, their unwillingness to abandon self-sufficiency or commit themselves too far—as we may suppose Claudio does, with his ‘I give myself away for you, and dote upon the exchange’—can be seen as a proper poise.8

Even these statements, however, seem to me to do less than justice to what I have tentatively called the Dionysian element in the emotions and reactions of the protagonists—the startling and wonderful ferocity of their exchanges. In fact Hunter appears even to distrust this ferocity when he says: ‘But the nearness of Beatrice to a shrew must be faced and admitted if we are to preserve the balance of the play.’9 It is true, of course, that Beatrice, like Benedick, is shown to be wrong, or partly wrong, in some of her earlier assertions, that she can be said to change her mind; but we are, I believe, so aware—consciously or unconsciously—of the creative vitality within her earlier attitude that we cannot accept the word ‘shrew.’ Hunter himself seems a little uneasy about the sentence that I have been commenting on, for he continues: ‘Admitting the quality of aggression in her nature is not quite the same thing as condemning her. …’ The view which I shall put forward is that her aggression is an important part of what we feel to be her glory.

Useful contributions towards a full understanding of Beatrice and Benedick have been made by some of those critics who have responded to the fact that Much Ado About Nothing represents, more richly than any other play of Shakespeare's, the Renaissance spirit at its most assured and its most splendid—the spirit that we associate with Castiglione and with the portraits of young men and women painted by Raphael and Titian. Some of the statements made by D. L. Stevenson are particularly pertinent. Speaking of what he calls Shakespeare's ‘love-game comedies,’ he says: ‘Their criticism of the accepted behaviour of lovers takes nourishment from all the humanistic forces working through Renaissance life.’10 Stevenson fills out this observation in his discussion of Lady Emilia Pia and Lord Gaspar Pallavicino, the two characters from The Book of the Courtier who have often been compared with Beatrice and Benedick:

The similarity of these two attendants at the court of Urbino to two of Shakespeare's dramatic characters is, it would appear, not so much causal as parallel. That is to say, once the Renaissance assumed the social and emotional equality of the sexes, love generally became not a question of acceptance or denial (as it was to Elyot), but a quarrel between the ideal and the psychologically possible. … It was a quarrel brought about by the sturdy, critical spirit of the age. … The attempt to accommodate a romantic attitude to the life of a gentleman and to the newly apprehended lady of the court, then, represents the intrusion of Renaissance reality into medieval courtly ideals whether illustrated in drama, in conduct book or in fact.11
Stevenson notes, too, that … unlike the characters in *Love's Labour's Lost* and in *As You Like It*, Beatrice and Benedick remain as shrewdly enlightened creatures of the Renaissance after they have agreed to marry as they were before. … Benedick's statement to Beatrice, ‘Thou and I are too wise to woo peaceably,’ is a fitting summary of the implications to be drawn from their particular courtship.\(^\text{12}\)

### II

**BEATRICE:**

I pray you, is Signor Mountanto returned from the wars, or no?

**MESSENGER:**

I know none of that name, lady; there was none such in the army of any sort.

**LEONATO:**

What is he that you ask for, niece?

**HERO:**

My cousin means Signor Benedick of Padua.

**MESSENGER:**

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

**BEATRICE:**

He set up his bills here in Messina, and challenged Cupid at the flight, and my uncle's fool, reading the challenge, ... hath he killed and eaten in these wars? But how many hath he killed. For indeed, I promised to eat all of his killing.

**LEONATO:**

Faith, niece, you tax Signor Benedick too much; but he'll be meet with you, I doubt it not.

(I i 28)\(^\text{13}\)

Beatrice's first, memorable question betrays the concern of a potential lover. Yet her tone is flecked with an irony that contrives to be both aloof and playful. What strikes us most forcibly, however, in the opening sentence of the ‘merry war’ is its implied *challenge*—a challenge which is amusing but none the less real. The war, we soon grasp, though merry, is a war indeed. Beatrice's interest in Benedick and her mocking resistance to him are communicated simultaneously; and she pictures him in a state of combat—as a fencer, as indeed a master of the upward thrust.

Beatrice's opening remarks show, as most commentators have stressed, a large degree of witty control: those actresses who have attempted to play her as a spinster with a broad streak of neurotic cantankerousness have of course missed much of the humour and much of the point. But on the other hand we are in danger of losing contact with her—and, I believe, of denying some of our own deepest responses—if we allow ourselves to think of her as merely or mainly a witty young lady. Her control is superb; but it is something important that she is controlling, something which any lively and sensitive person must have had some experience of. What I
wish to suggest is that Beatrice and Benedick evoke even more excitement than has been explicitly recognized because their concerns are more significant, more centrally a part of the human condition, than critics seem to have noticed.

MESSENGER:

He hath done good service, lady, in these wars.

BEATRICE:

You had musty victual, and he hath holp to eat it; he is a very valiant trencher-man, he hath an

MESSENGER:

And a good soldier too, lady.

BEATRICE:

And a good soldier to a lady. But what is he to a lord?

MESSENGER:

A lord to a lord, a man to a man, stuffed with all honourable virtues.

BEATRICE:

It is so, indeed; he is no less than a stuffed man; but for the stuffing—well, we are all mortal.

LEONATO:

You must not, sir, mistake my niece. There is a kind of merry war between Signor Benedick and her

BEATRICE:

Alas, he gets nothing by that. In our last conflict four of his five wits went halting off, and now

MESSENGER:

Is't possible?

BEATRICE:

Very easily possible: he wears his faith but as the fashion of his hat; it ever changes with the

MESSENGER:

I see, lady, the gentleman is not in your books.

BEATRICE:

No; an he were, I would burn my study. ...
Beatrice's is a remarkable virtuoso performance, and it is clear that she is deriving from it the same kind of pleasure as the audience enjoys. Yet this is far from being mere performance. As a proud and noble creature she is displaying her plumage, but she is doing so not so much in order to show how worthy she is of a mate as to show how thoroughly she deserves to remain herself. She rejoices in herself, as well she might; but she feels her self-sufficiency threatened by the man to whom she is (largely unconsciously) attracted. The relentlessness with which she pursues Benedick with her mocking tongue indicates the gay and poised half-desperation of a person for whom attack seems somehow to have become the best method of defence. With comic exuberance she resists the menace so tryingly yet so piquantly thrown before her by life itself, indeed by her own emotions. She embraces Benedick in a spirit of joyous but serious contradiction and denial.

It is conventionally assumed that young men and young women drift naturally into love and mutual devotion and mutual service. Beatrice (like Benedick) is sufficiently proud and sufficiently perceptive to discern that this ‘natural process’ is in many respects highly unnatural—that it is in fact something of an outrage. She knows that her emotional and intellectual quality, her force of personality, must be given its due, must be given its head. And in implicitly asserting this she is—even though the play proves her partly wrong in the end—neither an emotional cripple, nor a crazed blue-stocking, nor even, like Congreve’s Millamant (for whom one has very considerable sympathy), a self-consciously bewitching and somewhat over-sophisticated mademoiselle. Beatrice’s protest against what she feels to be the intolerable laws both of life and of society springs from the healthy and intelligent vigour of her own self-delight. And it is impossible for the audience to be deeply critical of Beatrice’s valuation of herself when it finds itself largely sharing that valuation: we like Beatrice, and, though our critical faculties are not wholly converted by her, distinctly we like her as she is.

Benedick’s stand (for it is a stand rather than a stance) is fundamentally the same as Beatrice’s. It is perhaps slightly less astonishing than hers, since we are rather more accustomed to rebellions and surprises in the behaviour of men. But the two protagonists are fairly evenly matched in their energy and in their attractiveness, and it is this fact, of course, which makes us steadily more aware that a very fine match could be made between them.

BEATRICE:
I wonder that you will still be talking, Signor Benedick; nobody marks you.

BENEDICK:
What, my dear Lady Disdain! Are you yet living?

BEATRICE:
Is it possible disdain should die while she hath such meet food to feed it as Signor Benedick? Courtesy itself must convert to disdain, if you come in her presence.

BENEDICK:
Then is courtesy a turncoat. 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.

BEATRICE:
A 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.

BENEDICK:
God keep your ladyship still in that mind! So some gentleman or other shall 'scape a predestinate
Scratching could not make it worse, an 'twere such a face as yours were.

BENEDICK:

Well, you are a rare parrot-teacher.

BEATRICE:

A bird of my tongue is better than a beast of yours.

BENEDICK:

I would my horse had the speed of your tongue, and so good a continuer. But keep your way a' God's name, I have done.

BEATRICE:

You always end with a jade's trick; I know you of old.

(I i 108)

Again, one's immediate impression is of marvellously accomplished fun. But why is it that this snatch of dialogue is obviously so much more solid and significant than any fragment that one might select from Noel Coward or from Oscar Wilde or indeed from Congreve? In the words of Beatrice and Benedick, modulating as they do from controlled disdain to vigorous and brilliant abuse, there is a touch of living fierceness, an emotional pressure, which makes us constantly aware that we are in the presence not of skilled or even consummate artifice but of something which we are made—by the art, of course—to feel as a part of everyday reality.

I have expressed my disagreement with George Sampson's view that the drama of Beatrice and Benedick is 'near to tragedy': the tone of their exchanges is confidently and securely comic. But it is important to remember that great tragedy and great comedy, even at their purest, have rather more in common than perhaps we are in the habit of realising. Each represents a serious mode of apprehending human life. Even a discussion between Dogberry and Verges is appreciably less distant from the world of tragedy, less a denial of it, than a conversation between Algernon Moncrieff and Lady Bracknell. In this little altercation between Beatrice and Benedick—comic as it is—there are tensions and cross-currents of feeling that can perhaps be said to inhabit the same realm of being as those which a few years later were to express themselves in tragedy:

O, thou weed,
Who art so lovely fair, and smell'st so sweet
That the sense aches at thee, would thou hadst ne'er been born!

(Othello, IV ii 66)

Indeed Shakespeare's great tragic period seems to result partly from his having recognized, as many other major Renaissance artists did, some of the flaws in—maybe the ultimate insufficiency of—the exuberant self-reliant world and spirit that Much Ado celebrates.

To pursue this line of thought, however, would be to leave the play behind. But it is necessary to grasp how real are the feelings, how sharp the cutting edge, embodied in the exchanges of Beatrice and Benedick. There may be some value, too, in bringing out a similarity that has not often been noted:

No, uncle, I'll none. Adam's sons are my brethren, and, truly, I hold it a sin to match in my kin
Why Hal, 'tis my vocation, Hal. 'Tis no sin for a man to labour in his vocation.

(I Henry IV, I ii 104)

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 185)

I would you had but the wit: 'twere better than your dukedom. Good faith, this same young sober-blooded boy doth not love me; nor a man cannot make him laugh; but that's no marvel, he drinks no wine.

(2 Henry IV, IV iii 85)

Falstaff is, of course, incomparable; but no characters are closer to him, in some of his aspects, than Beatrice and Benedick. The movement of their lively and flexible prose cannot but remind us of his (it is interesting to note, incidentally, that Much Ado may well have been written immediately after Henry IV). Falstaff stands opposed to all the conventions of virtue and sober respectability and military honour; Beatrice and Benedick reject the norms of love and marriage. In him and in them we hear a call of nature that is wild, alarming, profound. Perhaps the chief feature of our response—if we allow ourselves to chart our feelings without prejudice—is a sense of liberation. We experience a gust of fresh and new air, not simply because it is delightful to abandon briefly the burdens of accepted knowledge and responsibility, but because Beatrice and Benedick and Falstaff are expressing and embodying a permanent, though perhaps inconvenient, facet of human truth. It is true that love and marriage—especially the conventional versions of these things—are an imposition upon decent freedom and self-respect, just as reputable life and honourable death are an affront to the ordinary human vitality which in Falstaff reaches almost titanic proportions. It is because they boldly incarnate bracing, life-giving truths that these three can be said to be heroes—albeit comic heroes.

III

It is worth asking why, if the challenge that they offer to conventional wisdom is an important one, Beatrice and Benedick should nevertheless be so richly comic.

Obviously we laugh at them partly because they are deluded or half-deluded: they erect stong and proud barriers against love, but of course amor vincit omnia. This aspect of the comedy, central though it is, I don't propose to deal with; it has been discussed often. We laugh too, with them as well as at them, because they are genial, witty, gamesome, exuberantly non-tragic. Their critique of the ways of society, for example, is pointedly different from Don John's; indeed Beatrice's shrewd comment on the latter tells us a good deal about her own quality: 'How tartly that gentleman looks' (II i 3). But perhaps the deepest vibration in our laughter forms part of our response to precisely that essentially serious challenge that I have been attempting to define.

Bergson stressed that comedy is born when living people, who should be alert and flexible, behave stiffly and mechanically. Beatrice and Benedick become, amusingly, if not mechanical at least predictable when they succumb to love. But in so far as they defy the norms of love and marriage (and this defiance they maintain, to some extent, to the very end of the play) they have the laugh of all the others—not only Claudio and Hero, indeed, but the reader or audience as well. Shakespeare turns comedy inside out: part of our pleasure lies in our own discomfiture; or rather, one part of ourselves mocks another part.

But the mocking of mechanical actions and reactions is perhaps only the negative side of the comedy. The humour that springs from Beatrice and Benedick does not only chastise: it rejoices. We enjoy the truth and reality of their intuitions as we enjoy all truth and reality. But we laugh, we undergo that peculiar form of

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nervous release, because we find ourselves in the presence of forces of life that are powerful and exhilarating, forces that bear us upwards—just as, in tragedy, we feel fearful because we encounter forces that chill us and bear down upon us. Beatrice and Benedick strike us as funny because they reveal new or partly new ways in which life, the life within us, is or may be fun; and an ancient, boisterous, partially iconoclastic recognition stirs in our depths. Laughter is a way of saluting life at its most propitious; almost effortlessly it searches out and proclaims nature beneath convention, the earth of the flesh beneath the air of theory, the heart’s vital truth beneath the mind's cramped duty. Perhaps the key word or phrase is one that I have used once or twice already—self-delight. Self-delight, involving as it does relationships with other people's self-delight, is not a peaceful occupation, however: Beatrice and Benedick are ‘too wise to woo peaceably’ (V ii 66).

A maker of comedies, especially one who succeeds in getting us to laugh out at profound human truths, must write from a certain poise, a stance of relaxed humane vision. Stance and poise depend to a large extent, often, upon the state of the culture in which the writer finds himself; and yet the achievement itself must always belong ultimately to the artist himself. It is interesting to compare some of the assertions that Shakespeare formulates or enacts in Beatrice and Benedick with some rather similar assertions made or implied by D. H. Lawrence. Sometimes of course Lawrence can be very amusing in his treatment of the relationship between man and woman, as for instance at certain moments in the nouvelle The Captain's Doll. Perhaps rather more characteristic of him, however, is a passage like this, from Women in Love:

The old way of love seemed a dreadful bondage, a sort of conscription. What it was in him he did not know, but the thought of love, marriage, and children, and a life lived together, in the horrible privacy of domestic and connubial satisfaction, was repulsive. He wanted something clearer, more open, cooler, as it were. … On the whole, he hated sex, it was such a limitation. It was sex that turned a man into a broken half of a couple, the woman into the other broken half. And he wanted to be single in himself, the woman single in herself.\(^{15}\)

In writing these words, Lawrence is clearly feeling the need to open up a new path for human attitudes and actions. The Shakespeare of Much Ado, on the other hand, seems almost to watch the new path opening of its own accord, and he enjoys fully the implications of what he sees. Lawrence, great as he is, tends often to insist upon the validity of the vision that he is expounding (even though, when he is writing at his best, he manages to detach himself from his protagonists), whereas Shakespeare, for all the punch and fire of Beatrice and Benedick, appears content to allow their vigorous truths to unfold freely and in the end to merge harmoniously into the total meaning of the play.

And yet at the same time, Shakespeare is never guilty of that partial irresponsibility which one associates with most of the comedy of the Restoration period: his humour is always deeply life-giving and therefore serious. Indeed, if Shakespeare's vision in this play is on the whole more generous and relaxed than Lawrence's, it is obviously more wholesome than that of the Restoration dramatists. Their plays are marred by sophistication; the thought is often over-elaborated, while the feeling tends to become salacious. In Beatrice and Benedick wit and emotion, liveliness and humour are one.

The fact that the hero and heroine live and have their being in prose is not fundamentally to be explained in terms of (to use Foakes's words) ‘the supremacy of intelligence, or wit, in the values of the world of the play.’ In Much Ado, as in several of the other plays Shakespeare wrote between about 1597 and 1602, prose is often the instrument of ‘nature’ as against artificiality or emotional narrowness. Our knowledge that Shakespeare is the greatest of poets seems often to blind us to the fact that in five or six of his plays he chose to make many of his most imaginative and disturbing formulations in prose rather than in verse. He seems at this time to have felt that the number of thoughts and feelings that could be crystallized in verse, or at least in his own verse as it had developed up to that point, was limited, and thus verse was able at times to become for him the vehicle for attitudes of mind and heart which lack the full weight of passionate commitment. One of Benedick’s comments on the love-sick Claudio may well contain something of the playwright’s own feeling
on these matters:

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 18)

There can be little doubt that the new vigour and flexibility that we find in the verse of the great tragedies stems from the period in which Shakespeare cultivated the virtues of prose.

IV

No critic of any importance has failed to respond to the brilliance and the power of the exchange in which Beatrice tells Benedick to kill Claudio. Its full significance and its relation to what has happened earlier in the play have not, however, been generally recognized. It is certainly true that the protagonists reveal themselves in this scene more richly and more movingly than they have done before; but—as my earlier observations imply—it is inaccurate to say that they are now for the first time ‘reacting with real feeling,’ that they ‘shed briefly their armour of wit, and speak plainly and directly,’ or even that they ‘in the end uncover their hearts.’

The whole exchange pulsates with energy, with the clashing and mingling of cross-currents of vitality. At first this energy is held in, understated, touched with a little humour, as Beatrice absorbs the meaning of the harrowing scene of the broken wedding and Benedick tensely and sympathetically watches her reactions. Because Beatrice is aware of the new development in her relationship with her ‘antagonist,’ her kind concern for Hero flows naturally, inevitably, into a slightly veiled but nevertheless probing challenge:

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.

(IV i 258)

Worked upon by the intimacy of these insinuations, and responding (as she does too) to a sense of crisis, Benedick utters his love. Beatrice hesitates, equivocates, at first shyly, then good-humouredly, and finally brings out a passionate yet poised declaration:

I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest.
At this Benedick explodes with a lover's full-flowing liberality—'Come, bid me do anything for thee'—only to find his impulse met by what strikes him as a violent contrary force: ‘Kill Claudio’. At first, he fails to recognize the implications of what he is up against—of what he is involved with and in—and he gaily refuses to act; but the sheer power of her conviction overbears his opposition:

BENEDICK:

(taking her by the hand): Tarry, sweet Beatrice.

BEATRICE:

I am gone though I am here; there is no love in you. Nay, I pray you, let me go.

BENEDICK:

Beatrice—

BEATRICE:

In faith, I will go.

BENEDICK:

We'll be friends first.

BEATRICE:

You dare easier be friends with me than fight with mine enemy.

BENEDICK:

Is Claudio thine enemy?

BEATRICE:

Is he not approved in the height a villain that hath slandered, scorned, dishonoured my kinswoman? O that I were a man! ... accusation, uncovered slander, unmitigated rancour—O God, that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the marketplace.

By the end of the exchange Benedick is wholly convinced that his love for Beatrice must make him fight Claudio.

We see, then, that the energy of the lovers—that which they possess as individuals and that which they generate together—runs in a number of different directions. But what is most important is that the ‘field of force’ that is displayed here is precisely the one that we have seen and experienced from the first.

Beatrice and Benedick were introduced to us as creatures with an intense sense of individuality—both their own and other people's—and with therefore, among other things, a keen awareness of sexual differences. Both because of the healthy turbulence of their emotions and because of the need to ward off soul-destroying influences, they were apt to be pugnacious, to conceive of life as a war—a ‘merry war.’ Their championing of themselves, however—quite unlike Don John's embittered and envious self-indulgence—by no means dammed up the flow of sympathy and generosity towards others; freely themselves, they were always free to
respond where a response seemed called for. And it turns out that, though they have their moments of comic humiliation, even falling in love is not incompatible with dynamic self-assertion. They need themselves, but they also need what their selves need—and each self requires another complementary self, partly as something to fight with, something in terms of which and against which it may live and be defined, but also, of course, as a point of focus for that welling sweetness, that strange love of other life, which accompanies and interpenetrates the robustness of merry warriors. Only those who have achieved independence can give themselves fully in love. And self-aware beings naturally expect the highest standards in their sexual partners (as indeed Beatrice and Benedick have hinted from the first); the complementing, the mutual reinforcement, must be well done, and each must value the other's distinctive pride. Moreover this enlargement, this expansion of the area of self-fulfilment, must inevitably produce not introversion but an even wider sympathy, and not sentimentality but a toughness and crispness of feeling.

The scene that we have been looking at is thus a continuation and a blossoming of the movement of feeling which was begun in the first scene of the play. Of course it surprises us, as all great art must, and as all living human responses must. But at the same time we can recognize that it is right that Beatrice and Benedick should be so alert in their emotions, so subtly mobile in their moods. It is right, too, that Benedick's sympathy should make Beatrice implicitly both call upon and mock his manhood, and that this should lead to his declaration of love, in the course of which, newly conscious of his sexual identity, he refers to his sword, that sword that as Signor Mountanto he was wielding when first Beatrice brought him before our eyes:

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?

(270)

And the great 'Kill Claudio,' astounding as it is, summarizes and fulfils the whole meaning of the relationship between Beatrice and Benedick. It is in itself the most concentrated and fierce of all her rapier-like utterances; in it she demands that Benedick make real use of his man's sword. Held within Beatrice's passionate command, beside her affection for the injured Hero and her contempt for the contemptible action of Claudio, is her burning knowledge (there is no trace of lukewarm calculation in it) not only that love must prove itself by a willingness to risk all and to commit itself entirely, but that in some ultimate sense to love—to live absolutely—is to fight. Beatrice and Benedick must, in various ways, continue to live by the sword, and Claudio's base act, like his earlier mawkishness, provides an occasion for them to show the mettle of which they are made.

Beatrice takes the lead (as the heroines so often do when Shakespeare is in an untragic mood), but Benedick follows her fairly swiftly:

BEATRICE:
Princes and counties! Surely a princely testimony, a goodly count, Count Comfect; a sweet gallant, surely! O, that I were Hercules that only tells a lie and swears it. I cannot be a man with wishing, therefore I will die a woman with grieving.

BENEDICK:
Tarry, good Beatrice. By this hand, I love thee.

BEATRICE:
Use it for my love some other way than swearing by it.

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

BEATRICE:
Yea, as sure as I have a thought or a soul.

(310)
The word ‘soul’ suggests the fullness of Beatrice's humanity. And it is a largeness and complexity which impresses us in Benedick's reply; he is sternly resolved, he shows his love for Beatrice and his concern for Hero, and yet even here there is a touch of the play's pervasive humour:

Enough, I am engaged; I will challenge him, I will kiss your hand, and so I leave you. By this hand, Claudio shall render me a dear account. As you hear of me, so think of me. Go, comfort your cousin. …

(326)

V

What allows the slightest suggestion of laughter to colour Benedick's resolution is, of course, our knowledge that it can't end like this. Dogberry and Verges do their belated bit, mistakes are undone, and the proper comedy-conclusion is ushered in. The vivacity of the hero and heroine is able to stream back into the now harmonious warfare of bellicose affection:

BENEDICK:
A miracle! Here's our hands against our hearts. Come, I will have thee; but, by this light, I take

BEATRICE:
I would not deny you; but, by this good day, I yield upon great persuasion; and partly to save you

BENEDICK:
(kissing her) Peace! I will stop your mouth.

(V iv 91)

That kiss is impressive as well as funny because we know what lies behind it. And we feel the full weight of the protagonists' energy, firmly and creatively channelled, in Benedick's final invitation:
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.

(V iv 115)

Notes

4. Ibid., p. 35.
8. Ibid., p. 21.
9. Ibid., p. 18.
11. Ibid., pp. 120-121.
12. Ibid., p. 214.
14. See also I i 222 and *I Henry IV*, V iii 57.

Criticism: Character Studies: Hugh M. Richmond (essay date 1979)


[In the following essay, Richmond traces the historical precedent for the villainous Don John in Much Ado about Nothing and proposes literary analogues for the play's comic lovers, Beatrice and Benedick.]

From Robert Greene's *Groatsworth of Wit*, with its bitter warnings to his colleagues against upstart plagiarists, down to Geoffrey Bullough's recent encyclopedic account of Shakespeare's sources and analogues,1 Shakespeare's capacity to build on other men's work has been recognized as intrinsic to his mode of composition as an Elizabethan dramatist. As we shall see, even such a play as *Love's Labor's Lost*, which lacks literary sources, reflects detailed and systematic exploitation of the lives and personalities of the contemporary French aristocrats whose names recur in the majority of the play's principal characters. Shakespeare's procedure in composition shows Elizabethan “invention” to have been more syncretic than wholly original in nature: the adjustment of a series of pre-existing resources to form a fresh pattern. Characteristically, he excerpts provocative motifs from some archetypal legend or history which is rich in bizarre incident; then he interpolates diversifying characters and incidents from other sources to provide contrast or reinforcement; and finally he heightens the contemporary immediacy of the whole by an overlay of disconcertingly modern allusions whose anachronism is offset by the witty self-consciousness of the author. Overall nothing could be further from Aristotle's prescription that “it is not the poet's province to relate such things as have actually happened, but such as might have happened … according either to probable or necessary consequence,” for ironically, in view of his seemingly improbable themes, many of Shakespeare's plots and characters also have at least faint precedents or analogues in history, if not fully historical.
prototypes. This is true of elements in plays which we are not accustomed to considering
documentary—whether it be the Orsino of *Twelfth Night*, the Berowne and Longueville of *Love's Labor's
Lost*, or the curious coincidences between Lear's misfortunes and those of the aging Brian Annesley in
1603-04, involving the inheritances of his three daughters, among them his favorite, Cordell. Such analogues
and resonances may encourage us to see that, despite the apparent archaism which Shakespeare often favored
in taking plots from sources like Plutarch, Holinshed, or Painter, many of their details do hold “the mirror up
to nature” and serve as “the abstract and brief chronicles of the time,” paralleling or alluding to the
experience and first-hand observation of his Elizabethan audiences. This surface realism of his plays makes
them vivid and convincing and is intrinsic to his theatrical technique.

Keeping these considerations in mind, we can better understand the procedures and aims of Shakespeare when
they appear to elude modern understanding, as they do at times in even his most popular plays. For example, a
lively, realistic comedy like *Much Ado* seems to such critics as its Pelican editor to suffer from the fact that
“the Hero-Claudio story must be regarded as the main plot because of its melodramatic and spectacular
character, yet Shakespeare carefully keeps us from entering into the emotions of either Hero or Claudio.”
Similarly Bullough feels that this quaint episode, cut from the thirteenth-century setting established by
Bandello's novella, is “the core” of the play, but he also asserts that Shakespeare does adjust it to Elizabethan
taste, because “natural villainy was becoming more desirable, more popular—in the second lustrum of the
nineties, with its Malcontents and men of strange Humours. … So he invented Don John, ‘bastard brother to
Don Pedro,’ ‘a plain-dealing villain’ and a Malcontent of a kind just emerging in satire and the theatre.”
Bullough contemptuously adds that “Don John is a very small villain to cause so Much Ado.” However, the
development of such eccentric characters affords useful clues to the methods of composition of Shakespeare,
for it is significant that the major additions which *Much Ado* makes to its prototype in Bandello lie in the
characters of Don John, and of Beatrice and Benedick. The three seeming “originals” turn out to share more
complex derivations than Bullough allows, for they are neither well-classified as Shakespeare's entire
“invention” nor do they prove as Bullough argues of the lovers, “that Shakespeare needed no specific source
for his happiest creations.”

That Shakespeare wanted a contemporary setting for *Much Ado* rather than a medieval one is evident in all
three characters added to the Bandello story, but most overtly in the choice of name for his villain. For the
appearance of the portentous figure of Don John the Bastard at Messina is no theatrical accident but a fact of
sixteenth-century history, whose ingenious introduction into *Much Ado* gives us an excellent miniature
illustration of Shakespeare's characteristic mode of composition. While no personality resembling Don John
appears in the Bandello source, and he has no association with the massacre of the Sicilian Vespers with
which that novella begins, nevertheless Don John was not only closely linked with Messina during
Shakespeare's lifetime—he stands there to this day, before the cathedral. The reason that the fine statue by
Calamech was placed there in 1572 is more than adequate, for Shakespeare's Don John the Bastard bears the
name and shares many of the attributes of Don John of Austria, the illegitimate son of Charles V, half-brother
of the King of Aragon (and the rest of Spain), who led the fleets of Christendom from Messina to the defeat of
the Turks at Lepanto—one of the turning points of European history. And he returned to Messina after his
victory on the 7 October 1571, under conditions analogous to those at the play's start.

Nor has the dramatic potential of this figure been wholly ignored outside literary criticism; indeed, in his
magnificent study of *The Mediterranean in the Age of Philip II*, Fernand Braudel with unconscious irony
salutes Don John as “a Shakespearean hero,” even while detailing many of the sinister traits which
Shakespeare's villain shares. However, Braudel does not stress the concerns which transformed the hero of
Lepanto into a monster for all loyal Englishmen of Shakespeare's generation. To them he seemed to “surpass
Circe,” and an English ambassador could write that he made “such earnest and vehement offers of his faith
and service to our sovereign, as I doubt him more than others trust him; for I see his deeds contrary to his
words, using concert in secrecy with Her Majesty's rebels.” Although Don John's brutal triumph over the
Turks marked a decisive reassertion of European supremacy over Mohammedan sea power, his character was
by no means simply positive. Raised in obscurity under another name and acknowledged only in 1559, Don John had many of the more oppressive traits of his time and culture. He was acutely sensitive to his ambiguous status, and this led to many painful episodes with his half-brother, King Philip II. Thus he fled the Spanish court in 1565 in an attempt to assert his will to pursue a military career and returned “embarrassed and humiliated” without success: “in the knowledge that if he persisted in his intention Philip's officers had instructions to place him under arrest, Don John surrendered.” His career was full of such abortive attempts at self-assertion echoed by Shakespeare's Don John, who admits “I cannot hide what I am” (I.iii.11), only to be admonished by Conrade: “but you must not make the full show of this till you may do it without controlment. You have of late stood out against your brother, and he hath ta'en you newly into his grace, where it is impossible you should take true root but by the fair weather that you make yourself” (I.iii.17-22).

The historical prototype frequently failed to recognize such necessities. Don John's career was deeply conditioned by the ambivalent social standing resulting from his bastardy, and his touchiness on points of honor was as acute as any other Spaniard's. At the funeral of Queen Isabella his pride “received a wound which to his sensitive imagination seemed mortal. By the neglect of a Court chamberlain, or possibly the malice of the Prince of Eboli, Don John was given a place in the church unbecoming to his rank. Deeply mortified, the young admiral requested permission of the King to retire from Court and to withdraw to the austere discipline and sombre cloisters of the Franciscan monks of Abrojo … in his hour of humiliation and injured vanity.” It is not surprising that Braudel considers him “the most volatile” of Philip's ministers and “isolated from his contemporaries.” His primitive rigor with the rebellious Moriscoes of Granada in 1569 reached a grim climax at the conclusive siege of Galera, whose resistance provoked Don John's sinister vow: “I will take Galera and raze it utterly to the ground. Every man, woman and child within its walls shall be put to the sword, and I will sow the earth on which they stood with salt.” This oath he firmly achieved, except that he agreed with his protesting troops that this involved the waste of some fairly serviceable women, so that a fraction of them and their children were ultimately spared.

Despite his military prowess, Don John was never secure in his relations with his half-brother, and after Lepanto they even became exacerbated, so that some have considered “the king's chief motive was a desire to humiliate Don John.” Commentators have described many of the king's orders in such terms as “a stab in the back for Don John from his half-brother,” or again: “Philip's orders seemed tantamount to disgrace.” Other instructions so affronted Don John that “upon discovering the limits they imposed on his authority, [he] fell into a rage bordering on despair. … They showed him that his subordinate position as a bastard was irremediable and that the king placed little confidence in him.” This last episode occurred a few weeks before he first arrived at Messina in 1571, and the tensions persisted throughout his stay there, largely explaining “the single-minded passion of his temperment” thereafter, although he was often ill: “plagued by three or four complaints.” Like Richard III, and reinforced by motives such as Edmund's, “Don John was undoubtedly tempted by the desire for a princely throne, an overwhelming passion which gave him little rest. … In fact what tempted Don John more than effective power was the title. In a Europe besotted with precedence and hierarchy, all young princes dreamed of crowns. … Don John, bitterly resentful of his bastard status, granted only the inferior rank of Excellency, dreamed longingly of the French crown when it was briefly unclaimed on the death of Charles IX in 1574; and his last years in the Netherlands were haunted by fantasies about an English throne.”

Such ambitions for what Tamburlaine calls “the sweet fruition of an earthly crown” (Part I, II.vii.29) led Don John to defy Philip's orders in 1573 in order to seek the throne of Tunis, taking “measures which were subsequently to expose him to the criticism, if not the reproaches, of his brother, and to play a part in the tangled drama of secret jealousy and frustrated ambition.” One can recognize these aggressive moods in Shakespeare's John, who bitterly insists: “I must be sad when I have cause … and wait for no man's leisure … and tend on no man's business” (I.iii.12-15), and he goes on to denounce his half-brother: “I had rather be a canker in a hedge than a rose in his grace … I am trusted with a muzzle and enfranchised with a clog … if I had my liberty, I would do my liking” (I.iii.24-32). These are the motives behind the resentment that governed
the historical John's disobedience of Philip's instructions, and his restless pursuit of a kingdom of his own. It was also just this desire to become a monarch by conquest which made the hero of Lepanto a monster in the English imagination. We find that even before the failure of the Tunis enterprise in 1574, “Charles IX of France had been urging Elizabeth to ally herself to him against Spain, in fear that Don John of Austria, having secured Spain in the Mediterranean, might raise a force in the Netherlands to descend upon England, liberate the captive in Sheffield Castle, and assume with Mary Queen of Scots the dual crown of Scotland and England.” Moreover, “Mary's eagerness to marry Don John” was well established. Under such circumstances Don John “found himself the natural candidate of a score of eloquent conspirators” whose initiatives first define the concept of the Spanish Armada against England in practical, political terms. Don John began detailed planning for the invasion with figures like Thomas Stukeley in 1575. By 1576, the whole project acquired official standing in Spain as a factor in sending Don John to supervise the restoration of Spain's crumbling authority in the Netherlands.

There is ample evidence that Europe as a whole, and the English government and people in particular, were fully apprised of the paranoid temper and ambitions of Don John from this time onwards. In the Netherlands his appointment as regent was publicly attacked by figures like the Prince of Orange who warned the States “of Don John's proud and cruel disposition,” and that “he will always be suspicious and distrustful. … He has used menaces.” The Prince of Orange also warned Queen Elizabeth of Don John's desire “to exterminate the reformed religion” by fomenting “a rebellion in England against the Queen under colour that the Papists should demand publicly the exercise of their religion, and that there were several great people mixed up in this conspiracy. They had further taken steps to poison the Queen, and the marriage of Don John with the Queen of Scots was already arranged, so that not only would he be the head of affairs in the Low Countries, but also possess the kingdoms of England and Scotland.” By 1577 these plans were also fully known to the common people of England, for in the spring of that year the Bishop of Chichester wrote nervously “to Mr. Secretary Walsingham: Those that are backward in religion grow worse on the report of Don John's coming to the Low Countries,” and the Bishop recommended a new administering of “the oath of supremacy.” Henry, Earl of Huntingdon wrote even more bluntly to Walsingham, at the same time: “I trust there be no truth in what I saw in a letter this day that Don John of Austria should marry the Scottish Queen. Our Papists expect and desire it.” English agents were warned by Secretary Wilson “to have a good eye to the Duke of Guise's doings and to learn who they are that pass between him and Don John. I fear the greatest mischief will be practised that way.” Mary Stuart's mother was Marie de Guise, and Don John's marriage to the Scottish Queen would strengthen the Catholic League in France, as well as the Catholic cause in Britain.

English agents and ambassadors now consistently warn their government of John's erratic personality: “He is besides by blood illegitimate, young and inexperienced, and not worthy of the obedience of the nobility. … He is besides arrogant and choleric, and has more crafty speech than judgment.” Ambassador Wilson notes to Walsingham that “assurance is there none that Don John will deal uprightly,” and Agent Rogers reports to him that the Prince of Orange is worried that a local governor will “be corrupted by Don John,” whom another report describes as “scheming everywhere” so that “People's minds here are diversely agitated. The most part have a great fear of Don John … although he has been held of small account.” Agent Davison expresses to Walsingham his amazement that Don John can secure any trust: “The proceedings of these men are so strange that I cannot tell what in the world to make of them; if they be not wilfully blind they cannot but see the great peril which hangs over their heads by losing time in treating with him from whom they can expect no good … a practice growing from ill passion. … He may perhaps be brought to keep truth in some small things to gain the more trust in greater that he may afterwards abuse them with his greater advantage. … Yet would Don John rather hazard and try his uttermost fortune, such is his cruel and insolent nature, than depart with that note of dishonour to be expelled and chased out of his government by a sort of drunken Flemings.” Any audience must share the incredulity expressed by the Agent here, when it sees the acceptance of Don John's corrupt advances by the aristocrats in Much Ado, evil designs which are detected only by the jaded and skeptical Benedick:
The practice of it lives in John the bastard,  
Whose spirits toil in frame of villainies.  

(IV.i.186-87)

The historical Don John's pathological pride in the face of defeat is also shared by Shakespeare's figure: “This may prove food for my displeasure. That young start-up hath all the glory of my overthrow. If I can cross him any way, I bless myself every way” (I.i.57-60). This kind of neurotic envy appears in another report by the English Agent Davison: “Don John doth very ill digest the receiving of the Prince into this town, for such as come thence say it doth fret him to the heart”; and when Davison finally reports John's death, he notes it came after the frustration of his schemes, “partly as some think of very grief and melancholy.” This compulsively self-destructive nature of Don John is summed up in Walsingham's comments to “Mr. Vice Chamberlain” Hatton: “We are amazed to see Don John continue the war finding nothing to induce him to do so save some particular respects which are of more force with him than that which in duty he owes to the King his brother. If the mischief likely to ensue by his not yielding to a peace lighted only upon himself, the harm would be less: but it seems most clearly that her Majesty and the Crown of England will be partakers of it.”

Don John's morbidity of mind was even the subject of a formal address by “the States General to the King of Spain,” which observed that “We have regretted more than we can say the apprehension which has seized Don John of some plot against his person. … In spite of all we could say he persisted in his fears … in a fashion that has scandalized everybody.” Yet if this paranoid figure died before Shakespeare ever came to the London theater and his intended Queen by then had also met as grim a fate, Don John remained a crucial reference for Shakespeare's generation, for it was his ingenious plan to reconquer England for Catholicism by force which planted the seeds of the Armada in the mind of Philip II, even if, as Ambassador Paulet reported during John's lifetime, “the time does not yet serve for the execution of it.”

So the victor of Lepanto became in the English mind the tutelary demon presiding over the doomed Armada.

There is little difficulty in seeing how Shakespeare might come to update the deeply medieval world of the Sicilian Vespers used in Bandello by introducing Don John into the play's Messina. Shakespeare alludes with precision in Love's Labor's Lost and Hamlet to episodes in Brabant when the Princess of France of the former play visited Don John and met him on the River Meuse, in a spirit reminiscent of Cleopatra's descent on Antony (another, if less successful, wager of a sea-battle below the heights of Actium). Thus Shakespeare certainly had a detailed knowledge of events during Don John's administration in the Netherlands, as well as of his character and antecedents. He saw no point in fully recreating such characters as Bandello's “Carlo II, King of Naples” who challenged the authority of “King Piero of Aragon” when he reconquered the rebel Sicilians in 1283. However, the account of Piero's naval victory seems to have suggested the useful contemporary analogy of the bloody battle of Lepanto to Shakespeare: “He went against him with what array of ships and galleys he possessed, and meeting him in battle great was the combat, with cruel slaughter of many men. In the end King Piero defeated King Carlo's fleet, and took him prisoner; and, but better to carry on the war, he withdrew the Queen and Court to Messina.” The pattern of Piero's activities is similar to Don John's Lepanto campaign based on Messina. Shakespeare followed his customary tactful policy around 1598, of avoiding provocative names (Oldcastle had recently become Falstaff, and the speeches of Henri of Navarre, by then Henri IV, were ascribed to “Ferdinand” in the early scenes of the quarto of LLL [Love's Labour's Lost]), so the reigning Philip II (also King of Aragon) does not openly usurp the role of Piero, even though his historically erratic relations with his now-dead bastard brother provide a ready-made resource for the emotional derivation of Don John's conspiracy in the play. This change allows Shakespeare to refocus the malevolence of the two misguided lovers required in Bandello into the single character of Claudio, a simplification no doubt also required by the fusion of Hero's story with the “new” material of Benedick's affair with Beatrice. Don John provides a more contemporary figure than Timbreo's conventionally jealous rival in Bandello and illustrates a type which clearly interested Shakespeare and his contemporaries greatly, as Bullough noted, for Don John sustains the line from the Bastard of Orleans in Henry VI, Part I, and the Bastard Faulconbridge of King John, to Thersites in Troilus and Cressida and the Bastard Edmund of King
If Don John affords Shakespeare a notorious contemporary example of the malcontent figure which he so frequently favors in developing a source, Beatrice and Benedick are no less fashionable and contemporary figures. In Love's Labor's Lost Shakespeare had drawn on the names and attributes of witty aristocratic lovers of the current Valois court, who were known personally to such of his patrons or their associates as Essex, Southampton, and Derby. Berowne and Rosaline in particular are considered prototypes for the later pairs in Much Ado, and since Berowne at least was directly modelled on the historical Charles de Gontaut, duc de Biron (not to discuss the complex precedents for the Princess, Katherine, Maria, Longueville, and Dumain), we may be encouraged to feel that the later warring lovers are less unprecedented than we are usually told. However, the relationship of Beatrice and Benedick has been sufficiently misread for only the faintest analogues for this witty pair of lovers to have been proposed, the most interesting perhaps being in Castiglione's Courtier, even though the exchanges of Emilia Pia and Gaspare Pallavicino are scarcely more relevant to Beatrice and Benedick than the witty repartee of innumerable other courtiers, recorded with at least as much historical veracity both in the pages of the Heptameron and in the gossip of Brantôme's memoirs such as his Lives of Fair and Gallant Ladies. There may seem to be a specific aptness in the remark of Castiglione's Count Ludovico that “I have 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 worlde, onely for that they heard say that the opinion of many was, that they loved together.” Unfortunately, as too few scholars have recognized, the love between Beatrice and Benedick is explicitly not one occasioned only by such advocacy of others as Ludovico describes. Shakespeare's conspirators merely delude themselves in hoping that they “are the only love gods” (II.i.344)—as their own later humiliation confirms. For the Penguin editor rightly detects that from the start “Beatrice's disparagement only emphasizes the fact that she can think of nothing else” but Benedick. The case for such an interpretation appears vividly in Catullus' epigram (as briskly translated by Swift):

Lesbia for ever on me rails,  
To talk of me she never fails.  
Now, hang me, but for all her art,  
I find that I have gained her heart.  
My proof is this: I plainly see  
The case is just the same with me;  
I curse her every hour sincerely,  
Yet, hang me, but I love her dearly. (43)

Benedick's permanent attraction to his “Lady Disdain” is equally outspoken—comparing her to Hero, he says that Beatrice “exceeds her as much in beauty as the first of May doth the last of December” (I.i.170).

Far from being tricked into love, then, Beatrice and Benedick are already in love; and they are not even betrayed into admitting a love that exists without their having fully recognized it. The plot goes a whole stage further than this by establishing that they are aware of having already been mutually-committed lovers. Any idea of the virginally man-fearing Beatrice is necessarily false: she is the resentful, jilted mistress. When Don Pedro observes to her that “you have lost the heart of Signior Benedick,” she responds quite openly that “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.249-52). It is a disconcerting fact that as late as 1900 Furness can note that “into no discussion that I can recall is any weight given, or indeed any reference made, to this speech. Enough is here told to explain Benedick's first greeting to Beatrice as Lady Disdain. Between the lines, there can be almost discerned the plot of another play.” Bearing his note in mind, we may conclude Furness is surely correct that, though in his time the implications were “always overlooked,” the speech establishes a complex previous relationship between Beatrice and Benedick, in which Benedick gave her his heart, but not sincerely, and later withdrew his love. So that, if he played false then, her present malice merely reciprocates his bad behavior—returning him his own bad faith
This interpretation may be confirmed by her earlier observation to Benedick: “You always end with a jade's trick. I know you of old” (II.i.129-30). It needs no very subtle gloss here to suggest that Beatrice has suffered an earlier mishap from his “throwing over the traces,” and the word “end” suggests the kind of broken relationship she later claims as justifying her malice.

The neglect of this crucial aspect of the lovers' relationship explains in part why Shakespeare's historical and literary models have proved elusive. The play's plot as a whole has not always been accurately registered, and the processes of its construction are therefore less than fully understood. We need to see that Shakespeare wants to give immediacy and contemporary bite to his characterization. The result of the replacement of an amatory rival to Claudio by the political figure of Don John is to enrich the range of modern male misconduct in the play. If Don John extends the spectrum into the negative far beyond Claudio's shallow censoriousness, this is balanced by the seductive and relatively innocuous complacency of Benedick. Moreover, Don John of Austria serves to update an archaic story by a modern association in ways shared by Benedick and Beatrice, who are scarcely less authentic sixteenth-century figures and ones whose dynamism equally overshadows the archaic conventionalities of Bandello's story, with the new values of the French court. Tudor court and artistic life was lived under the shadows cast by the pyrotechnic culture and society led by the Valois dynasty, which had transposed Italian cultural supremacy to France almost as literally as Francis I uprooted Leonardo de Vinci himself and created the social modes recognized in Love's Labor's Lost. As Shakespeare was later to describe in the first scene of one of the last plays with which he was associated, Henry VIII evaluated himself by comparison with Francis on such occasions as the Field of the Cloth of Gold, and was pathetically susceptible to the charms of women trained by the earlier Marguerite de Navarre, Francis' brilliant sister, whose court furnished Henry not only with mistresses like Mary Boleyn, but trained Anne herself in that sexual virtuosity which Henry (and Wyatt) initially found so irresistible. In fact, the widowed Marguerite was even proposed as Henry's wife at one point; and the youthful Princess Elizabeth's first published work was a translation of Marguerite's Mirror of the Sinful Soul, probably made from the very copy inherited from her mother, which Anne kept as a momento of her happier days in France and may even have carried with her to the scaffold itself. Marguerite's reputation and influence in Elizabethan England was thus inevitably great and is reflected in innumerable ways, not least by the popular selection from her tales in the Heptameron published in William Painter's anthology The Palace of Pleasure. The Heptameron is an updating of Boccaccio's Decameron, vividly illustrating the impact on sixteenth-century social and moral values of the combined effects of the Reformation and the Renaissance. Many of the tales are thinly disguised accounts of the amatory experiences of the Valois court, and scholars have had little difficulty in identifying Marguerite and Francis themselves as characters in certain stories. One of these, the fifty-eighth tale in the Heptameron, appears as the sixty-first in Painter's first volume, and we may be sure that Shakespeare read it because Painter's anthology also provides sources for The Rape of Lucrece, Romeo and Juliet, and All's Well that End Well. The Heptameron's fifty-eighth tale illustrates the dynamic social role of women which both Marguerite and her brother agreed to advance in their court. Indeed some scholars have even seen in the heroine indications that she may have been Marguerite herself, so that the lover would be one of her erratic admirers, like the talented yet obtuse Admiral Bonnivet (who supposedly figures so grotesquely in the fourth tale also): “In the court of King Francis I, there was a lady of very lively wit who, by her good nature, worthiness and pleasing conversation had gained the heart of many suitors without dishonour, entertaining them so agreeably that they did not know what to make of her, for the most confident were in despair, and the most despairing were encouraged by her. All the same, in mocking most of them, she could not avoid loving one of them a great deal, whom she called her ‘cousin,’ so that this name would justify a deeper understanding. And as nothing is fixed, often their love turned to anger, and then returned more strongly than ever, so that the court could not ignore it.”

The witty and elusive lady is of a temperament very like that of Beatrice. One should note that her tension-ridden relationship with her admirer also corresponds far more exactly to the full “history” of the fluctuating relationships of Beatrice and Benedick than can be recognized from the conventional viewpoint of
their mere entrapment by others into a fresh and unexpected love. Yet this very theme of cathartic “deception” is also the point of Marguerite's tale, for the ladies of the court of Francis agree to trick the untrustworthy lover of the witty lady, when she proposes that he be betrayed into ridicule by a profession of unqualified passion on her part. The lady's motive is explained as bluntly as Beatrice's censure of the untrustworthy Benedick for winning her heart “with false dice” (II.i.251): “You know how many wicked tricks he has played on me and that when I loved him most, he made love to others, from which I had more pain than I let appear. Well, now God hath given me the means to revenge it.” The other court ladies are the more willing to go along with the deception in that, like Benedick in his “merry war” with Beatrice (I.i.54), the French courtier affects misogyny: “there was no gentleman more committed to war against the ladies than he, and he was so loved and admired by everyone that no one dared risk becoming the victim of his mockery.” It is thus agreed that his erstwhile mistress shall feign passion for the gallant, and entrap him into covert approach to her bedchamber, when all the conspirators shall abruptly challenge him by screaming “stop thief” at the top of their voices, so that the whole chateau shall know of his passion and thus ensure the humiliation of a professed despiser of women. In the event the aristocrat is ridiculed publicly as planned; “but he had his responses and ripostes so neatly that he made them all think that he was not keen on the enterprise and that he had agreed to visit the lady just to give them amusement. … But the ladies would not accept this truth, of which there are still good grounds for disbelief.”49

Such merry wars as these illustrate vividly that the vagaries of the Battle of the Sexes which are so amusing a feature of Shakespeare's comedy find some of their most vivid and immediate precedents and analogues in the Heptameron—certainly closer than those in Castiglione's decorous Courtier. Indeed, Benedick's final rueful concession of his own and all male volatility is anticipated strikingly in the thirty-seventh tale of Marguerite's collection, in which an untrustworthy husband is tamed by a similar trick. The male narrator concludes with this advice: “I beg you, ladies, if God should give you such husbands, that you don’t in the least despair until you have persistently tried every means to overpower them, for there are twenty-four hours in the day in each of which a man may change his opinion.”50 Not only are we reminded of Benedick's unexpected confession that “Man is a giddy thing” (V.iv.6) but also of the admonitory song in Much Ado, with its feminine perspective:

Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more!
Men were deceivers ever,
One foot in sea, and one on shore;
To one thing constant never.

(II.ii.59-62)

An even more provocative analogue for Beatrice's behavior in Much Ado can be seen in the shared sexual psychology of its famous church scene and that in another episode of Valois history, closely associated with the Guise family which supported Don John's marriage to Mary Stuart. For in Colynet's history of France (which also affords parallels for both Love's Labor's Lost and Henry V), there is a disturbing seduction scene in which the lover of some ladies of the Guise faction is dextrously excited to “exalt the Church” and serve the cause of honor by killing a man they feel has slighted them. The women passionately exploit the same techniques of incitement used by Beatrice in serving Hero when they assert that “if they were men or if they could be so transformed into men that they might have access to the tirant, they would find it in their hearts to stabbe him: that is a special point of honor which they do proffer him to doo such a famous deed … hee is a man endued with strength they have been his good Ladies, they have favoured him greatly and pleasured him in anything that ever he requested. What, will he not do so much at their request: they must die … what a good deede it is to save the lives of Princesses, Ladies. …”51 One recognizes an analogy to the aggressive sentiments of Beatrice in the famous church scene, with her passionate admonition to her lover to “Kill Claudio” (IV.i.297), which she follows up with her sexist reproaches at his hesitation: “O that I were a man! … O God that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the market-place. … O that I were a man for his sake! Or
that I had a friend would be a man for my sake. … I cannot be a man with wishing, therefore I will die a woman with grieving.” In each case the male succumbs to the sexual pressure to prove less effeminate, but Benedick stalls long enough to avoid killing Claudio, while the historical Frenchman did in fact murder Henri III.

The implications of these historical precedents or analogues for aspects of the supposedly most “original” characters of Much Ado: Don John, Beatrice, and Benedick, are significant for the understanding both of Shakespeare's procedures in compiling his plays and of their curiously vivid and authentic impact. Having uncovered in Bandello yet another conventional illustration of the idealistic lover's incompetence which he had so often previously used, in plays like The Taming of the Shrew and Romeo and Juliet, Shakespeare sought ways of enriching and updating this archaic material. On the one hand he ascribed the evil genesis of the Messina plot to one of England's contemporary enemies; on the other he turned to France (as he so often did in his comedies) to provide himself with a lively contemporary mode of positive, dynamic, and subtle sexual relations. If his comedies find their prototype in the transcription of historical French personalities like Charles de Gontaut, duc de Biron, Catherine de Bourbon, and others in Love's Labor's Lost,52 it is hardly surprising if the behavior of their successors in Much Ado should prove to resemble scarcely less closely that recorded in the Valois courts. In the most literal sense, Shakespeare's play at its best proves to be “the abstract and brief chronicles of the time” (II.ii.512) and not just the spontaneous product of a fertile imagination. The strength of Shakespeare's art lies less in the inspiration of his own private fantasy than in alertness to established tradition and in his preference for giving immediacy to such traditions by dextrous transpositions from contemporary events and characters. Like its prototype, Love's Labor's Lost, the extraordinary vitality and convincingness of the characterization in Much Ado derives much from Shakespeare's transposition of the most picturesque personalities and manners of sixteenth-century life on to the Elizabethan stage.

Notes

3. See Bullough, II, 269; I, 428-30; VII, 270-71, respectively.
5. Josephine Waters Bennett, in Harbage, p. 274.
12. Ibid., p. 42.
17. Ibid., II, 1064, 1136.
18. Ibid., II, 1098, 1130.
19. Ibid., II, 1131.
21. Ibid., p. 228.
22. Ibid., p. 229.
23. Ibid., pp. 244-45.
25. Ibid., p. 516.
30. Ibid., p. 514.
32. Ibid., p. 206.
34. Ibid., p. 175.
38. Bullough, p. 112.
39. Ibid., p. 71.
41. Bullough, pp. 78-80.
42. Josephine Waters Bennett, in Harbage, p. 274.
46. For details of the relations between Henry VIII, Anne, and Marguerite, which bear on this treatise, see the preface to *The Mirror of the Sinful Soul: a Prose Translation from the French of a Poem by Queen Margaret of Navarre Made in 1544 by the Princess (afterwards Queen) Elizabeth, then Eleven Years of Age*, ed. Percy W. Ames (London: Asher, 1897).
48. Ibid., p. 357.
49. Ibid., pp. 358-59.
50. Ibid., p. 268.

52. See my *Shakespeare's Sexual Comedy* for further discussions of this aspect.

53. David, pp. xxv-xxx, provides a survey of scholars exploring this kind of parallelism, including Joseph Hunter, H. B. Charlton, Frances Yates, and others.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Peter Marks (review date 17 November 1998)**


>In the following excerpt, Marks reviews the 1998 Stratford Festival production of Much Ado about Nothing at New York's City Center. Marks contends that the production was unremarkable and “short on laughs.”

The curtain rose at 7:40, but the Stratford Festival did not unveil its capabilities until an hour later.

The moment of revelation came when William Hutt, the celebrated Canadian company's Old Reliable, an actor in his late 70's with the savoir-faire that comes with age, made the force of his presence felt in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. The troupe has brought the play to City Center for a two-week run in repertory with its production of Moliere's *Miser*.

Mr. Hutt, portraying Leonato, father to Hero, the ingénue, and uncle to Beatrice, the sharp-tongued cynic, steals an inherently funny drinking scene with his descent into good-natured inebriation. Dangling a martini glass, Mr. Hutt turns the leonine patriarch into a figure out of Noël Coward, supplying dry-as-vermouth commentary as the other men spin lies about the love Beatrice (played by Martha Henry) has for Benedick (Brian Bedford), all of which Benedick overhears while hiding behind a plant.

The scene is so effortlessly charming, and Mr. Hutt so delightfully lightheaded, that you wouldn't mind if someone turned off the play and allowed the banter to go on and on. The trouble is that once the scene ends, the party is essentially over. Its conclusion marks the passing of the only truly sparkling encounter all evening.

The Stratford Festival, which draws tourists and rabid theatergoers to a small town in Ontario for an immersion in the work of Shakespeare and other old hands, has come to City Center with a sampling on the first of what it hopes will be an annual occasions. The company, quite sensibly, arrived in New York, where the classics only sporadically enthrall the hometown crowds, with a pair of audience-pleasing comedies by dead playwrights with whom the ensemble is nonetheless on intimate terms.

Surprisingly, the shows are short on laughs and long on—well, they're just kind of long. Based on the dubious rewards, potential ticket buyers might be better served by waiting to see what Stratford plans for next year.

These are technically proficient productions, directed by Stratford's artistic director, Richard Monette, but without virtually any remarkable aspects, from the sterile sets by Guido Tondino and Mérédith Caron to unappealing costumes by Ms. Caron and Ann Curtis.

Though there are nimble performances by a few of the older actors, like Mr. Hutt (in both plays, but more memorable in *Much Ado*) and the always resourceful Mr. Bedford (also in *Much Ado*), the level of performance is for the most part standard issue, especially among the younger players. The overall impression is of a *Much Ado* ultimately thwarted by odd casting decisions and a *Miser* undermined by a precious and
debilitating concept.

Mr. Monette’s modern, cosmopolitan Much Ado is the livelier of the evenings. The setting is the Italian seacoast just as World War I is ending, in Leonato’s luxurious palace, where the fellow at the baby grand plays music inspired by Gershwin.

The play takes place at what would have to be twilight. As portrayed by the mature Ms. Henry and Mr. Bedford, the old antagonists are a lot older than audiences are used to. This is a cooler, sexually mellower sparring match, between an unregenerate spinster and a confirmed bachelor. But age is not really the confounding characteristic. In fact, the line readings have a nice twist in this On Golden Pond pairing. “My dear Lady Disdain, are you yet living?” Mr. Bedford, in ascot and whiskers, sneers at Ms. Henry, whose casual retort, “I know you of old,” sounds more like an insult than an observation.

The severe-looking Ms. Henry, playing Beatrice as a kind of bookish smarty pants, is best in the early scenes, when Beatrice is at her most smug. But the badinage goes nowhere. Dressed in what look like outfits from the Queen Elizabeth II Reject Shop—check out the ghastly kimono and cap she wears in the wedding scene—Ms. Henry reveals little affinity for Mr. Bedford. That they end up together seems a random result. In another break with tradition, the audience is not actively engaged in the rooting for their union. Whatever happens to them, you’re reasonably certain that these two survivors will, indeed, survive.

Surrounding the two leads are an assortment of supporting players, only a few of whom, like James Blendick as Don Pedro, are more than satisfactory. Tom McCamus’s villainous Don John is a blank in black, and the overdone Dogberry of Stephen Ouimette should be wearing a sign that says, “Look at me, I'm funny.” …

**Criticism: Production Reviews:** Page R. Laws (review date 2002)


[In the following review, Laws describes how New York's Aquila Theatre Company successfully turned Much Ado about Nothing into a giddy spoof of television's secret agent shows of the 1960s and 1970s.]

Shakespeare's classic insights on true love's weal and woe still prove uncannily accurate whether actors wear tights or no. There was certainly much undone to rev up Much Ado in The Aquila Theatre Company's outrageously premised 2001 touring production. The respected Anglo-American company based at New York University turned the 1599 comedy into a spoof of 1960s-70s TV and film secret agents. Messina becomes Spy-versus-Spy Land; there is little loss of the play's essence in the temporal transfer and a surprising gain in its inherent giddiness (cf. Benedick's “for man is a giddy thing and this is my conclusion” [5.4.108-9]).

Shakespeare's themes of love versus war and love as war are well intact. The recently demobbed Don Pedro, Claudio and Benedick are looking for love in all the right places. Peter Meineck, Aquila's Producing Artistic Director and Robert Richmond, Associate Director and author of this adaptation, give us a rectangle of rope laid on a bare stage to mark the sparring area where this “merry war” (1.1.62) between the sexes takes place. The eight cast members, many doubling or tripling roles, are clad, if female, in skin-tight black shiny vinyl (sort of a James Bond-age look) and, if male, in black bowlers and suits resembling the get-ups of John Steed of TV’s 1960s Avengers series. Both sexes spend a lot of time vamping and then freezing in tableaux. They form martial silhouettes of gun-shooters and kung fu fighters against red or blue-lit backgrounds, much in the manner of a Bond film's opening credits. The clue and indeed the glue to the whole stylization is Anthony Cochrane's musical score, full of twanging electric guitar, creeping xylophone and suspenseful bongos. It is derivative of 007 film scores, but that is just the satiric point. Cochrane, who also plays a sturdy Benedick, has
composed an up-tempo, danceable version of “Hey nonny nonny” (2.3.62-74) that alone is worth the ticket price.

Robert Richmond's version of the play really lies on the borderline between an adaptation and a heavily cut original text production. Characters entirely cut out include Leonato's brother Antonio, Ursula, and such minor folks as Balthazar the singing attendant and Conrade, one of Don John's henchmen. The low comic crowd has been thinned out to just Dogberry (Louis Butelli imitating Henry Winkler's “the Fonz”) and Verges (Nathan Flower). The duping of Beatrice (Lisa Carter) has been moved from an outdoor bower to an indoor table scene, allowing for some admirably theatrical shtick. The play's cleverest effects are wrought, in fact, with stools, newspapers and expert timing. The tomb song has been cut, a move possibly misguided on Richmond's part, given the play's general tip towards the frivolous. We never really feel Claudio's (Nathan Flower) anguish when his misplaced machismo apparently prompts Hero's (Shirleyann Kaladjian) death. Other cuts include some of the lengthier “quibbles,” to borrow Dr. Johnson's term, plus the removal of lines offensive to the modern ear (e.g., “If I do not take pity of her, I am a villain; if I do not love her, I am a Jew” [2.3.262-63]). Inevitably, however, when coupled with certain acting decisions, such cuts do take their toll on characterization. Don John, played as a less-than-threatening automaton by Louis Butelli, could and should be much darker. Hero could likewise show more capacity for suffering. Amid the flashing lights of this brightly-colored mod version, we are blinded to the darker elements of Shakespeare's chiaroscuro work.

A welcome exception to the caricaturing of the characters is a Don Pedro (Richard Willis) who suggests the poignancy of being the odd lover out. He must act as a Cyrano wooing Hero for his friend Claudio and we see he could be attracted to Beatrice, were she not already spoken for in the comic dance by her natural partner, sharp-tongued Benedick. While Anthony Cochrane holds his own as Benedick, there is little chemistry between Carter, the best actor in this capable cast, and himself. And given the potential poignancy of Don Pedro being left without a mate, it seems unwise to have him cavorting with slutlish Margaret (Cameron Blair) in the comic finale, a swinging reprise of “Hey nonny nonny.”

What is really gained for the audience in this updating is the fun of catching the rapid, pop cultural allusion. Although Beatrice is no Mrs. Peele (the Avenger immortalized by Diana Rigg), the two women do have their quick wits in common. Both are liberated ladies who naturally come across as shrews to a misogynist. Likewise, Charlie's Angels figures prominently, with the three female actors taking every opportunity to strike a triple Angelic pose. In the masked party scene, the males sport phallic noses reminiscent of A Clockwork Orange. And Alex Webb's (Leonato's) stiff mechanical arm—not very funny here—is arguably borrowed from Kubrick's comedy Dr. Strangelove.

In Aquila's Much Ado, the gain in giddiness seemed worth the loss in darkness and the narrowing of each actor's performance range to fit the cartoonish concept. But that is only so because we have Shakespeare's text to come home to, after all is said and done.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Toby Young (review date 17 August 2002)**


[In the following review, Young declares he was completely won over by the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2002 production of Much Ado about Nothing, set in Mussolini's Italy.]

During the interval of Much Ado About Nothing, the RSC's summer block-buster, I sidled up to Ned Sherrin in the bar and started peppering him with questions. Why does Don John hate his brother? What's the back story? And how does Don John hope to get his revenge on his brother by sabotaging the marriage of Hero and
Claudio?

“I know your game,” said the presenter of Loose Ends. “You want to find out how it ends so you can leave without having to sit through the second half.”

If he'd said this to me at either of the other plays I saw last week he would have been right, but in this case he was wrong. At the beginning of the evening I was prepared for the worst, having sat through eight other RSC productions in the past year, but by the time the interval rolled around I was completely won over. Much Ado About Nothing is the best Shakespeare production I've seen since taking over this column.

Set in Italy under Mussolini, it's an unapologetic crowd-pleaser, with plenty of song-and-dance routines, a beautiful heroine in the form of Kirsten Parker and two scorching central performances by Harriet Walter and Nicholas Le Prevost. Le Prevost is particularly good as Benedick, whom he plays as an irascible old drunk who's rescued by the love of a good woman. The scene in which he challenges Claudio to a duel, having been put up to it by Beatrice, is absolutely spellbinding. Claudio and his patron, Don Pedro, can hardly believe it when their old sidekick, a buffoon who's used to singing for his supper, unexpectedly lays down the gauntlet. Can this be the same Benedick who usually trots at their heels like a trained poodle? Le Prevost appears to grow before your eyes until he towers above his former masters, terrifying them out of their codpieces. It's heart-stopping stuff.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Markland Taylor (review date 30 September-6 October 2002)**


[In the following review, Taylor examines the Hartford Stage/Shakespeare Theater 2002 staging of Much Ado about Nothing, directed by Mark Lamos. Taylor finds the production “surprisingly bloodless and lacking in spontaneity.”]

Mark Lamos opens the company's 39th season with this anyone-for-tennis? staging of Shakespeare's Much Ado About Nothing. Set mostly in the garden of an English country house in the 1920s, this Ado—a co-production with D.C.'s Shakespeare Theater, where it plays next—looks glossily expensive and is clearly and intelligently spoken, complete with a variety of English accents. But Shakespeare's comic wit has been blunted here, and this staging is surprisingly bloodless and lacking in spontaneity.

Karen Ziemba, the award-winning Broadway musical performer noted for her dancing, plays the anti-romantic Beatrice. She is to be applauded for taking it on, and does have presence and verbal fluency. But the witty cut and thrust between Beatrice and her equally anti-romantic foil, Benedick (Dan Snook), just doesn't manifest itself, and as the production progresses, Ziemba seems to be more and more a shrewish Kate than a disdainful Beatrice. Neither is she flattered by her hairdo nor some of Catherine Zuber's many sumptuous costumes, which keep drawing attention to themselves rather than helping the characterizations of the thespians wearing them.

As Benedick, Snook is too lightweight, especially opposite Ziemba's sturdy Beatrice. And at times he's far too cutely coy.

These two roles are problematic because they're actually peripheral to the play's plot, which revolves around Hero (Kathleen Early) and Claudio (Barrett Foa). The role of Claudio is even more problematic since he, on the flimsiest of evidence, has to turn on his beloved Hero at their wedding and denounce her as unfaithful.
Early is an attractive little Hero, without being quite a strong enough presence, and Foa isn't able to fully negotiate the great leaps of feeling and attitude Claudio is asked to make.

Peter Rini is an elegant Don Pedro, and Glenn Fleshler aptly nasty as his evil bastard brother, Don John. Richard Ziman and Edwin Owens get their laughs as the comic constables Dogberry and Verges (though they are a bit plodding); Owens reappears later as an effective Friar Francis. Two of the best performances come from Michael Santo as Leonato, Hero's father, and Nafe Katter as his brother Antonio. Their maturity pays off.

Riccardo Hernandez's vast setting is all manicured lawn, topiaries and white stairs and balustrades. Popular music of the '20s is used (although at one point a pun brings in the strains of "Speak Low," a song from a 1943 musical). The production ends with a rug-cutting arm-and-leg flinging dance for the whole cast.

Criticism: Themes: Paul A. Jorgensen (essay date summer 1954)


[In the following essay, Jorgensen describes how Shakespeare's use of the word nothing in the title and text of Much Ado about Nothing would have held significant, if sometimes ambiguous, religious and philosophical meanings for Elizabethan audiences.]

It is generally agreed that certain words must have given Shakespeare considerably more pleasure than they give us today. The honesty game in Othello, for example, may now impress us as a cleverness unworthy of the tragic stature of the play. I have elsewhere suggested, however, that Shakespeare was attempting in Othello a serious dramatic use of a popular literary situation in which knaves, with scarcely more disguise than the label honest endlessly repeated, pose successfully as honest men. The word nothing presents an interesting parallel, for not only did its iteration stem from popular genres, but serious writers were using it for purposes other than verbal ingenuity. And there were further similarities. Like honesty, it had developed shadings just closely enough related to one another to prevent easy distinction. In its combination of one covert meaning with several respectable meanings—enough to make its use permissible, but never securely so—Shakespeare must have recognized one of his favorite opportunities. The fate of both words in modern exegesis also promises to be comparable. So enlightening, one fears, has been professorial clarification of the occasional pun on honesty, that many students have left the classroom believing that whenever Shakespeare said “honest” he meant “chaste.” Less likely to emanate from classrooms, but not for that reason the less persuasive, are the results of Thomas Pyles' scholarly study of “Ophelia's ‘Nothing,’” wherein he rescues the word (if not Ophelia) from a moderately respectable oblivion for a distinguished place in the “venereal vernacular of the day.” Without meaning to sully what Professor Pyles rightly considers the “beautiful clarity” of his findings, I should like to restore some of the larger web of meaning which lay behind Shakespeare's remarkable insistence on the word.

“Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle?” asks Lear's Fool. The query strikes deeper into the King's impending tragedy than we at first realize. Certainly Lear's confident reply—"Why, no, boy, nothing can be made out of nothing"—would have struck original audiences as seriously, even ironically wrong. In its pagan doctrine it opposed a vital Christian tenet; it contradicted, in several other senses, the highly potential nature of the word and idea as demonstrated elsewhere by Shakespeare and his contemporaries; it had been underlined by a previous dialogue (I.i.89-92) in which, after Lear and Cordelia exchange emphatic nothing's, the King warns her, “Nothing can come of nothing”; and it is ironically echoed by the Fool's later pronouncement upon Lear himself: “Now thou art an O without a figure. I am better than thou art now: I am a
fool, thou art nothing” (Liv.211).

The audience which thus witnessed, in one sense, much growing tragically from nothing, and, in another, kings becoming things of nothing, had been familiarized with the pattern not only by De Contemptu philosophy but by two other well-known bodies of writing. The first consisted of theological treatises affirming the original nothingness surrounding creation and the essential nothingness of all temporal things. The second was part of the literary tradition which produced mock encomia like Erasmus' Praise of Folly. Both shared the purpose of defending the importance of nothingness.

Indeed, out of context it is sometimes hard to distinguish one type from the other. The theological treatises were of course marked by solemnity of purpose, for they were attempting to refute the doctrine which the Church could not allow to stand unrefuted: creation out of matter, with its implicit dualism. But as the discussion thus far has inadvertently demonstrated, no solemnity of idea could control so treacherous a vocabulary as the subject was fated to contend with. Witness Sir Philip Sidney's attempt to translate with dignity De Mornay's proof from creation ex nihilo that God exists:

It followeth therefore that it is a power from without us which hath brought us out of Not beeing into beeing. … For otherwise, from out of that nothing which we were (If I may so tearme it,) we shoulde never have come to any thing at all. Now betweene nothing and something, (how little so ever that something can bee) there is an infinite space.5

And this was the fate of philosophical poets like Sir John Davies, John Davies of Hereford, and Fulke Greville who concentrated upon the second half of the paradox: that temporal life and matter are essentially nothing. Davies of Hereford, for example, in proving the insubstantiality of life, creates little more than jingle of thing's and nothing's:

What! in the World, where all things are so rife,  
Is naught but Nothing to the same agreeing?  
Which not appeares, nor scarce suppos'd by Seeing!  
And, beeing scarce suppos'd: then it is  
To Nothing next, or Nothing's like to this.(6)

The nonreligious writers gladly availed themselves of the theological argumentation, since it gave valuable support to their encomia; but their special contribution is usually revealed in verbal mazes just a little worse than accidental; for, despite a superficial concern with the ideas involved, their real interest was to make verbally as much as possible out of nothing.

Although there were Italian and Latin antecedents,7 the first English tract of this trifling sort was The Praye of Nothing (1585), doubtfully attributed to Sir Edward Dyer.8 This prose treatise not only claims for Nothing the distinction of being the origin and end of everything, but speculates upon how much better most things would be if Nothing had caused or influenced them. This exploitation of the word's ambiguity, especially when it is used as the subject of a sentence, is better illustrated in an anonymous ballad, apparently inspired by the tract and bearing the same title:

Nothing was first, and shall be last, for nothing holds for ever,  
And nothing ever yet scap't death, so can't the longest liver:  
Nothing's so Immortall, nothing can,  
From crosses ever keepe a man,  
Nothing can live, when the world is gone, for all shall come to nothing.(9)

William Lisle's poem Nothing for a New-Yeares gift (1603) likewise uses the word, as in its title, in both a positive and negative sense. And in a manner reminiscent of the Queen's premonition in Richard II, Lisle pays tribute to the creative pains that come from meditating the subject:
Excesse of studie in a trauunce denies
My ravisht soule her Angel-winged flight:
Strugling with Nothing thus my bodie lies
Panting for breath, depriv'd of sences might.
At length recovered by this pleasant slumber,
The straunge effects from Nothing, thus I wonder.(10)

Obviously the only limitation upon this type of writing is the patience of the reader, for it is an easy matter to
dilute sense with so large a portion of nonsense that the mind refuses to follow. Trusting indeed would be the
“Courteous and gentle Reader” who, having survived Nicholas Breton’s prefatory address to him, attempts a
serious reading of the ensuing discourse upon the various kinds of nothing. Breton’s address begins as follows:

Reade no further than you like: … If there be nothing that likes you, my luck is nought: in
nothing there can be no great thing, yet something may bee founde, though nothing to any
great purpose. Well, there are divers Nothings, which you shall reade further off. … Now,
though I will wish you looke for no mervailous, or worthy thing, yet shall you finde
something; though in effect (as it were) nothing, yet in conceit a pretie thing to passe away
the time withal. Well, if you stande content with this Nothing, it may be ere long, I will send
you something, more to your likeing: till when, I wish you nothing but well.11

Here, indeed, is much ado about nothing. The achievement of such writing is well expressed in two
concluding lines from the anonymous “A Song made of Nothing”:

Here you see something of nothing is made,
For of the word “nothing” something is said.(12)

To some extent, and especially in his early works, Shakespeare’s interest in the word lay in this type of
rhetorical chicanery. But just as the nondramatic encomiasts often combined a modicum of sense with the
more obvious intent of bewildering iteration, so Shakespeare frequently has an idea within his earliest Nothing
jingles. When, in Sonnet 136, he says:

For nothing hold me, so it please thee hold
That nothing me, a something, sweet, to thee,

he is making the challenge equivalent, in terms of love, to the other types of creativity from nothing. A similar
challenge is basic to a virtuoso passage in A Midsummer Night’s Dream (V.i.77-89). To Philostrate’s
deprecation of the artisans’ play as “nothing, nothing in the world,” and Hippolyta’s insistence, “He says they
can do nothing in this kind,” Theseus replies, “The kinder we, to give them thanks for nothing.” Again, in
Much Ado (IV.i.269), both Beatrice and Benedick, in their exchange of thing’s and nothing’s, resort to the
screen of nonsense for a tentative advancement of a serious meaning:

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

At the same time, they manage a deft indirectness by putting nothing into a syntax where the other person may
choose either its negative or its positive meaning. And in still another sense, inaudible let us hope to the
speakers if not to the audience, the passage might reward the combined insights of Professors Partridge and
Pyles.13
Shakespeare, in fact, almost always surpasses other performers in this word game in the number—nearing proportions Empsonian—of satisfactory readings he supplies. It is seldom that one of the word's appearances in a Nothing cluster is without two or more possible interpretations. No fewer than two older meanings, for example, enrich the second nothing in Falstaff's remark about Pistol: “Nay, an 'a do nothing but speak nothing, 'a shall be nothing here” (2 Henry IV, II.iv.207). One meaning was negation in the sense of idleness or lack of import. With this denotation in mind, Alonso reproves Gonzalo who has been talking about his ideal commonwealth (Tempest, II.i.171): “Prithee no more. Thou dost talk nothing to me”—which remark, of course, gets Gonzalo really started on the subject. He had talked of nothing, he declares, to entertain the others, whose lungs are so nimble “that they always use to laugh at nothing,” in which usage nothing may connote not only empty talk but the word itself, as it appeared in the idle entertainment of the popular encomia. In its second meaning, Falstaff's nothing has the same force as naughtiness in its original sense. Christian monism encouraged the explanation of evil as mere negation. So Sir John Davies explains it in Nosce Teipsum:

And then the Soule, being first from nothing brought,  
When Gods grace failes her, doth to nothing fall;  
And this declining pronenesse unto nought,  
Is even that sinne that we are borne withall.(15)

To these denotations and contexts, with their shadings too numerous to describe here, must be added the unrelated meanings made possible by an unusual vulnerability to the pun. Affording a passable rhyme with doting, as in the twentieth sonnet, nothing invited confusion with another fertile word, note. “A Song Made of Nothing” might not suggest a quibble if there were not other examples to prove that the play upon “musical noting” was far from infrequent. Shakespeare's Autolycus uses the word to describe both the vacuity and the technique of a song: “No hearing, no feeling, but my sir's song, and admiring the nothing of it!” (Winter's Tale, IV.iv.623). Stephano looks forward to having his “music for nothing” (Tempest, III.ii.154). More doubtful, and with a primary meaning closer to “absence of sense,” is Laertes' description of Ophelia's singing: “This nothing's more than matter” (Hamlet, IV.v.174)—and here one rules out only with reluctance a punning allusion to the obscenity of the mad ditties. More clearly in a musical context is the climactic appearance of the word in the involved passage on noting from Much Ado (II.iii.55):

PEDRO.  

Or if thou wilt hold longer argument,  
Do it in notes.

BALTH.  

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!

Shakespeare's more thoughtful concern with the traditional Nothing forms may best be approached through the special slant that these apparently gave to his expression of De Contemptu philosophy. Treatises on Nothing commonly divide the subject into such categories as life, time, beauty, and honor. Thus Breton's discourse contains a long monologue proving, by logical steps, that military honor belongs to the type of
Nothing called “the nothing durable” (sig. G 2v):

An other Honour is gotten by valiancie, and that is in the Warre, whereby the Captaine
winneth the Armes, that [he and] his posteritie … do honourably beare: yet for all this, well
considered, it is nothing, for that it is not certaine: for that in Warres to day is got, that to
morrow is lost: to day he gets an Ensigne, that to morrow looseth his owne Armes. … Hee
may be accused and attainted, that never did amisse. … Then this Honour, I see likewise is
the nothing, that is the nothing durable.

Written, if not printed, well before the penning of Falstaff's disquisition, this monologue may have come to
Shakespeare's attention, especially if the “W. S.” who wrote the commendatory verses can be, as Grosart
thinks possible, the dramatist. Again, Macbeth's “signifying nothing,” with which he closes his discourse on
time and life, may have had a specific ring, now lost, to audiences accustomed to the many formal
disquisitions whose equations ended with *nothing*.

Although in these instances Shakespeare does not, any more than several other writers in the genre, depend
upon the emphasis of iteration, there are many serious passages in which he does. Thus, Leontes' protest
against believing his jealousy insubstantial is clamorous with the word:

> Why, then the world and all that's in't is nothing;
The covering sky is nothing; Bohemia nothing;
My wife is nothing; nor nothing have these nothings,
If this be nothing.

*(Winter's Tale, I.ii.292)*

But here, since Leontes is distraught, Shakespeare uses for valid purposes of characterization the pointless
cleverness of the non-dramatic writers. Furthermore, Leontes' distraction is not only expressed but aggravated
by his meditating the idea of nothingness. In like manner the “inward soul” of the rhetorically frantic Queen
Isabella trembles with “nothing”:

> As, though in thinking on no thought I think,
Makes me with heavy nothing faint and shrink.

*(Richard II, II.ii.31)*

The Queen's fearful thought of non-being contrasts effectively with her husband's eager acceptance of it.
Richard finds a pleasure, typically verbal, in dramatizing the ritual of a king becoming a thing of nothing. He
prefaces this aspect of his deposition with “for I must nothing be,” and concludes it: “Make me, that nothing
have, with nothing griev'd” (IV.i.201-216). And he privately re-enacts the scene—with the same verbal
play—in the episode before his death, where after being “unking'd,” he straightway becomes “nothing.” “But
whate'er I be,” he concludes,

> Nor I, nor any man that but man is,
With nothing shall be pleas'd till he be eas'd
With being nothing.

*(V.v.38)*

The solacing power of Nothing, as Richard ingeniously interprets it, was a staple of the mock encomia, which
likewise rely upon ambiguity by comparing Nothing's harmlessness with the misery occasioned by things. The
prose *Praye of Nothing* is written so that “we may more apparently perceive the good effects which come of
nothing, as of the least, or no enimie of life, by whose societie many evils depart.” It is appropriate that the dying Timon should find no more positive words for the hereafter than the formula of the mock encomia:

Of health and living now begins to mend,
And nothing brings me all things.

*(Timon of Athens, V.i.189)*

Timon’s statement, of course, had its obverse side. Nothing, in a positive sense, did produce all things; and its formidableness in the genesis of man's affairs and dreams became for Shakespeare, as for his contemporaries, a fertile obsession. Shakespeare's meditation on this orthodox theme runs through such variations as Romeo's oxymoronic “O anything, of nothing first create” (I.i.184); Mercutio's rhapsody on the origin of dreams; and even, perhaps, whole plays in which the dramatist's virtuosity was demonstrated by the extent to which he could make something of nothing. But possibly the aspect of the subject that most fascinated Shakespeare, judging from his references to it, was its metaphorical application to the poet's craft. According to the psychological authority Laurentius, “the understanding part of the minde receiveth from the imaginative the formes of things naked and voide of substance.” This, the creative shaping of what was trifling, insubstantial, or unknown, seems to have impressed Shakespeare as the real challenge facing the imagination. In his most famous lines on the subject (*Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.i.14-17), he speaks of imagination bodying forth the forms of things unknown, while the poet's pen

Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

Nor is the task of shaping “airy nothing” peculiar to the poet. It is shared by all who imagine. Ophelia's “speech is nothing,”

Yet the unshaped use of it doth move
The hearers to collection.

*(Hamlet, IV.v.7-9)*

Here it is the hearers who turn the nothing, the nonsense, into shapes. And Shakespeare demanded that his audience generally do the like. The audience's obligation to give the actors thanks for nothing, as proposed by Theseus, is best explained by the playful demands of the mock encomia. But in *Henry V* Shakespeare challenges the audience more seriously. Let us actors, he asks,

On your imaginary forces work.(20)

Nothing is the material of human dreams. Mercutio, like Gonzalo accused of talking of “nothing,” likewise shapes the word to his own ends:

Which are the children of an idle brain,
Begot of nothing but vain fantasy;
Which is as thin of substance as the air.(21)

Imogen describes her supposed dream as “but a bolt of nothing, shot at nothing, Which the brain makes of fumes” (*Cymbeline*, IV.ii.300-301). Distempered fantasies are similarly begot. Queen Isabella, fainting from “heavy nothing” (or could it be heavy noting?), is told by Bushy, “‘Tis nothing but conceit, my gracious lady.” Her reply, though hysterical and equivocal, is in one of its senses consistent with Shakespeare's other
'Tis nothing less. Conceit is still deriv'd
From some forefather grief. Mine is not so,
For nothing hath begot my something grief,
Or something hath the nothing that I grieve.(22)

One must not, of course try to build Shakespeare's concept of imaginative creation upon the fanciful, and at best figurative, references to Nothing in these passages. At the same time, analogy with the doctrine of divine creation, which was neither fanciful nor figurative, helps explain the remarkable persistence with which the concept of nothingness, and usually the word itself, appears in his statements on poetry and dreams. And it is interesting that Puttenham should use, “reverently” he is careful to add, analogy with the Christian God to justify the Greek notion of the poet as maker (rather than simply imitator). Did not God, “without any travell to his divine imagination,” make “all the world of nought?”

But perhaps enough has now been said about Nothing to give point to the title of this paper. Did Shakespeare intend the Nothing in Much Ado to have what was for him a characteristic richness and emphasis? Almost a century ago, Richard Grant White employed his knowledge of Elizabethan English in a bold proposal that the original audience both pronounced and interpreted the title as “Much Ado about Noting”; for noting, or observing and eavesdropping, is found in almost every scene and is indispensable to all the plots. Though no successful refutation of White's argument has appeared, its rejection is implicit in an almost perfect editorial silence. Not only do most editors fail even to mention the theory (Hardin Craig is apparently unique in giving it a footnote), but there has been only the most casual of commentary on the title at all.

Possibly some of the additional evidence needed by White is now before us. He proved that noting yielded a good reading of the play; he could not prove that Shakespeare intended so slight a title to carry weight. With our awareness of the various Nothing discourses, of their challenge to make as much as possible of nothing, of Shakespeare's concept of nothing as the material of imaginings, and of his tendency to underline the word, we can add support to White's theory—though only by correcting his exclusive emphasis on the meaning of “noting.” Writers who ingeniously shaped Nothing into many significances did employ the pun, but their medium demanded the use of other kinds of manipulation. In attempting a dramatic, rather than expository, elaboration, Shakespeare would give the playwright's equivalent of the poet's imaginative shaping. Out of a trifle, a misunderstanding, a fantasy, a mistaken over-hearing, a “naughtiness,” might come the materials for a drama—as happened, less deliberately perhaps, in King Lear.

Besides paying deserved respect to an important word, this theory has the merit of removing from the most troublesome of Shakespeare's happy comedies many of the supposed imperfections in character and motivation. At worst, perhaps, it will move the hearers to collection.

Notes

2. MLN [Modern Language Notes], XLIV (1949), 322-323.
4. For the theological significance of creation ex nihilo, see C. M. Walsh, The Doctrine of Creation (London, 1910).

7. See Jean Passerat’s *Nihil* (1567), and Francisco Copetta’s *Capitolo nel quale si lodano le Noncovelle* (c. 1548). The genre, still not extinct, persevered only meagerly during the Augustan period. Fielding, in an Essay on Nothing (Complete Works, ed. Henley, London, 1903, XIV, 309), could cite as one who “dared to write on this subject” only “a hardy wit in the reign of Charles II” (doubtless referring to Rochester’s “Upon Nothing”).


10. Second stanza, reprinted *Fugitive Tracts, Second Series* (1875), no pagination.


13. Editors have apparently overlooked the parallel between this dialogue and the broadside ballad beginning: “Fain would I have a prettie thing, / to give unto my Ladie: / I name no thing, nor I meane no thing, / but as pretie a thing as may bee” (in Clement Robinson’s *A Handefull of Pleasant Delites*, 1584, ed. Kershaw, London, 1926, pp. 95-97).

14. For other examples of this privative usage of nothing, see *Othello*, III.iii.432 and IV.i.9.

15. *The Poems of Sir John Davies, Reproduced in Facsimile* (N.Y., 1941), p. 148. More elaborately De Mornay cites as the cause of evil “the verie nothing it self; that is to wit, that God almightie, to shew us that he hath made all of nothing, hath left a certeine inclination in his Creatures, whereby they tend naturally to nothing, that is to saye, to change and corruption” (p. 23).


> Too much of water hast thou, poor Ophelia, And therefore I forbid my tears.


19. M. Andreas Laurentius *A Discourse of the Preservation of the Sight* (1599); Shakespeare Assoc. Fac. No. 15, p. 16. For the relationship between the understanding and the imagination, see Thomas Wright, *The Passions of the Minde* (1601), pp. 91-96.


25. Of the twelve pages devoted by T. M. Parrott to the play in *Shakespearean Comedy* (N.Y., 1949), none is given to the title. Most editors who do allude to it (Neilson and Hill, O. J. Campbell, and G. B. Harrison) refer to it either as a symptom of genial carelessness or as a clue that all will turn out happily.
Criticism: Themes: Paul Mueschke and Miriam Mueschke (essay date winter 1967)


[In the following essay, the Mueschkes present Much Ado about Nothing as a play primarily about honor and dishonor, particularly “feminine honor sullied by slander.”]

The gaity of Much Ado About Nothing is consistently praised; its somber aspects are either ignored or disparaged. Most critics agree that Much Ado is the gayest of Shakespeare's three joyous comedies, that its theme is courtship, and that the main plot centers on the wooing and winning of Hero. These basic assumptions lead to a number of widely accepted conclusions: since the subplot is more original than the main plot, the witty lovers overshadow the troubled lovers; Hero, shadowy and silent, is not a credible heroine since the audience assuming a vindication of her innocence is imminent takes her plight lightly; Claudio, the titular hero, is a cad who should not be rewarded by marrying the lady he has flagrantly slandered; John, the nominal villain, is unconvincing because he delegates his plotting to Borachio; and finally, the repudiation scene, though theatrically effective, is a blot on an otherwise brilliant comedy.¹

The interpretation of Much Ado developed in this article is, point for point, at variance with the view generally accepted. We hold that the theme of this comedy is honor, that its spirit is less joyous than reflective, and that courtship, a peripheral concern, is presented as an imminent threat to masculine honor. Once the accent on honor is established, interest in the witty lovers becomes subordinated to interest in the troubled lovers; John, the malevolent match-breaker, becomes more than a nominal villain; the main plot focuses less on the birth and growth of love than on the death and rebirth of love. Finally, seen in the light of lost faith restored and sincere atonement for “unintentional” injury, the recantation scene (V.iii) restores the moral equilibrium lost in the repudiation scene (IV.i) with the result that Hero becomes more credible and Claudio more admirable. The intermittent gaiety of Much Ado is not an end in itself, it serves as a foil to the gravity. This comedy is of mingled yarn, in which the grave and the gay are at times contrasted, at times fused—so artfully that they sometimes temper, sometimes enrich each other.²

The structure of Much Ado—composed of three hoaxes, four withheld secrets, and three metamorphoses—achieves organic unity through an integration of subplot with main plot. This integration, based on parallel construction, is elaborated by opposing antithetical images, ideas, characters, motives, or scenes. The first four scenes, like the first three scenes in Othello, are treated as a prologue to the main action; in both plays the villain's initial attempt to sow dissension is short lived, but his subsequent slander, supported by ocular and auditory proof, is devastating. The Claudio-Hero alliance is the exciting force which precipitates the conflict between the benevolent Prince and his malevolent brother as they play their respective roles of matchmaker and matchbreaker.

The Prince, matchmaker in main plot as well as subplot, devises the amiable hoax which facilitates the marriage between the wary lovers. Aided by members of Leonato's household, Don Pedro creates the illusion which culminates in Benedick and Beatrice's self-appraisal, followed by their commitment to reciprocal love (II.iii; III.i). In both main and subplot, marriage is delayed by internal impediments, not by external obstacles; the malicious hoax generates an illusory impediment; the amiable hoax dissolves actual impediments. John's ruse culminates in undeserved suffering; Pedro's ruse creates a love that expands into compassionate sympathy for those who suffer.

John, assisted by Borachio, instigates the malicious hoax, which, by playing on the latent fear of cuckoldry, culminates in Claudio's tearful disillusionment and Hero's symbolic death (IV.i). The Bastard's vicious slander
generates much ado about nothing, since Hero, who is unequivocally chaste, must be, and finally is vindicated. Through the device of the withheld secret, which heightens suspense, her vindication is deliberately delayed until late in V.i. Just as the rising action up to and through the climax in IV.i depends on the interplay of the three evolving hoaxes, so does the falling action depend on the interplay of the four withheld secrets that culminate in the three metamorphoses of Hero. The first withheld secret, that Hero is belied, culminates in her metamorphosis from virgin to wanton (IV.i); the second, that Hero is alive, culminates in her transfiguration from sinner to martyr (V.iii); the third, that Hero “died . . . but whiles her slander liv’d”, culminates in her metamorphosis from martyr to bride (V.iv). The fourth, that Benedick and Beatrice have been snared into love, a secret withheld from them until near the close of the fifth act, adds greater depth as well as piquancy to their repartee of courtship at the end of II.iii and after III.i.

Our more detailed interpretation of Much Ado (1598-1599) is divided into four interlocking sections, developed in the following sequence:

(I) A nexus of hearsay and ordeal not only infiltrates both plot and subplot but also unites them. Emanating from this nexus are hitherto unnoted overtones of thought and feeling which are implied or expressed by a varied range of rhetorical and technical devices.

(II) The rigid concept of honor which flares up in the crises and climax of Much Ado is illuminated by references to Castiglione's Courtier (trans. Hoby, 1561) and Peter Beverley's Ariodanto and Ieneura (1565-1566). Once this courtly ethos is seen as the determining factor in Hero's three transfigurations, a significant number of characters and scenes take on an added dimension.

(III) A reexamination of tone, role, structure, and imagery in key scenes provides a broader perspective, from which Much Ado emerges as a masterpiece of Shakespeare's maturing dramaturgy.

(IV) This play, a milestone in Shakespeare's development, is less closely related to the two “joyous comedies” with which it is generally associated than with the history plays with which it is contemporaneous and the tragedies by which it is followed.

In the crises of this far from joyous comedy, hearsay creates illusory dilemmas which seemingly necessitate hasty commitment; ill-advised commitment culminates in serio-comic ordeals. Hearsay in the sense of a reported report—as well as such related forms as noting, reputation, rumor, insinuation, and slander—are freighted with or colored by either accidental or deliberate distortion. Distortion due to ignorance, inattention, fear, pride, or malice motivates impulsive and precipitate action which in turn creates or accentuates apprehension, misunderstanding, dissension, and realignment of the individuals or groups in conflict. The impact of hearsay, or its collateral equivalents, alters existing relationships between two pairs of brothers, two pairs of lovers, a trio of gallants, and a father and daughter, when successive conflicts crystallize in a sequence of ascending crises.3

The power of hearsay and the potency of defamation that are topics for jesting in the subplot (III.i) become sources of anguish in the main plot (IV.i). What was a jocular phrase is transformed into a shocking act; the figurative becomes the literal; the impersonal generalization foretells a personal catastrophe. Hero, who jests about hearsay, is martyred by hearsay; she, the devisor of the comic trap, is herself caught in a vicious trap. Unlike the “honest slander” with which she proposes to stain Beatrice, John's furtive slander almost destroys not only Hero but also those who cherish her. She herself discovers “How much an ill word may empoison liking” (III.ii.86), when she is deserted by father and lover, who discredit her truth in favor of the Bastard's perjury (IV.i).4
The impact of hearsay is singularly pervasive; it not only colors dialogue, motivation, and action, but also gives rise to a cryptic irony which is as characteristic of this remarkable comedy as is the wit of Benedick and Beatrice. Intermittent irony frequently stems from crisply phrased oxymoron—a rhetorical device deftly used to intensify the present, recall the past, and foreshadow the future. The comedy opens with a glowing report of Claudio's valor, followed by the messenger's paradox, “joy could not show itself modest enough without a badge of bitterness” (ll.21-22). The tone and tenor of this reflection is underscored by Leonato's prophetic response, “How much better is it to weep at joy than to joy at weeping!”—(as John invariably does). This remark, early in the play, sets off the enigmatic overtones of the dialogue. These overtones—like those in Troilus and Cressida (1601-1602) and Othello (1604-1605)—sometimes contrast, sometimes fuse, joy and sorrow, faith and doubt, emotion and reason, love and hate, honor and shame, and substance and shadow. Viewed as reflections of Shakespeare's concern with the fallibility of the senses and the ravages of mutability, these and similar stressed dichotomies somehow evoke the inexpressible about the riddle of existence and the mystery of the human predicament.

Honor, whether the setting be the court of Beverley's Jenevra, the palace of Castiglione's Courtier, or the court-oriented house of Leonato, is the primary virtue in a caste-conscious society. Uncrowned by honor, all other gifts of nature, fortune, or culture are debased and worthless. The honorable lady must be modest and chaste; the honorable gentleman, loyal and valorous. At all costs, not only honor, but also the reputation for honor, must be zealously preserved. Man's reputation depends on unsullied valor; woman's, on unstained chastity. Once lost, a reputation for either valor or chastity can never be wholly regained. Castiglione, as translated by Hoby, expresses this idea more colorfully; “And even as in women honestye once stained dothe never retourne againe to the former astate: so the fame of a gentleman that carieth weapon, yf it once take a foile in any little point through dastardliness or any other reproche, doeth evermore continue shameful” (Bk. I, p. 48).

Honor in Much Ado, as in The Courtier, is a rigid, compulsive force which varies from but retains vestiges of the chivalric code exemplified by The Historie of Ariondanto and Ieneura. Whether clad in satin or steel, a “worthie” gentleman must be ever ready to vindicate a victim of calumny. In Beverley's verse romance, the champion enters the lists to save the perjured Jenevra from an actual death by fire; in Much Ado, Leonato, Antonio, and Benedick in turn challenge Claudio to a duel, charging that his slander has slain Hero (V.i). In the narrative as well as in the drama, suspense is heightened when the belied lady as well as her defender suffers an undeserved ordeal. Beverley's ordeals are spectacular and sensational, those in Much Ado are seriocomic. Jenevra faces literal death, Hero suffers figurative death; princess and lady alike almost become martyrs of slander.

In both cases, heedless of the law of church or state, their defenders take justice in their own hands. Theirs is the stock response of their caste—once honor is impugned shame must be dissolved in blood. Their courtly code forbids turning the other cheek, it prescribes vengeance through bloodshed. As Castiglione confirms: “me thinketh it a meeate matter to punish them … sharply, that with lyes bringe up a sclaunder upon women. And I beleave that everie worthie gentilman is bounde to defend alwaies with weapon … when he knoweth any woman falslye reported to be of little honestie” (p. 249).

Courtly honor is the matrix of the ironies and reversals which characterize Hero's two rejections (II.i; IV.i) and three metamorphoses (IV.i; V.iii; V.iv). Whether Hero acts or fails to act is less significant than what she essentially is; what she is, less important than what she symbolizes. Even were one to ignore, as many critics still do, Hero's obediently guarded repartee during the courtship by proxy in II.i, her chaste thoughts and language during the snaring of Beatrice in III.i, and her virginal forebodings about marriage in III.iv, she still remains the embodiment of the courtly concept of ideal daughter and bride. Emblem of the sheltered life—crowned by beauty, modesty, and chastity—she is bred from birth for a noble alliance which will add luster to her lineage.
In the crises, Hero is intentionally portrayed as vulnerably passive. Her passivity as well as her innocence not only intensifies the shock of her martyrdom but also heightens the dramatic effectiveness of her three transfigurations. The centrality of Hero's role must be reestablished, emphasis must be shifted from her function as foil to Beatrice, to her function as center of the mores, the imagery, and the irony of the action.

Thematically linked to the direct attack on honor, which separates the hearsay-crossed pair in the climax, is the covert fear of dishonor, which keeps the taunting lovers of the subplot apart in their initial skirmish for ascendancy. Verbally, Benedick flees while Beatrice pursues (I.i.117-146). That the maid is far from reticent in her pursuit of the bachelor is as apparent as that he is no less attracted by her than fearful of her wit and disdain. The reason for his fear of Beatrice and matrimony is elaborated later in the scene when Claudio hazards ridicule by admitting an inclination toward marriage.

Comically aghast at the prospect of separation from his brother-in-arms, Benedick inadvertently reveals his own hidden fear of the tender trap. Haunted by phantom horns, the professed misogynist attempts to dissuade his enamored friend from courting cuckoldry: “Is’t come to this? In faith, hath not the world one man but he will wear his cap with suspicion?" (ll. 199-201). When accused of being “an obstinate heretic in the despite of beauty,” Benedick not only reaffirms his mistrust of women and marriage but also again reveals his fear of cuckoldry. So even in the subplot, where courtship is dwelt upon and depicted with inimitable verve, the accent is on honor—not on the raptures of courtship, but on the gnawing fear which discourages marriage: “That a woman conceived me, I thank her … but that I will have a recheat 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 the which I may go the finer, I will live a bachelor” (ll. 240-248).7

The cuckoldry jest, ubiquitous in Renaissance and Restoration comedy, has lost much of its evocative power for the modern mind. Yet even now, witty allusions to cuckoldry trigger the wry laughter which stems from an awareness of the distrust and antagonism between the sexes; an antagonism which is heightened when women challenge male dominance and upset the status quo. Although the timeworn taunts of cuckoldry have lost the full measure of their emotive impact, in context, they still are much more than obsolete obscenity. This antic wit, often offensive as the phallic pun, is still laden with invaluable clues to Renaissance thought and mores. Then as now, a dominant wife implies an inadequate husband; a weak husband led by a wily wife portends dishonor. Then, before marriage, a man's honor is his own responsibility; only real or apparent breach of faith or lack of valor can debase him. After marriage, part of his honor passes into his wife's keeping; her actual or seeming unchastity bleeds his escutcheon.8

Honor is the warp of the three hoaxes, hearsay is the weft, and illusion spins the web. Don Pedro's amiable hoax unites the subplot lovers, Don John's malicious hoax separates the main-plot lovers, and the Friar's benign hoax reunites the hearsay-crossed pair. The purpose of each of the three hoaxes is to reverse existing relationships. Each hoax is designed to create the specific illusion which will secure such a reversal. Dupes of illusion, both pairs of lovers are somewhat plot-ridden; they act less than they are acted upon.

The Prince, blithely unaware that the Claudio-Hero alliance is being undermined, concerns himself solely with the amiable hoax, directed toward the bickering pair, which is intended to create faith by destroying fear and distrust. John's malicious hoax, directed against the Claudio-Hero alliance, is based on the latent fear of cuckoldry; it subverts instinctive love and faith by substituting in their stead doubt, confusion, and shame. The malicious hoax induces Claudio, Pedro, and even Leonato to credit and support the slander which in IV.i culminates in Hero's first metamorphosis from virgin to wanton. To counteract John's hoax, the Friar devises the benign hoax which culminates in Hero's second transfiguration—from wanton to martyr (V.iii). Hero's third metamorphosis—from martyr to bride—is reserved for the surprise and discovery in the denouement, where the masked “niece” of Leonato is discovered to be Claudio's slander-slain betrothed who died “but whiles her slander liv'd” (V.iii.66).
The malicious hoax, the most complex of the three, is prominent in both the rising and falling action of the main plot. That Borachio, not John, concocted the scheme is relatively unimportant, that John never appears in person after IV.i is even less significant. Coleridge was essentially right in observing, “Don John, the mainspring of the plot, is merely shown then withdrawn.” Modern critics who quote Coleridge usually omit the all important appositive, “the mainspring of the plot.” Consequently they fail to see that, once injected, the venom of John's slander spreads its infection. Whether he is present or not, evil dominates good, judgment is poisoned, will is perverted, shadow becomes substance, and undeserved ordeals proliferate.

John is actually the mainspring of the counterintrigue in the main plot. The force of his villainy is not rooted in a talent for plotting; his power stems from a tenacious will, implemented partly by his familiarity with the peculiarities of the courtly code, and partly by his talent for distortion, hyperbole, and innuendo. Impresario of fantasy, he fashions hydas from latent fear of cuckoldry. The sly treachery with which John drops insinuation into the initially unreceptive ears of Claudio and the Prince recalls Iago, that other dissembling rogue who, posing as a plain-dealer, “twists suspicion into assurance.” Both villains are qualified by nature and experience to play on the passions of their betters; both know how to sting emotion until reason dissolves, how to arouse a sense of betrayed honor, and how to goad illusory betrayal into rash action.

Spawn of paternal venery, John envies his more fortunate brother's power and prestige; Pedro, the licit heir, inherits honor and authority, the Bastard is born to shame and subjection. The frustrated malcontent is obsessed by a desire to debase others as he himself has been debased, to cause suffering as he himself has suffered, and to dishonor as he himself has been dishonored. Act I, scene iv traces the Bastard's metamorphosis from passive malcontent railing at Fortune into an active villain eager to hamper the very alliance his brother is attempting to assure. At first John's mood is that of a muzzled mastiff unable to lick festering wounds. His ego smarts, he recalls his abortive revolt against his brother and winces at the very mention of Claudio, who had the “glory of his overthrow”; nothing will soothe his smarting pride except an opportunity to crush the “start up” Claudio, and to pit wit and will against those of his invulnerable brother. After hearing the report that the Prince intends to woo Hero for Claudio, John invites his cronies to help devise a means of forestalling the anticipated match.

Out of the kaleidoscopic merriment of the masked revelry scene—a perfect setting for a miniature comedy of errors—John emerges as matchbreaker (II.i.). Here, the villain pretends he has mistaken the masked Claudio for Benedick; Claudio, in turn, deliberately encourages the seeming error. So the curious youth (like the subplot lovers in II.iii, III.i) by eavesdropping hears more disturbing gossip than he had anticipated. The villain makes his dupe's ears tingle by confiding, “my brother … is enamor'd on Hero … dissuade him … she is no equal for his birth” (ll. 169-172).

The embittered lover releases pent emotions in a soliloquy: “Friendship is constant in all other things / Save in the office and affairs of love” (ll. 182-183). These verses condone Pedro's seeming violation of trust, the next lines bemoan beauty's mystic power to ensnare and to betray: “beauty is a witch / Against whose charms faith melteth into blood. … Farewell, therefore, Hero!” (ll. 186-189). Reasoning in metaphorical absolutes, Claudio decides: Friendship shrivels in the flame of desire; his patron has become his rival; Hero who has bewitched the Prince is to blame; she alone is the source of dissension; she must be rooted out of Claudio's mind and heart.10 This sudden, short-lived rejection of Hero is a prelude to the longer lasting, more shocking repudiation at the altar.

Claudio's susceptibility to suspicion emanating from hearsay indicates that under stress the immature lover values friendship for the Prince, who appears faithless, above love for Hero, who appears fickle. When finally aware that both Claudio and Benedick assume Pedro has wooed Hero for himself, he assures them that he has not only won her for Claudio but has also gained Leonato's consent to an immediate betrothal. Obviously, John's initial attempt to frustrate his brother by destroying the Claudio-Hero alliance has been a fiasco. At this point, there is a triple irony of situation; on the one hand, John's abortive attempt to sow lasting dissension
fails; on the other, neither the Prince nor his favorites suspect John of renewed treachery; and most ironical of all, the mutual faith binding the trio of gallants is strengthened by the very trial to which it was subjected.

In III.ii, the Prince and Count, who in the first half of the scene are genial jesters at Benedick's metamorphosis into an avowed lover, are themselves transformed in the second part to dazed dupes of John's calumny. This sort of ironical reversal, which is both typical of and recurrent in Much Ado, probes deeper beneath the surface of events than is customary in Shakespeare's earlier comedies. Toward the middle of III.ii, the matchbreaker traps the matchmaker and undermines Claudio's certainty that he will wed Hero on the morrow; by whipping up stock responses to illusory dishonor, John impels her admirers to become detractors. After arousing the apprehension of the Prince and Claudio by demanding a private conference on a mysterious matter which deeply concerns both patron and lover, the villain implies that if Claudio knew what John knows, he would shun marriage. The villain obliquely suggests a secret impediment which threatens honor; he implies, then asserts, Hero is unchaste; her unchastity is the impediment which must be faced (ll. 84-110). The entire process of leading up to the slander is calculatingly ambiguous. He deliberately tantalizes his victims until their nerves are raw and fear of dishonor is fomented; after their judgment is paralyzed by innuendo, he lures men reft of judgment to make an immediate and irrevocable choice between tainted love or undefiled honor. Mercilessly, John's defamatory taunts dare the beguiled Prince and Count to swear what they would do if the unchastity charge were true, before it has been proved true. Vacillating between faith that the unchastity charge is false and fear that it is true, Claudio resolves his dilemma with the promise, “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” (ll. 126-128). And the Prince adds, “as I wooed for thee to obtain her, I will join with thee to disgrace her” (ll. 129-130).

The repudiation scene (IV.i), the adroitly delayed climax of the malicious hoax, depicts prescribed response to apparent unchastity. John's hoax, never staged, intermittently reported—part slander, part timing, part mistaken identity, part perjured witness, and part duped witnesses—creates an illusion of dishonor that engenders delusion and revulsion. Convinced that father and daughter have connived to conceal Hero's unchastity at the expense of her bridegroom's honor, Claudio enters the church determined to turn the tables by publicly shaming those who had conspired to dishonor him. On the other hand, Leonato, confident that he is about to witness a union of virtue and valor, is perplexed but not deeply disturbed when Claudio, with the deliberate ruthlessness of a disillusioned idealist, turns the words of the marriage ceremony itself into an inquisitor's catechism (ll. 11-31). Soon, cryptic quibbles about secret impediments turn into outright rejection, as Claudio cries, “She's but the sign and semblance of her honour. … Her blush is guiltiness, not modesty” (ll. 34-43).

Vainly, Leonato seeks reassurance from the Prince, who scoffs, “I stand dishonour'd that have gone about / To link my dear friend to a common stale” (ll. 65-66). After Hero denies guilt, Pedro challenges her denial: “Upon mine honour, / Myself, my brother, and this grieved count / Did see her, hear her … Talk with a ruffian at her chamber-window; / Who hath … Confess'd the vile encounters” (ll. 89-94). John, at the height of his Pyrrhic victory, gloats, “pretty lady, / I am sorry for thy much misgovernment” (ll. 99-100). In riddling oxymoron Claudio laments the loss of love and faith: “But fare the [sic] well, most foul, most fair! Farewell, / Thou pure impiety, and impious purity! / For thee I'll lock up all the gates of love, … turn all beauty into thoughts of harm” (ll. 104-108). Again, as in the initial rejection (II.i), Claudio fears and denounces the enigmatic power of defiled beauty. Struck by irony, hyperbole, antithesis, and paradox, the thread of laughter vibrates fitfully as deluded father and lover grapple with illusory unchastity.

Leonato, convinced of Hero's infamy, thinks of his dishonor, not of her plight; he demands, “Hath no man's dagger here a point for me?” (l. 110). Perhaps the audience are not unduly perturbed, since the Watch have overheard Borachio's inadvertent confession (III.iii), and even though neither Dogberry nor Verges understands the tenor of the drunkard's babblings, the audience does. Nevertheless, though the audience may
be certain that Hero is belied, her father, her bridegroom, and the Prince, convinced of her guilt, play their roles with tragic intensity. Leonato's despair submerges his judgment, he accepts appearance for reality, perjury for proof; love turns to loathing, his cherished daughter dwindles from virgin to wanton (ll. 122-144). Obsessed by illusory dishonor, the Bastard's dupes intensify their own seriocomic ordeals. The malicious hoax has created havoc. There is a realignment of forces, the duped patron, the embittered lover, and the distracted father flee into John's camp to escape contagion! Friendship displaces courtship or fatherhood; male honor withdraws from female defilement. The Lady is a harlot; let her die for shame. Theirs is the stock response of their caste, the rigidity of the courtly code sanctions little compassion for frailty or dishonor.

The repudiation scene, examined with the courtly code of honor in mind, is much more than a coup de théâtre. 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 that slander, mirage, and perjury are accepted as ocular and auditory proof. Incensed by defiled honor, men argue in absolutes shorn from any rational mean, and under the aegis of the courtly code act and react with prescribed cruelty.

The significance of the Friar's role, in and after the climax, has never been recognized; it is his wisdom that casts out the demons of despair; it is his compassion that substitutes symbolic death for literal death. After the exit of the Count and Princes, Hero revives from the swoon that resembles death. Leonato, convinced that Hero is “mir'd with infamy”, believes honor prescribes that she, like Lucrece, should literally die for shame. That is why he cries, “O Fate! take not away thy heavy hand. / Death is the fairest cover for her shame” (ll. 116-117). The Friar, aided by Benedick and Beatrice, gradually leads the distraught father's thoughts from fatalistic acceptance of shame to active vindication of honor. After the Friar argues that “ocular proof” may be an illusion, and after Benedick suggests that the Bastard belies Hero, Leonato's wrath turns from his daughter's shame to her detractors' slander. Leonato urges vindication through bloodshed. The Friar prefers a ruse designed to change slander to remorse: “She dying, as it must be so maintain'd, / Upon the instant that she was accus'd, / Shall be lamented, pitied, and excus'd” (ll. 216-218).

What is trite chronological narrative in Bandello and Beverley becomes foreshadowing through prophesy in Much Ado, as the Friar foresees and foretells the psychology of Claudio's remorse: “When he shall hear she died upon his words, / Th' idea of her life shall sweetly creep / Into his study of imagination” (ll. 225-227). Throughout his incisively truncated recantation, Claudio does mourn; throughout his rapt vigil he mourns the martyr slain by slanderous tongues. Hero, glowing with more than mortal glory, does rise before his inner eye. In the penultimate scene, the vision which elevates Hero displaces the illusion which debased her. The intensity of Claudio's remorse atones for the cruelty of the public repudiation at the altar.11 Staged in retarded tempo, embellished by stylized movement, haunting music, and appropriate lighting, the recantation scene not only ennobles Claudio, who lost stature in the repudiation scene, but also sanctifies his delayed union with Hero. To appreciate the organic unity of Much Ado in terms of illusion and metamorphosis—the tense climax (IV.i), the evocative recantation (V.iii), and the animated denouement (V.iv) must be envisioned, though they seldom are, as mutually illuminating.

The recantation scene, a miniature masque, depicts the ritual of expiation performed by Claudio, shortly before his union with Leonato's “niece.” By torchlight, Claudio, accompanied by his Prince and several other witnesses, solemnly approaches Hero's ancestral tomb to propitiate her “bones” and absolve his blood guilt. The tapers flicker on the mourning weeds of the celebrants, as, bowed with contrition, Claudio ascends the seven steps of atonement. The lyric intensity of this requiem masque is heightened by the hour, the setting, and the allusion: (1) The scroll which bears the epitaph is unrolled; (2) the retraction is read aloud before hushed mourners, “So the life that died with shame / Lives in death with glorious fame” (ll.7-8); (3)
symbolically, the recantation is eternized by hanging the epitaph-bearing scroll on the tomb, “Praising her when I am dumb [dead]” (l.10); (4) the music is prelude to a dirge burdened with contrition and a plea that the penitents responsible for the virgin's death be forgiven, “Pardon, goddess of the night, / Those that slew thy virgin knight” (ll.12-13); (5) with ritualistic solemnity, the procession circles the tomb; (6) as coup de grâce, Claudio, still intent upon perpetuating the bitter-sweet memory of his betrothed, pledges, “unto thy bones good night! / Yearly will I do this rite” (ll.22-23); (7) finally, with an insight which begets empathy, Claudio, aware that he is no longer Fortune's favorite, begs Hymen to guard Leonato's “niece” from the woes experienced by his daughter, “Hymen now with luckier issue [speed's] / Than this for whom we rend'red up this woe” (ll. 32-33).

The power of language to create an illusion which either elevates or debases a relationship has been stressed not only in our comparison of the function of illusion in the subplot with that in the main plot, but also in our integration of the shifting imagery with the ironies and reversals clustering about the three transfigurations. Our integration of imagery with action demonstrates that the precarious equilibrium of the volatile aristocrats is disturbed less by ocular illusion than by verbal delusion; in the crises, not ocular proof but hearsay and insinuation twist suspicion into assurance. The sporadic word-play on “die for love” which snares the wary couple into both declarations and reaffirmations of reciprocal love is paralleled by the more grim and pervasive word play on “die for shame” which first separates, then, after literal death is transmuted into symbolic death, finally unites the hearsay-crossed pair.

The tantalizing ambiguities in the subplot lovers' repartee of courtship has fascinated critics; but even the most astute commentators have ignored the multifaceted word-play on death which centers on Hero's transfigurations. This intricate pattern of calculated ambiguity sustains suspense throughout the falling action: the climax ends with the Friar's paradox, “die to live”; the three challenges of Claudio are justified by the iterated refrain, slander slew Hero; Claudio recants by playing variations on the theme, “done to death by slanderous tongues”; and finally, in the denouement, martyred Hero, who “died defil'd,” is reborn through vindicated fame and becomes the bride of Claudio, who, chastened by remorse and atonement, becomes a more deserving bridegroom.

The contrast between the adroit use and the maladroit abuse of language which distinguishes the speech of Dogberry, Verges, and the Watch from that of the articulate aristocrats is no less self evident than an endless source of delight. The aptly inept word-play of Dogberry and his flunkies has been explored with gusto—not only as an end in itself, as a means of characterization, and as a comic foil for the subtler wit of Benedick and Beatrice, but also as a technical device for delaying the exposure of John's defamation. Word-play in Much Ado, unlike that in the earlier romantic plays, is ever closely integrated with and dependent on action—as it runs the gamut from broad low comedy to sophisticated high comedy. Laughter in Much Ado is frequently ironic; pervasively reflective. The symbolism in the much maligned main plot is at least as significant as is the comic potential in the deliberate use and inadvertent abuse of language in the subplots. The enigmatic word-play of John, Hero, Claudio, Leonato, and the Friar, too long overlooked, is at least as important for a balanced appraisal of tone, structure, and values as are the inimitable ineptitudes of Dogberry and Verges, or the widely heralded witticisms of Benedick and Beatrice.12

Much Ado (1598-1599), as we interpret it, is closer in spirit to Henry IV (1597-1598) than to the two joyous comedies (As You Like It, 1599-1600; Twelfth Night, 1599-1600) with which it is generally associated. Written contemporaneously, the comedy of private conflict and the chronicle of public strife, though seldom compared, are reciprocally illuminating. The accent in both plays is on honor; dishonor in the comedy is illusory, dishonor in the history play is real. Honor, in the one, is viewed in terms of seeming and being; honor, in the other, is discussed in terms of a mean contrasted with two extremes.13 The conflict in the comedy centers on feminine honor sullied by slander; that in the chronicle, on male honor tainted by cowardice or foolhardiness. The dominant ethos in both plays is rooted in the courtly code that prescribes modesty and chastity for women, valor and loyalty for men. In the comedy all four attributes of honor come
into play; in the chronicle where the attributes of feminine honor are less relevant, the interest is centered on the attributes of masculine honor.

The tragicomic ordeals in *Troilus and Cressida* (1602-1603) which culminate in disillusionment and the serio-comic ordeals in *Much Ado* which culminate in delusion differ less in tone than in sustained intensity. Both center on violated fidelity; real violation in the former, seeming violation in the latter. Whereas Claudio's delusion can be and is dispelled by exposing its contrived origin, Troilus' disillusionment, battening on mutability, corrodes faith in love and in valor. The implications of the action in the problem play are predominantly cynical largely because the amorous entanglements of Priam's sons are as costly to the walled Trojans as the bickering between the strategists and warriors is to the encamped Greeks. The oath of fealty, the Achilles tendon of the chivalric code, is stretched to the snapping point, no less by the deteriorating military alliances between the Greeks than by the amatory misalliances and political expediencies of the two willful Trojan princes.14

Troilus, enmeshed in his own casuistry, is first apostle and later victim of appetite; his own misalliance like his sophistic defence of Paris' stolen love is steeped in bitter irony. The *fine amour* of Troilus, abetted by Pandar, culminates in copulation and is interrupted by the fortunes of war. Separation imminent, Troilus insists upon iterated vows of eternal fidelity which the worldly-wise Cressida reluctantly swears. Later, after his unsuspected rival in turn appropriates Troilus' mistress, his love-tokens, and his charger, his love affair shatters into irrational disillusionment. Betrayed, in varying degrees, by Fortune, by Cressida, by Paris, and by his own rash words and acts, Troilus, seemingly impervious to death, hazards foolhardy valor.

Finally shocked out of the confines of the wish to die into the realm of Trojan survival by the murder of Hector, Troilus belatedly comes of age when he instinctively dons his slain brother's mantle by assuming leadership of a doomed nation. Seen in the light of pagan-humanism, the subsequent repudiation of Pandarus is an additional indication that Troilus, seasoned by ordeal, frees himself from the debilitating influence of Paris and dedicates his valor and his future to Hector's vision of enduring glory. Throughout the martial as well as throughout the extra-marital crises in this controversial play, character, dialogue, and incident fuse in an enigmatic atmosphere of cosmic irony which grows less oppressive in V.x, where Troilus' spirit soars above self-indulgence and adversity.15

The similarities between *Much Ado* and *Othello* (1604-1605) are more numerous than are those between any other comedy and tragedy in the entire Shakespeare canon. The exciting force in both plays is an alliance between virtue and valor which the villain intends to destroy by creating an illusion that the heroine is unchaste. In the comedy the first four scenes—in the tragedy the first three scenes—are treated as a prelude to the main action; a prelude in which the villain's initial attempt to create havoc fails. In both plays a strong-willed villain is substituted for the rival lover of the source. In both, the power of insinuation to engender, heighten, and sustain relatively flimsy ocular proof is stressed.

The process by which the villain dupes the gullible soldier-lover, the illusion by which faith is transformed into doubt, love into loathing, and pride into shame—is fundamentally the same in the two plays. The delusions of both bridegrooms—the recurrent lapses into soul-searing dichotomies, the tensions between emotion and will—are expressed in oxymoron. The heroine's inability to foresee and cope with the hero's change in attitude toward her is similar in kind, though in the tragedy increased in degree. Honor in each case is a compulsive force which incites the warrior-lover in the comedy to cruelty; in the tragedy, to crime. The cultural milieu, the philosophical, and ethical assumptions in *Much Ado, Troilus and Cressida, and Othello* are similar. In all three, the fallibility of the senses and the vulnerability of reason contribute to the mutability of fame and glory. Illusion, which shatters into metamorphosis and culminates in ironic disillusionment, characterizes the tone of the climax in *Much Ado*, the falling action of *Othello*, and almost the entire action of *Troilus and Cressida*.
Notes


2. A preliminary version of this article was presented in a paper read at the MLA [Modern Language Association], Sept., 1949.


6. Charles T. Prouty, *The Sources of Much Ado About Nothing* … (New Haven, Conn., 1950). The “lost” text of Peter Beverley's adaptation from the *Orlando Furioso* is here reprinted for the first time—pp. 76-140.

7. See G. L. Kittredge's notes on cuckoldry, p. 133 *et passim*.

8. Curtis Brown Watson, *Shakespeare and the Renaissance Concept of Honor* (Princeton, 1960): “much modern Shakespeare criticism reveals, on many key points of ‘interpretation’, … historical ignorance … [and] a basic lack of sympathy with Renaissance pagan-humanist values in general and Shakespeare in particular … our critics are often insufficiently aware of their own preconceptions and of the many respects in which our democratic ideals in the 20th century basically contradict the aristocratic assumptions of Elizabethan society” (p. 9 *et passim*).


10. Cf. C. T. Prouty, *Sources*—friendship is reduced to “a conventional tag”, p. 9 *et passim*.

See Kittredge on “image magic” (p. 119, l. 187). Combining his suggestion of literal black magic with the more obvious implication of metaphorical witchcraft explains why Claudio momentarily envisions Hero as a Medea, and instinctively rejects her. Perhaps he recalls that his knowing friend Benedick, wary of Beatrice, compared her to the “the infernal Ate in good apparel” (II.i.263).

11. Despite varied explanations of Claudio's motive for rejecting Hero before the altar, most critics still agree that the repudiation is unforgivably cruel, and that his repentance is an inadequate atonement for his offence. Professor Prouty argues that Claudio, a realistic not a romantic lover, needs no apology for publicly rejecting a damaged bride who apparently defrauds him, since his was merely a “mariage de convenance” (*Sources*, p. 46)—“essentially a business arrangement” (p. 50). Conversely, Miss Dorothy C. Hockey points out that *Much Ado* loses “meaning” if we assume with Miss Nadine Page (“The Public Repudiation of Hero”, *PMLA [Publications of the Modern Language Association of America]*, L (1935), 739-744) and Professor Prouty “that Claudio is merely making a typical realistic Elizabethan marriage …” (Citation from Miss Hockey). If depicted as a mercenary not a romantic lover, why should Claudio grieve at the idea of a stolen Hero? “Why should he sing romantically at her tomb and promise to repeat the rite each year? “Notes, Notes, Forsooth …,” *SQ, Shakespeare Quarterly* VIII (1957), 356, n. 10. For a cogent critique of Prouty's *Sources*, for insights into Shakespeare's alterations of Ariosto, Bandello, et al., and for a novel apology—see Kerby Neill, “More Ado About Claudio: An Acquittal for the Slandered Groom,” *SQ* III (1952), 91-107.

12. For recent comment on the wit of Benedick and Beatrice see G. K. Hunter, *Shakespeare: The Late Comedies* (London, 1962), pp. 22, 26-32. For a more comprehensive discussion see A. P. Rossiter, *Angel With Horns* … (London, 1916). His pertinent comparison of “Wit with nitwit” is focused on the “linguistic mishaps and semantic excesses of Dogberry,” p. 70 *et passim*. His distinctions between quibble and relevant wit (pp. 68-69), and his theory of “two-eyedness” (a facet of word-play) as the
source of the serio-comic is stimulating (p. 62 et passim).


15. Our reading of V.x is partially anticipated in a generally ignored footnote in The Art and Life of *William Shakespeare* by Hazleton Spencer (New York, 1940): “Troilus does not fail; Cressida fails him, but that failure rather strengthens the fibre of his nature, as Coleridge saw, so that ... after the death of Hector he comes forward as the leader of the Trojans. (“Troilus and Cressida,” London Times Literary Supplement, May 19, 1932, pp. 357-358.)”—p. 409, n. 1.

**Criticism: Themes: Steven Rose (essay date April 1970)**


*In the following essay, Rose argues that in Much Ado about Nothing, Shakespeare offered some serious and often somber observations on the nature of love.*

Is *Much Ado* really ‘about’ nothing? The throw-away title—like that of its immediate successor *As You Like It*, or the sub-title *What You Will* to the third of this central group of comedies—is surely more a challenge to the audience to think of a better one than a proclamation of the play's own triviality. Whatever Beatrice, who could see a church by daylight, may prove to symbolise by her realism, she is not a nobody. And Benedick has an equivalent stature.

The plot of *Much Ado About Nothing*, as has often been pointed out, revolves around ‘hearsay’:

> Is little Cupid's crafty arrow made,  
> That only wounds by hearsay.

Through hearsay Leonato is led to believe that Don Pedro is seeking Hero's hand; and later Claudio believes this of his friend too. Beatrice and Benedick are both tricked into believing the other in love with them. Through Don John's machinations Claudio and Don Pedro first think Hero is faithless and then, through the Friar's, that she is dead. Ironically, hearsay also provides the solution to both plots: the Watch overhear the details of Don John's conspiracy in the one and in the other two love-sonnets addressed to each other stolen from the pair (a kind of hearsay) finally link Beatrice and Benedick. This structure is, I think, central to an understanding of the play. For, like most of Shakespeare's comedies, *Much Ado* is About Love. And, as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the way in which the lovers swap partners is both comical and at the same time a comment on the essentially arbitrary nature of human passion, so here where love and hatred are governed by another kind of magic juice—hearsay—the plot carries with it a similarly serious comment. It is this which I propose to examine.

At the beginning of the play we are presented with two pairs of protagonists whose relationships are apparently clearly defined: Claudio and Hero are in love and Beatrice and Benedick are at war. This at any rate is the situation as we see it by the end of the masked ball. It is in a sense the romantic conception of love, which permits only love or enmity and nothing in between—a situation akin to that found in the opening scenes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Moreover these passions and antipathies are presented as spontaneous and inevitable: Beatrice and Benedick never meet ‘but there's a skirmish of wit between them’; and Claudio, though he has been away to the wars, still finds his original liking for Hero as strong as ever. Instead of thoughts of battle,
Come thronging soft and delicate desires
All prompting me how fair young Hero is,
Saying, I liked her ere I went to wars.

To this conventional view, however, Shakespeare has already inserted several important qualifications. First of all, Hero has been wooed by proxy. That is to say her love has partly been governed by another man's interpretation of Claudio's affection. It is in fact a kind of hearsay. We know it to have been important in affecting her decision because a little while earlier she was actually prepared for a proposal from Don Pedro. Secondly, Claudio's love is also qualified by the way in which at a word from Don John he suspects his friend Don Pedro of having wooed on his own behalf—thus preparing the audience for his graver suspicion later on of disloyalty in Hero herself. His affection, we see, is easily dislodged by vanity and injured pride. And love that can be moved by vanity is perhaps based on vanity. Thus what Shakespeare has done here is subtly to have undermined our belief in romantic love. From a view of it as something essentially spontaneous and ineluctable love is being shown here to depend on the vision we have of our beloved through the eyes of others. The implications of this I shall discuss in a moment.

Now at first sight Beatrice and Benedick will seem to present a parallel to all this. For just as Claudio and Hero are parted through hearsay, so Beatrice and Benedick are united by similar means. And (ironically) vanity, though it is viewed in acomic light, plays a large part in this plot also. Throughout the gulling of Benedick the conspirators constantly stress Beatrice's sufferings and at the same time praise Benedick's virtue (except in pitying her distress), all of which is nicely calculated to appeal to his very considerable male vanity. In Beatrice's case the emphasis is laid more on her pride than on Benedick's sufferings; in their verbal exchanges she had perhaps been the crueler of the two and would possibly have more to repent. She is also a little less vain:

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.

Yet this too is double-edged. Will she love him because she loves him, or simply in order to live up to an image she would have of herself? It is a question posed by both Beatrice and Benedick in their different ways.

The implications of all this, if true—and for the moment I only want to argue the more sombre aspects—are disturbing. Shakespeare has apparently undermined not only our notions of romantic love but in a sense our notions of the integrity of the human personality. If at the beginning of A Midsummer Night's Dream someone had told Demetrius that before the night was out he would utter sighs of love for one whom he now spurned, like Beatrice or Benedick he would have laughed the person to scorn. And Lysander like Claudio would have found it impossible to believe that within a short space of time his beloved could appear hateful to him. Yet it was so. Which, then, was the true Demetrius—the one that loved or the one that scorned? Which the true Claudio? The true Beatrice or Benedick? Is there one? If not, love is a fiction. For a marriage of true minds implies two whole and distinct personalities, distinct both in themselves and from each other—otherwise what would they have to offer each other? In Much Ado About Nothing, however, the characters seem to be in love, not with their partners, but with convenient and fickle images of them presented by others. In Twelfth Night Orsino and Olivia suffer from a like sickness, only they are in love with images they have created for themselves. But the effect is the same in either case: subject and object merge, the beloved becomes simply an extension of the lover, to accord with his fantasies. Soon there is only self and self-love.

A deeper and more sombre exploration of this theme is to be found in a play which bears certain striking affinities to Much Ado—the domestic tragedy of Othello. The similarity is not simply one of plot, but more interestingly of the discrepancies in plot. In both cases, we note, use is made of a somewhat unconvincing
innocent accomplice (Margaret and Emilia) and in both plays the heroine could not possibly have had the opportunity to commit the acts of continuous infidelity, the ‘thousand times’ (both Claudio and Othello use the phrase), of which they are accused. Now these ‘errors’ are significant because the less convincing the plot (from the victims’ point of view as well as ours), the less easy it is either to understand or forgive Claudio’s or Othello’s being deceived. Is not the readiness, then, with which they believe the charges an important comment on the nature of jealousy and indeed of love? What Shakespeare is saying is that a man whose love can be destroyed so easily by jealousy is not, as Othello seems to believe, one ‘that loved too well’, but rather one who never loved at all. We can imagine Othello at the end denying such a charge with an almost despairing vehemence, and pointing by way of proof to his burning forehead, his raging heart, as if to say—What is the cause of this if not love? That, however, is the appeal of the emotionalist, who would judge the truth of any passion by the extent of the agitations within the lover rather than by the constancy with which the passion attaches itself to and draws inspiration from the beloved. But, as Socrates proves in Plato’s Symposium, love which is not directed towards some demonstrable ideal cannot be said to exist; or, more exactly, that love devoid of any external object is necessarily only self-love. This is Othello’s case (and indeed the case of Claudio and Orsino too). After all, if someone whose word we have no immediate reason to suspect slanders a loved one, in what are we to put our trust? The only answer, surely, is in our knowledge of the beloved. Othello could never have known Desdemona and therefore could never have loved her. She existed for him only within the realm of his fancy, just perhaps as the Othello she saw was an Othello of her imagination—a man whom she married ‘for the dangers he had passed.’ There was never really any point of contact between them. Desdemona’s final ‘Commend me to my kind lord,’ seen as any sort of judgment on her husband, is as absurd as Othello’s ‘she was a whore.’ As to Claudio and Hero, the possibility of mutual knowledge or love between two partners who literally address no more than twenty-odd words to each other during the whole course of the play is inconceivable. Thus the implication is that in neither case did the plotters, or Shakespeare, need to have to imagine any very elaborate scheme in order to part the lovers: they had only ever been united in each other’s imaginations and an image has only as much resistance to calumny as its owner wishes to give it, changing from god to devil in an instant.1

Othello’s jealousy is, of course, insane and monstrous. Yet the fact that so pure a creature as Desdemona shows signs of a similar divorce from reality would indicate that Shakespeare’s insights in this respect are of wider application than to the merely abnormal. Freud himself warns us that ‘the state of being in love threatens to obliterate the boundaries between the ego and the object.’ The problem, then, must be to obtain a relationship at once close and loving but where the partners still preserve their own separate identities. For to guard this jealously in oneself is to respect it in the other person. Only in such a way is it assured that the partners will love each other for what they really are—which can be the only lasting motive for love—and not out of a desire for self-aggrandisement, the inevitable corollary once the ego begins to subordinate the object of its passion to any purely personal consideration. This last can take many forms. Among them, of particular importance in the present discussion, we have to include the desire, however sincere, to love someone because we believe that they love us. What is being advocated, then, although it would appear a kind of contradiction in terms, is the idea of disinterested love. But how can we find a formula for such a proposition?

We have to turn back, I think, to Much Ado About Nothing and in particular to Beatrice and Benedick. Now the first thing to note is that their attachment was never really a result of the conspiracy. Don Pedro and the others go off well pleased with their efforts but in fact, as most audiences realise, the pair had been on the verge of love from the beginning. The very first person that Beatrice inquires after on hearing of the army’s return is Benedick, albeit with the usual irony:

I pray you, is Signor Mountanto returned from the wars or no?

It soon becomes evident from their verbal exchanges that the pair take an uncommon delight in being rude to each other. Only as in all lovers’ games it is easy to overstep the bounds of mere play: thus when Beatrice
takes advantage of the masked ball to say a number of particularly cruel things to Benedick he is genuinely hurt—‘O she misused me past the endurance of a block … She speaks poniards and every word stabs.’ In fact the pair are rather afraid of each other and conceal their true feelings only lest the other should take advantage of the slightest sign of vulnerability to pour scorn on them. So in the end the plotters did not have an awful lot of work to do. Only a word was really necessary to break down the defensive wall that had been set up between them. Indeed Benedick's very eagerness to be ‘tricked’ as he rationalises away all his previous objections is one of the most amusing things in the play:

When I said I would die a bachelor I did not think I should live till I were married.

What conclusions can be drawn from all this? Well, we know that true love has not after all been tampered with. The bond between Beatrice and Benedick is something genuine and not merely a fabrication resulting from an appeal to vanity on both sides—the vanity of believing that one is the object of love. However, in order to provide a sufficient counterweight to the darker implications of the Claudio-Hero plot (which despite the happy ending are never entirely dispelled) we must know precisely in what the genuineness of this relationship consists, we must see it in action. The crucial scene here, I think, is that in which Beatrice persuades Benedick to defend her cousin's honour and challenge Claudio. In particular, her impassioned outburst against the latter is especially revealing:

Is he 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-places.

But the point is, she is not a man. She needs a man. Only Benedick is capable of tearing Claudio's heart out in the market-place. Here, perhaps, is our formula for a disinterested love—need. In the past Beatrice had always asserted that she was independent, that when she went to heaven St. Peter would show her the place ‘where the bachelors sit’ and there she would live in perfect contentment. Yet suddenly she is confronted by a situation to which her own resources are entirely inadequate. A woman cannot fight for the honour of her cousin. It is this situation more than anything else which provides the turning point in her relationship with Benedick, and clarifies its true nature. She loves him, we see, not because they told her he was desperate for her, or because, like Desdemona, she has created a world of fantasy around her lover which she wishes to enjoy vicariously, or because she wants someone to whom to sacrifice herself, or for any of the thousand other self-regarding and ultimately disastrous motives for love; she loves him because he is a man, because he is Benedick, the person in the world whom she knows and wants and needs. Such a need is not egocentric because it is not something which can be thought of as existing apart from Benedick. It is he who has created the need. The external situation merely brings home to Beatrice the fact that a woman can never truly be sufficient unto herself. Similarly Benedick's need of Beatrice is stressed by the fact that rather than lose her love he is prepared to challenge even his best friend. In this last there is even something a little sinister. But then a love-pact of its nature excludes the rest of the world.

The play closes thematically with the episode of the stolen love-sonnets. Here, like the name of an evil demon chanted backwards to destroy his power, hearsay is presented in an inverted guise and thus its ghost finally laid to rest. As before the lovers are influenced in their relationship by the reports of a third party but this time those reports are merely reproductions of their own inmost feelings. The decision that they should fall in love was taken by no one but themselves. Cupid's bow, belying the initial quotation, has after all struck directly, mysteriously.

Notes
The last stage in this aggrandisement of the self, that reached by Othello, is the point where fantasy begins to intrude upon and actually replace external reality, involving a complete loss of personality. The ego no longer having anything outside itself by which to judge and measure itself begins to lose all sense of identity. The self-dramatising tone of Othello's last speeches—is there not a parallel in Claudio's rather melodramatic funeral rites at Hero's tomb?—can thus be interpreted as the tragic attempt of a man in whom all sense of personal identity has been destroyed (which is the true Othello—the one that loved or the one that murdered?) to construct a personality for himself, or at least one that will satisfy his audience. Ironically enough, in this last respect, up to the present century at any rate, he has had a fair measure of success.

1. Freud, Civilisation and its Discontents.

Criticism: Themes: Thomas W. Ross (essay date 1972)


In the following essay, Ross compares Much Ado about Nothing to Shakespeare's problem plays and notes the play's elements of disharmony and ethical ambiguity. Ross contends, however, that the play is not a failure, but “succeeds brilliantly in conveying its bitter-sweet power.”

Critics have never accepted Much Ado as a problem play—or as a forerunner of the Last Plays, the romances or tragi-comedies. Yet if we are made aware of this drama's affinities with these kinds of play, we can understand and enjoy it more readily. We can balance extravagant critical pronouncements about it—as, for instance, that it is a “wedding of love and humor”\(^1\) and thus is like most of the comedies of the 1590's; or that it is a peculiarly “venomous play” with its distinctive “foul odor.”\(^2\)

In its ambiguous effects, it is akin to the problem plays; in its ritual movement—though Shakespeare chooses not to develop this idea—it is like the romances. Much Ado is a problem play because it conveys to us a sense of ethical imbalance; and, instead of fulfillment through ritual (the theme of the Last Plays), it offers only “maimed rites.”\(^3\)

Despite some confusion about the nature of the problem play, we can find considerable agreement among the scholars. Boas identified the theme as the “weakness, levity, and unbridled passion of young men.”\(^4\) Tillyard agreed, adding that the central action is “a young man gets a shock.”\(^5\) He also found that a major motif in such plays was the relationship between the “old and new generations”; the young characters are “forcibly brought to maturity in the course of the play”; and the “business that most promotes this process of growth is transacted at night” (p. 9). Summing it all up, Lawrence saw that the problem-play situation permits “different ethical interpretations” (p. 4).

Lawrence's words describe what I have called “ethical imbalance.” In Much Ado it starts with the outrage aroused by Claudio's epithet for his bride-to-be, Hero—"rotten orange” (IV. i. 33; 1689).\(^6\) And there is no alleviation of our sense of shock as the play progresses. It is not fair that this despicable puppy should have a second chance and be awarded Hero again. There are obviously parallel injustices in All's Well, Measure for Measure, and Troilus.

Following the Lawrence-cum-Tillyard formula further, we find that Much Ado is indeed a play about the old and new generations, as Tillyard says a problem play should be. The confrontation between youth and age comes to a climax in the pathetic encounter between the old men, Leonato and Antonio, and the “fashion-monging boys” (V. i. 94; 2181), Pedro and Claudio.
All four lovers are compelled to “grow-up”—and Hero’s maturation is described as a rebirth. The “business” which promotes Claudio’s growth (such as it is) is of course the ritual scene in the church (V. iii), which does take place at night. Though Tillyard did not comment on the importance of a nocturnal setting, it may be observed that it establishes the dark-to-light movement which, along with parallel patterns like winter-summer and death-life, is common in Shakespeare’s comedies and not just in the “problem” plays. In *Much Ado*, however, the “light” at the end of Act V is dimmed by the unconcern of those who were injured in Act IV.

If we expect a tidy gratification of our need for poetic justice, *Much Ado* will not do. It satisfies us in ways which are not those of the happy comedies like *As You Like It* or *Twelfth Night*. In *Much Ado* there is a disharmony among the three major sets of characters, even though Shakespeare knits them carefully together. They are Hero and Claudio; Beatrice and Benedick; and Dogberry, Verges, and the Watch. One need not even consider the obviously discordant misanthropes, Borachio, Conrade, and the villainous Don John, who at the end of the play remains unpunished.

The first group of characters, the romantic young lovers, seems at first to fulfill all the traditions of sentimental wooing. They fall in love at first sight. There is a barrier to their love (Don Pedro seems to woo Hero for himself—II. i. 169-181; 569-580), but the obstacle quickly disappears and they rush to church as fast as decency permits. The bridegroom complains, like Theseus in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and a dozen others, “Time goes on crutches till love have all his rites” (II. i. 372-373; 752-753). Then until they are actually before the altar in the presence of Friar Francis all is conventional smooth sailing.

The incomparable Beatrice and Benedick provide a contrasting theme of a kind which is almost as familiar as the boy-gets-boy-loses-boy-gets pattern set up for Hero and Claudio: it resembles the Berowne *et al.* theme in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. Here the two sworn enemies to the blind bow-boy find out too late that they have been tricked into betrothal. Both themes turn a little sour—that of the young lovers and that of the older and more worldly Beatrice and Benedick.

Dogberry and his simple cohorts are mechanically necessary to the plot. As Borachio admits, “What your wisdoms could not discover, these shallow fools have brought to light” (V. i. 238-240; 2314-2316). They must discover Don John’s guile and in their maddeningly slow and malapropistic way disclose it so that Hero can be rehabilitated and Benedick will not have to carry through with his challenge to Claudio. Leonato ridicules them mercilessly, but they are stupidly unaware of it. Though I should not like to press the point, I might suggest that the “ugliness” of this episode parallels the humiliation of Hero and the discomfort of Beatrice and Benedick.

Leonato tells Dogberry and the rest, “Neighbors, you are tedious” (III. v. 20; 1613). They discover Hero’s innocence, but too late. She is “dead” and we cannot forget her stricken silence in the church—or the bitterness in Benedick’s challenge to his old comrade in arms. Benedick himself seems to have forgotten it as the play comes to an end, and Claudio never was much affected by it—both responses which are of considerable significance, as I shall point out later on.

Shakespeare thus provides mechanical links among all three parts of the plot. There are other unifying devices—less evident, perhaps, but nonetheless significant. All three lines of movement depend upon mistaken appearances and eavesdropping; and, despite the confusion present in all three threads of plot, they thrust forward to the recognition of identity and regenerative festivity which typify Shakespearean comedy.

Actually Shakespeare works out the structure very neatly and the apparent discords seem to be resolved. But before the harmonies of Act V are sounded, there are those disturbing moments which one cannot forget, no matter how melodious the denouement. They center upon Claudio’s character and behavior. We are not reassured when critics tell us that the “Claudio-Hero plot has light entertainment as its object.” Neither in Shakespeare’s day nor in ours have audiences been so callous as to find amusement in the public humiliation
and apparent death of an innocent and lively girl. Nor can we laugh at Beatrice's "Kill Claudio" (IV. i. 291; 1952) or at the brilliant portrayal of controlled ferocity and guffawing incredulity among the three blasé friends, Benedick, Claudio, and Don Pedro (V. i. 111 ff.; 2200 ff.). The latter two are shown—here and elsewhere in the play—as bored aristocrats to whom everything is a joke. Don Pedro can hardly believe that Benedick is in earnest (197; 2279). He thinks that it is all too, too silly. But we are not amused.

The parallels with All's Well—which has been pretty well established as a problem play—are obvious. Helena is humiliated publicly, and Bertram, like Claudio, fails to win our respect, even though he gets the heroine in Act V. Parolles is humiliated too (somewhat like Dogberry), in a movement parallel with the Bertram-Helena action; however, he recognizes his weaknesses and descants upon them with a disarming candor which is of course quite beyond the Constable and the members of the Watch.

Both Much Ado and All's Well exhibit that ethical ambiguity which is a hallmark of the problem play. Just as this ambiguity is centered on Bertram in the later play, so too it depends upon Claudio, his counterpart in Much Ado. Don John's opinion of the young soldier and lover is of course colored by his prejudices. Still, his sneers should alert us: "the most exquisite Claudio" and "a proper squire" (I. iii. 52, 54; 389, 391) are bitterly ironic, but they are right. As judgments of the protagonist's character they are confirmed by Beatrice's shrewd and annoyed "Count Comfect, a sweet gallant, surely" (IV. i. 318-319; 1978). Even if we regard Claudio "historically"—that is, as a realistic Elizabethan patrician—and defend his callous inquiry about Hero's financial prospects, we are still aware, as Frye puts it, that:

Claudio becomes engaged to Hero without also engaging his loyalty; he retains the desire to be rid of her if there should be inconvenience in the arrangement, and this desire acts precisely like a humor, blinding him to the obvious facts of the situation. In his second marriage ceremony, he pledges his loyalty first, before he has seen the bride, and this relieves him from his humorous bondage.

(p. 81)

Though we should probably disagree about Claudio's being a "humour" character, these remarks put the finger on his moral flabbiness. He is "prim and shallow"—or worse. We may well compare him with the Claudio in Measure for Measure or with Bertram, the "proud scornful boy" in All's Well (II. iii. 158; 1054).

This comparison of Claudio and Bertram reveals the similarities between the two problem plays. Now as we turn to the parallels between Much Ado and the romances, we find that they are mainly associated with Hero. Frye gives us a clue (without, however, observing that Much Ado foreshadows the late, romances):

In Much Ado we have the same theme of calumniation [as that in Terence's Hecyra], but Shakespeare has put it in something much closer to a primitive society by suggesting so strongly that Hero actually dies and revives in the play.

After Hero's calumniation, Friar Francis persuades Leonato to agree to the "dead Hero" ruse, promising "on this travail look for greater birth" (IV. i. 215; 1877); he encourages the humiliated child with "Come, lady, die to live" (255; 1918). It is obvious that the great theme of regeneration which Shakespeare develops in all his romances is also played, in prelude form, in Much Ado. Marina, Imogen, and most clearly Hermione, Perdita, and Miranda—all share in this stirring movement from death to birth.

However, the Last Plays are based on the dual theme of regeneration and forgiveness. Hermione (The Winter's Tale, III. ii. 124; 1303) speaks of "pity, not revenge" and in The Tempest Prospero pardons his enemies (V. i. 78; 2034). In these plays the sacrifice of innocence has its hoped-for effect. The ritual movement from evil-doing through recognition to atonement touches the lives of all the other characters in the romances and
they are the better for it. The tempest purges and makes everyone more fully themselves, when their lives had
previously been incompletely realized (cf. *The Tempest*, V. i. 212-213; 2194-2195).

The same great theme is initiated in *Much Ado About Nothing* but—oh, the pity of it!—it has no effect.
Though Claudio learns the truth, it does not arouse remorse or penitence in him. Instead he offers a glib
excuse for his inexcusable brutality: “Yet sinned I not / But in mistaking” (V. i. 284-285; 2358-2359) and
speaks of himself as “poor Claudio” (305: 2381). Shakespeare has previously sounded this disagreeable note
of self-pity in the earlier scene where Hero's father Leonato accepts his daughter's guilt without demur and can
do nothing but speak of the dishonor to himself (IV. i. 122 ff.; 1783 ff.).

In the romances, supernatural powers (e.g., Apollo in *The Winter's Tale*) often set in motion the ritual of
forgiveness and atonement. In *Much Ado*, however, the ritual scene (V. iii.; 2521-2553) is scanted—a paltry
thing. In 33 lines, Claudio recites his expiatory verses (confused doggerel they are, too); calls for a hymn; and
is ready to change into his finery for the second wedding. No god appears. Instead there are perfunctory
allusions to Diana, Phoebus, and Hymen. The ceremony is as mechanical and casual as the turning of a
prayer-wheel—progressing, all too smoothly, from the idea of Hero's chastity (Diana); to the promise of
morning (Phoebus) after the “night” of the heroine's humiliation; and then to the sacrament of marriage
(Hymen).

What disturbs us is that Claudio never says, “I ask your pardon” (contrast Leontes, for instance, in *The
Winter's Tale*, V. iii. 147; 3361). Further, Benedick never begs pardon of Claudio, nor does Claudio implore
forgiveness of his sworn brother. Hero's placidity is worst of all. We certainly do not want her to be
self-righteous, but we anticipate the expression of some feelings about her denunciation and “death.” Yet
Shakespeare denies us this gratification. All we get is a paradox in sing-song iambics:

One Hero died defiled, but I do live,
And surely as I live, I am a maid.

(V. iv. 63-64; 2621-2622)

Perhaps we are to understand that she tacitly forgives Claudio. If so, his reaction is all the more
appalling—astonishment but no remorse.

Hero's sacrifice of her virginity in the second marriage does not release the “contained” or “controlled
energy”18 which is the latent power within it. Even Parolles in *All's Well* acknowledges this power.
Characteristically, as he sees it, the force is unleashed only when the *virgo intacta* ceases to exist:

There's little can be said in 't. 'Tis against the rule of nature. … Virginity murders itself and
should be buried in highways out of all sanctified limit, as a desperate offendress against
nature. … Besides, virginity is peevish, proud, idle, made of self-love, which is the most
inhibited sin in the canon. Keep it not. You cannot choose but lose by 't!

(I. i. 148 ff.; 140 ff.)

Helena, to whom these words are addressed, releases the energy of her virginity through the “bed trick,” and
Bertram is, in some measure, restored thereby. But Hero's sacrifice of her maidenhood touches no one, not
even herself. The “sanctimonious ceremonies” which make up the last two acts of *The Tempest* (see IV. i. 16;
1668) are ignored in *Much Ado*. Shakespeare does not bring into action those healing powers which can be
liberated through ritual.
Much Ado amuses and distresses us. It is a distress which we can identify as similar to that aroused by the other problem plays—a discomfiture aroused by an incompletely developed romance of tragi-comedy. This is the effect for which Shakespeare was striving. The inequities leave us puzzled and pained, just as they do when we read its sister-plays—Measure for Measure, All's Well, and Troilus. Puzzlement does not mean that the drama has failed, however. As a combination of problem and romance, it succeeds brilliantly in conveying its bitter-sweet power.

The ceremony of innocence is drowned, as in Yeats' poem. Rites are maimed. Though the sacrifice is punctiliously performed, no matter "how ceremonious, solemn, and unearthly / It was i' the offering," it does not have the anticipated effect (cf. The Winter's Tale, III. i. 7-8; 1153-1154). The rites in Much Ado are marriages and a ritual of atonement. The personages involved ignore them, almost entirely. Life is not often like The Tempest or, for that matter, like As You Like It. Sometimes it is a combination of unresolved discordant ingredients like gaiety and cruelty, and these make up the subject matter of Much Ado About Nothing.

Notes

2. E. J. West, “Much Ado About An Unpleasant Play,” *Shakespeare Association Bulletin*, XXI (1946), 30, 34. Among the few scholars to take the play seriously, though they do not identify it as a problem play or describe its parallels with the romances, are Paul and Miriam Mueschke, “Illusion and Metamorphosis in Much Ado About Nothing,” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, XVIII (1967), 53-65. They find that it has more in common with Troilus and Cressida and Othello than with As You Like It, “with which it is generally associated” (p. 64).
3. Since 1896 when F. S. Boas coined the term “problem play,” those critics who have found the concept useful have agreed that under the rubric should be included All's Well, Measure, and Troilus. To these Boas added Hamlet. W. W. Lawrence, *Shakespeare's Problem Comedies* (New York, 1931), and E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's Problem Plays* (New York, 1964), followed suit. In *The Problem Plays of Shakespeare* (New York, 1963), Ernest Schanzer retained Measure but found that it had closer affinities with Julius Caesar and Antony and Cleopatra than with the other “traditional” problem plays.
4. Quoted in Schanzer, p. 188.
5. P. 6. In an acrimonious review of Tillyard's book, Derek Traversi, “Academic Criticism Today,” *Scrutiny*, XVII (1950-1951), 181, claimed that it failed to identify the “characteristic modes of expression which differentiate these plays, by their possession of common qualities, from the rest of Shakespeare's production.” But is Traversi's own definition better? See An Approach to Shakespeare (New York, 1956), pp. 61, 62: “From the point of view of Shakespeare's developing dramatic art, [the problem plays] show a notable concentration on two related problems—the consistent presentation of character and the projection into a coherent dramatic pattern of complex states of experience. … All these plays are concerned, each after its own fashion, with the effort to arrive at some kind of personal order in a world dominated by contradiction and obscurity.” Such bland remarks could apply to Lear as well as to Prometheus Bound or The Bald Soprano.
6. All Shakespeare references are from the Complete Works, ed. G. B. Harrison (New York, 1952); following the conventional references are numbers indicating the Through Line Numbering System of *The Norton Facsimile: The First Folio of Shakespeare*, ed. Charlton Hinman (New York, 1968), as explained on p. xxiv of that edition.
7. William G. McCollom, “The Role of Wit in Much Ado About Nothing,” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, XIX (1968), 165, observes the apparent disunity (“the main strands of action do not at first seem very well joined”) but finds that unity is achieved through wit, which is “organic” (166). Charles T. Prouty, *The Sources of Much Ado About Nothing* (New Haven, 1950), states that through his “creative reinterpretation of his sources” and the “recurrent device of overhearing Shakespeare secures a unity
of tone, exactly as he had secured a unity of idea by emphasizing the essential realism of the characters in both plots” (pp. 16, 64).
11. At a recent London performance the audience did laugh nervously at “Kill Claudio.” They were not schoolboys (often one's fellow spectators at English Shakespeare performances) but adults—probably tourists. Their response may have been naive, but it did betray the fact that the line arouses emotion: the uncomfortable giggle was their way of expressing shocked outrage. Like most people, they were not familiar with the play or with Shakespeare's problem comedies generally. The alarming words took them by surprise. In a more recent television production, the great Maggie Smith spoke the lines with appropriate seriousness and menace. However, half the cast spoke dialect, sounding like Sicilian gangsters, and Don John was played as a leering buffoon in Regency costume. The director thus achieved a fair consistency of tone (frenetic gaiety) but only by doing violence to Shakespeare's poetry.
12. Lawrence, p. 4. In dealing with Troilus, Traversi speaks of the “emotional ambiguity” in that problem play (An Approach, p. 63). I think he means the same thing as I do by my “ethical ambiguity” or “imbalance.”
13. Kerby Neill, “More Ado About Claudio: An Acquittal for the Slandered Groom,” Shakespeare Quarterly, III (1952), 91, calls him “a realistic young Elizabethan seeking a good match according to the mercenary standards of his age.” Barbara Everett, “Much Ado About Nothing” in Essays in Shakespeare Criticism, ed. J. L. Calderwood and H. E. Toliver (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1970), p. 279, says that he is making his choice on the basis of “female good looks plus paternal income.” These and other critics naturally draw parallels between Claudio and Bassanio in The Merchant of Venice. They go on to point out that Benedick is similarly venal when he says that if he should ever marry, “rich she shall be” (II. iii. 31; 861-862). However, Benedick is not talking about Beatrice here; the love affair has not yet begun. Prouty, p. 51, insists upon the “historical” reading, while admitting that Much Ado comes dangerously close to the problem plays All's Well and Measure for Measure. However, he will not admit the play to the category because it involves “the non-serious presentation of a realistic situation” instead of “the serious presentation of the same thing.” He admits that the denunciation is “unpleasant and even brutal” to the modern reader, but “to Shakespeare's audience, fully cognizant of arranged marriages, there was no such reaction” (p. 62). He does not deal with Benedick's challenge as a piece of serious and ugly realism.
14. Smith, p. 244.
16. In “Much Ado About Something,” Shakespeare Quarterly, XV (1964), 152, Walter N. King observes: “Friar Francis' scheme is equally ineffectual with Claudio and Don Pedro.” McCollom, p. 167, adds Margaret to those untouched by the horrifying events: “After the rejection of her mistress, we see [her] enjoying herself in a bawdy dialogue with Benedick, for all the world as if it were still Act I.” Denzell D. Smith, “The Command ‘Kill Claudio’ in Much Ado About Nothing,” English Language Notes, IV (1967), 183, observes that “The command makes clear that love is a powerful agent for virtue” and asserts that “it works to secure honor and truth.” There is really no basis for this claim: the challenge of Claudio by Benedick does not “secure” anything for any of the characters in the play.
17. The Mueschkes, p. 62, claim that the recantation scene has “lyrical intensity” as a “requiem masque”; I deny the first (a matter of interpretation of the tone of the poetry, I suppose) and I do not understand the second.
[In the following essay, Dawson discusses how messages and their interpretation (or, more often, misinterpretation) not only propel the plot in Much Ado about Nothing, but also act as signs, or clues, to the play's major themes.]

Thinking about Shakespeare's Much Ado About Nothing led me to thinking about messages and the process of interpretation imposed by the delivery of messages. The play takes up this perfectly ordinary, everyday activity and subjects it to comic scrutiny. In doing so, the play highlights the act of message-sending itself, as well as the subsequent act of interpretation or, more often, misinterpretation. The characters certainly make much ado about such acts, which are indeed a kind of "nothing," if we regard nothing in a paradoxically active sense, as a free form, an act liberated from content. The title's well known pun on "noting" coalesces with this sense of "nothing": observing, and the interpretation that goes with it, becomes not only an action that impels the plot, but the very subject of the play, the nothing about which there is, indeed, much ado. A sentence in Barthes's Sade/Fourier/Loyola is appropriate here: "I listen to the message's transport, not the message." "Transport" (emportement) carries the double sense of the act of delivery and the delight (for the spectator) attendant upon that act. For us who contemplate Much Ado, the pleasure resides in the transport rather than the content of messages, and the world the play creates is one in which attention is directed as much to the way meaning is produced as to what the meaning is.

The play begins with news, with a messenger. All plays begin with news of some sort; they have to tell us something in order to get us started. but Much Ado, unlike most plays by Shakespeare, begins with a messenger actually bringing news from somewhere else. We could say, for one thing, that this opening schematizes the dramatist's need to provide us with initial information. But the messenger does more. He poses the problem of reliable meaning, of interpretation. We know this only in retrospect, once we have become familiar with the multiplicity and ambiguity of messages that this play contains. But at the very outset, both characters and audience receive and assess news, and are thus put in the same structural position that they will be in throughout the play. In general, language, as a system of messages, is consistently, comically, called into question: further messages are intercepted, misinterpreted, overheard in a variety of ways that move the plot forward and pose problems of interpretation for the characters.

Eavesdropping is, in fact, a favored form of activity in this play, even more than it is in Hamlet. Theatrically, the play offers its audience the dominant, recurrent spectacle of one character, or group of characters, overhearing another group, and interpreting, re-interpreting, or misinterpreting what has been seen or heard. The pervasiveness and fallibility of such activity are first suggested by Antonio in the second scene when he describes how his man "overheard" how "The Prince discovered to Claudio that he loved my niece your daughter" (I.ii.9-11). In the next scene, Borachio tells Don John how he has overheard the Prince and Claudio "in sad conference" (unlike Antonio's man, he gets his facts almost right). Later, Borachio is in his turn overheard by the Watch, whose comic misinterpretations nevertheless yield accurate results. Benedick and Beatrice eavesdrop on their friends and are won to each other by falsehood. Claudio and Pedro eavesdrop on "Hero" (offstage) and are also deceived by falsehood. They proclaim their plain truth (they are less cautious about the reliability of messages than Beatrice and Benedick), are equally plainly wrong, and are only dismissed into truth through being deceived once more by false report.

The central action of the play, then, is delivering messages, and we may start our investigation with a question about one of the most puzzling instances of this. Why does Claudio have Pedro do his wooing for him? This is
not a question about character or motivation. From that point of view, it seems easy to solve. An actor, of course, has to find an answer (Claudio is young, shy, inexperienced or whatever), but that isn't what concerns us here. Our question might be re-phrased as follows: what is the pattern that, from the point of view of the play as a whole, will reveal the contextual appropriateness of Claudio's action (presuming for the moment that it is appropriate)? The indirectness of the act makes it peculiar, especially in the light of Shakespeare's other comedies, where normally wooers energetically pursue their own wooing. (Where they don't, as with Sir Andrew in Twelfth Night, or “Mr. Brook” in Merry Wives, the effect is to discredit the lover; Sir Andrew is a fool, “Mr. Brook” a stock jealous husband with ulterior motives.) At the outset, Claudio lets someone else woo for him; later he lets someone else woo him out of love; and at the end he allows himself once more to be led, and bound, to a veiled bride who, by an appealing semiotic shift, becomes once again the original target of the indirect pursuit. His passivity and gullibility are obvious enough, but in themselves are not very interesting. What makes this indirectness significant is its relation to the other forms of interaction in the play—notably the tricking of Beatrice and Benedick (they don't really woo for themselves either—they are won first and woo later), and the apprehension and examination of the villains by Dogberry and his cohorts.

In all of these cases the action and discourse are indirect. The indirectness is linked to the persistent dramatic image of eavesdropping which, as I said, is what most of the characters are doing most of the time. To eavesdrop is to be at one remove from the dialogue (even when, as in the scenes where Beatrice and Benedick are gullied, the eavesdropper is involved in a plot laid by those to whom he listens), just as wearing a mask is, as an action, oblique, off-center, not straightforward. Hence the masked ball, where the process of penetrating or not penetrating a mask is enacted, is the perfect setting for the indirect wooing of Hero. She expects, because of previous misinformation, to be wooed by Pedro. She is wooed by a man in a mask who is in fact Pedro, but an oblique Pedro wooing in the name of Claudio. Claudio is, in a sense, Pedro's mask. Pedro is Claudio's voice. As audience, we don't know whether Pedro is pretending to be Claudio or simply speaking on Claudio's behalf. What, we may wonder, does Hero think? The scene, to make matters more impenetrable, takes place offstage, while onstage Claudio, masquerading as Benedick, hears a false report of what is happening offstage from Don John and Borachio, who know perfectly well they're talking to Claudio, not Benedick. The discourse and the dramatic movement could hardly be more elliptical and indirect. As an audience we are necessarily conscious primarily of the oblique quality of this interplay.

The appeal of Don John in Much Ado's world of masks and mistaking is that he offers certainty—what Othello will later call “ocular proof.” He promises “further warrant” for his slander of Hero in III.ii, and challenges Claudio and Pedro with the words “If you dare not trust that you see, confess not that you know” (III.ii.115-16). Like certain pronouncements of Iago, this sentence appears more meaningful, even portentous, than it actually is. It cheats the listener by pretending a meaning that it fails to deliver, thus giving the impression that Don John knows what he is talking about. His messages are often of this type—they lure their hearers with the promise of directness and certainty in a world of uncertainty and obliqueness. Hence slander is the appropriate crime for this villain in this world. And the stance he adopts of a pretended concern for the purity of language is consistent with this false promise: “The word ['disloyal'] is too good to paint her wickedness” (III.ii.105-106). Hero's sins, he claims at the aborted marriage, are “not to be named. … There is not chastity enough in language / Without offense to utter them” (IV.i.94-97). Language is vulnerable, easily tainted, its chastity needs protection. Again, Don John promises a wholeness of meaning, opposed to the malleability of meaning current in the rest of the play, where the emphasis is on the process of signifying rather than on the fixed meaning. Don John's falsified certainty thereby offers a threat to the very basis on which reality is constructed in this world.

Thus, the messenger who enters at the beginning may be seen in retrospect as problematic, in one particular sense. He introduces a world of messages, a world in which the act of message-sending and receiving is itself highlighted and in which the processes of interpretation and misinterpretation are integral to both the comic obstacles (those features which retard the resolution of the comic action), and to the resolution itself. Hence messages become in themselves signs, as well as vehicles, of the major concerns of the play. This process is
revealed most clearly and fully in the eavesdropping scenes with Benedick and Beatrice, and in the Dogberry scenes.

The gulling of Benedick in II.iii begins with Benedick's comic soliloquy in which he declares his own immunity to love and ridicules Claudio for becoming a lover and, accordingly, turning his language into a “fantastical banquet,” a gourmandizing love rhetoric which carries its own sexuo-culinary message (cf. The Joy of Cooking—Joy of Sex association, and, too, the many instances in the language of the play of a connection between food and love). But Benedick quickly falls prey, not so much to love, as to the seductiveness of the message itself. The soliloquy over, he spots his friends and hides in the arbor to listen. As for most of the characters, eavesdropping for Benedick is a natural, spontaneous gesture. He prefers it to saying hello. But a complex game is being played. He thinks he is eavesdropping on Leonato, Pedro, and Claudio, but in actuality they are spying on him. He is aware of the possibility of the game, but rejects it: “I should think this a gull but that the white-bearded fellow speaks it” (II.iii.121-22). He listens intently. His interest sparks Claudio's comment, “He hath ta'en th’ infection” (124). This last word is a significant one since it implies a symptomatology, a sign language. It is of course a conventional metaphor, but in this semiotically charged context, it has added force. “Infection” carries its own sign system: symptoms on the surface are an index of the infection below. But the infection that Benedick has caught is not that of love, or not only that of love, but of the sign itself, the message. He is not yet showing the traditional signs of love. Rather the symptoms he is showing, his posture, the strain to overhear, the comic surprise (the theatrical “take”), indicate a fascination with the act of overhearing what is being said, with the message's transport as much as with the message itself. By the time he has been fully “infected,” he is able to reinterpret Beatrice, to “spy some marks of love” (II.iii.241-42) in her that he had not perceived before. The final part of the scene gives us a wonderfully comic enactment of this process of reinterpretation. Beatrice, in line with the pattern we have been tracing, brings a message (one, significantly, connected with food): “Against my will I am sent to bid you come in to dinner” (243-44). But Benedick interprets it as a message of love: “There’s a double meaning in that” (255). He thanks her for her pains. “I took no more pains for those thanks than you take pains to thank me” (246-47), she replies, which he later construes to mean, “Any pains that I take for you is as easy as thanks” (257-58). Thus is the plain message made ambiguous; and thus does misinterpretation lead to love.

In a theatrically daring move, Shakespeare treats us to the gulling of Beatrice in the very next scene. Here, the emphasis is less on the seductiveness of the message itself and more on the possible transformation which can be the message's most vivid consequence. The scene begins with a speech which merges the motifs of message-sending and eavesdropping, both within a deliberately delusive context. Hero tells Margaret to go whisper in Beatrice's ear

Walk in the orchard, and our whole discourse
Is all of her. Say that thou overheard'st us.

(III.i.4-6)

Hero's message is false (since it is part of the plot), but it looks true to Beatrice when she arrives, since their discourse is of her. Within the plot, the game that they are constructing, Hero and Ursula speak of Beatrice's very real disdain, her pride and scorn, which “ride sparkling in her eyes, / Misprizing what they look on”—misprize in the sense of not understanding (misinterpreting), as well as contempting. She misconstrues Benedick and therefore mistakes his worth. Failure of perception, as it is in King Lear, is failure of valuing. But the context is comic, the tendency to misprize can be reversed, and sight transformed through the false message. Beatrice comes to see both Benedick and herself better. The dominant metaphor of the scene is one of trapping, but the metaphor seems deliberately inapposite. Beatrice isn't trapped, she is interpreted, and Benedick is reinterpreted for her and, subsequently, by her. The result is that her discourse is transformed through the false discourse which she has overheard:
For others say thou dost deserve, and I
Believe it better than reportingly.

(III.i.115-16)

The concern of the whole play with signs is reflected whenever love becomes the subject of conversation, since love is manifested primarily in a series of signs: “If he be not in love with some woman,” says Claudio of Benedick, “there is no believing old signs; ’a brushes his hat o’mornings … the barber's man hath been seen with him … ’a rubs himself with civet. … That’s as much as to say, the sweet youth's in love” (III.ii.39-51).

The greatest note of it, as Pedro observes, is Benedick's melancholy, which, like love, is itself registered in a code, a prescribed repertoire of gestures (cf. Democritus Junior and Jaques). Love, then, is a kind of language; but it also has a language, one which Benedick, after mocking Claudio for adopting it, tries unsuccessfully to master.

Love is like fashion, another sign system whose arbitrariness and instability are alluded to in the play (“But seest thou not what a deformed thief this fashion is” [III.iii.124-25]). But it is language itself, as the most fully elaborated of all sign systems, that provides the paradigm (“I know that Deformed; ’a has been a vile thief this seven year”); and it is Dogberry who most pointedly fixes the problem of language and its interpretation at the center of the play.

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 asininity of Dogberry, a linguistic rather than a theatrical code is invoked. In both plays, too, an ironic truth is discovered in asininity, 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); and 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.

As much as the Dogberry scenes, though in a different way, the wedding scene focuses on the process of signifying. It offers us the spectacle of a dramatic clash of interpretations. Hero's appearance and behavior are textualized, raised to the level of a sign, and interpreted. Claudio's is the subtlest reading, but also the most naive. He sees the sign as disconnected from its proper referent, as an appearance only:

*She's but the sign and semblance of her honour.*
*Behold how like a maid she blushes here!*
Comes not that blood, as modest evidence,
To witness simple virtue? ...  ....Her blush is guiltiness, not modesty.

(IV.i.32-41)

Denying the accepted relation between signifier and signified, he reinterprets the sign, investing it with new semiotic value, as proof of his contention that “she knows the heat of a luxurious bed.” He is, we might say, redefining the language of the blush. Claudio’s relation to signs, though he thinks it subtle, is in fact acutely misguided. He continually misreads his closest acquaintances. His mistaking of Hero in the wedding scene is confirmed in his next appearance, not only by his callous response to the news of her “death,” but by his misreading of Benedick’s message and intent when the latter comes to challenge him. Benedick’s pallor and intensity (V.i.130, 139-40), like Hero’s blush, are symptoms whose source Claudio is unable to fathom. Claudio, in fact, seems unaware of the possibility of misreading. His reinterpretation of Hero stems from the fact that he has been tricked by what Othello longs for, “ocular proof,” but such “proof” is itself a kind of message and hence obscure and subject to misreading, as Othello, to his horror, finally learns. The friar, unlike Claudio, sees the signs in context and interprets differently (as does Beatrice)—his “noting of the lady” reveals her “maiden truth” (IV.i.156, 163).

In _Othello_, to digress briefly, eavesdropping and misinterpretation lead not to comic redefinition but to tragic mistaking. As has been frequently observed, _Othello_ can in many respects be seen as the tragic converse of _Much Ado_; in it, the play of signification becomes very serious indeed. Exactly as Claudio redefines Hero’s look, seeing her blush as guiltiness not modesty, so Othello redefines Desdemona’s beauty, seeing it as a mark not of faithfulness but of treachery: “Was this fair paper, this most goodly book, / Made to write whore upon?” And just as Claudio justifies himself at the end of _Much Ado_, “Yet sinned I not / But in mistaking” (V.i.275-76), so Othello excuses himself by pleading that he was perplexed in the extreme, that he loved not wisely but too well. The process of investigation is central to _Othello_ as well, and the key scene is once again one of eavesdropping. The grotesque comedy of Iago questioning Cassio about Bianca, while Othello hovers in the background, misinterpreting every leer and giggle, seems almost like a dark parody of the scene in _Much Ado_ where Benedick is won to Beatrice through the lure of the message. Othello’s deafness in the scene signals his defeat, the abandonment of investigation. The sign for him is empty, he fills it with his own debased meaning. He, like Benedick, is “infected” by the message but of course the causes, symptoms, and consequences of infection are utterly different. Misinterpretation leads to hate, and finally to murder.

In _Much Ado_, the breakdown of the wedding prompts Benedick’s remark, “This looks not like a nuptial” (IV.i.67). The broken nuptial, in this as in many of Shakespeare’s plays, poses a semiotic problem. The critical term “broken” is apt—it suggests the fracture of a complex social sign into fragments and shards. The highly unorthodox wooing that follows the “wedding,” based on the injunction “kill Claudio” and leading to a repudiation of the traditional language and forms of courting, continues the motif of a fracturing of conventional signs. Eventually Claudio is led to a blind reacceptance of the traditional form in which “Another Hero,” who turns out to be the same Hero, is represented; hence the original ritual, once again intact, is reinstated, now, presumably, free of the threat of breakage. Beatrice and Benedick, by contrast, move to an enlightened acceptance of the unorthodox deceptions which have brought them together. Like the signs by which he sustains himself and constructs meaning, “Man,” as Benedick observes, “is a giddy thing, and this is my conclusion” (V.iv.107-108).

The play ends, as it began, with a messenger. Like the first one, this messenger is a pure function of plot. He signals the end, totality, all the strands tied together (Don John is captured), just as the first messenger signalled the beginning—an arrival. But the framing of the action of the play by these messengers signals more than that. It suggests that the “jeu de signification” (Derrida’s term) exceeds what is signified, that _Much Ado_ as a whole, is itself a play of signification.
Notes

1. Dorothy Hockey, in “Notes, Notes, Forsooth …” SQ [Shakespeare Quarterly] 8, no. 3 (Summer 1957): 353-58, was I believe, the first critic to discuss this pun in any detail. She argues that noting and mis-noting constitute the primary theme of the play.

2. Roland Barthes, Sade/Fourier/Loyola, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), p. 10. The French text reads as follows “J'écoute l'emportement du message, non le message, je vois dans l'oeuvre triple le déploiement victorieux du texte signifiant.” Barthes is talking about the text in relation to its reader or audience; I am extending his sense to include the interactions within the work as well as those between the work and the audience.


4. Both Hockey and Bertrand Evans, in Shakespeare's Comedies (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1960), p. 69, discuss this incident, Hockey in terms of the pervasiveness of “noting” and Evans in terms of the “alacrity to perpetrate a practice which infects people of this world.”


6. The way the word “deformed” becomes the elaborately described character Deformed is one of the funniest instances in the play of the power of the sign to slide away from its meaning and take on a reality of its own. See V.i.308-13, and see also William Carroll's Comments in The Great Feast of Language in “Love's Labour's Lost” (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press 1976), p. 35-36.


9. Critics often mention, but usually don't develop, the connections between Much Ado and Othello. Rosalie Colie, for example, in Paradoxa Epidemica (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1966), p. 240, calls the former a “comic rehearsal” for Othello while Bertrand Evans, p. 81, contrasts Othello's and Claudio's reactions to similar circumstances.

10. The “broken nuptial” in this and other plays was the topic of a paper delivered by Carol Neely at the conference of the Shakespeare Association of America in 1979.

Criticism: Themes: Jeanne Addison Roberts (essay date 1987)


[In the following essay, Roberts examines Shakespeare's use of obstacles and delay in Much Ado about Nothing and his other comedies, and contends that the delays “provide audiences with the pleasant anxieties of sustained anticipation.”]

Audiences of Shakespeare's tragic drama predictably and recurringly experience the desire to hold back the rising tide of tragic action, to arrest time, to allow a few more moments for Juliet to awaken and embrace Romeo, for Emilia to enlighten Othello, for the servants to muster the courage to save Gloucester's eyes, or for someone to rescue Macduff's wife and children from Macbeth's murderous rage. The impulse to delay persists in spite of the certain knowledge that disaster will not be averted, and indeed in spite of the grim cathartic
satisfaction of being swept away by the inevitable flood of catastrophic events which converge into the mainstream of tragedy. Similarly in Shakespeare's comic theater, two conflicting impulses contribute simultaneously to audience pleasure. The overwhelming current of comedy, as Northrop Frye has demonstrated in “The Argument of Comedy,” moves toward sexual consummation. It is anticipation of this happy outcome which engages audience attention and sustains interest through the progress toward this inevitable culmination, and which may arouse in audiences a desire to speed things up, to help the characters get on to the main event.

And yet immoderate speed destroys the comedy. Milton tells us in *Paradise Lost* that the Edenic Adam discovered very early the delights of his spouse's talent for “sweet reluctant amorous delay” (Bk. III, l. 311), and one remembers the immortal words of Mae West: “I like a man who takes his time.” One might well contend that the true “argument” of comedy is not the movement toward consummation but the elaboration of strategies to delay such consummation. Shakespeare shows impressive variety and skill in designing these strategies in his comedies and romances.

Probably the most obvious device for preventing the immediate union of the young is parental disapproval. This stumbling block is used rather conventionally in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to propel rebellious daughters from the comforts and convenience of conformity into the uncharted territory aptly symbolized by the wild forest, where they will help to shape their own destiny, a destiny characterized in each case by faintly unsettling but adequate new attachments. Parental plans are similarly circumvented by forest intrigue in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. In *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale* parental disapproval again fractures familial relationships and precipitates journeys toward self-discovery and sexual satisfaction. In *The Tempest* Prospero's mild restraints serve only to prolong courtship, not to subvert it.

The flouting of paternal authority may not have been for Shakespeare primarily a laughing matter, however, for the use of this theme is not a favorite delaying technique in his comedies. It has often been observed that the shadow of death hovers over a large number of the comedies, serving either to initiate confusion or to block fulfillment. In *Love's Labor's Lost* and *Two Noble Kinsmen* death defers nuptial celebrations. In *The Comedy of Errors, Twelfth Night*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the menace of death or supposed death inaugurates the action. In *The Merchant of Venice* and *Measure for Measure* the threat of death interrupts connubial progress. And in *Much Ado About Nothing, Pericles*, and *The Winter's Tale* a supposed death stretches out the central portion of the dramatic action.

Rather less ominously Shakespeare develops in several comedies the use of the play as foreplay—a device used somewhat sketchily in *Love's Labor's Lost* and in its full glory in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where the rude mechanicals' “Pyramus and Thisbe” is especially designed as nuptial entertainment and offered in answer to Theseus's plea for some diversion “To wear away this long age of three hours / Between [our] after-supper and bed-time” (V.i.33-34). Prospero evokes a nuptial masque for Ferdinand and Miranda to amuse them while waiting for the fitting moment to untie Miranda's maiden knot, and in *Much Ado About Nothing* the drama on the balcony masterminded by Don John and overheard by Dogberry's watchmen temporarily prevents the expected marriage of Hero and Claudio.

Even more common than the diversionary interlude of the play-within-a-play is the more extensive and inclusive form of play embodied in games. Comic games in Shakespeare range from the masked encounters of the ladies and the “Muscovites” in *Love's Labor's Lost* and the masked ball of *Much Ado About Nothing* through the almost incidental chess game of *The Tempest*. Games provide opportunities for confusion and discovery, and they prolong the intervals between the inception and completion of the central courtship. In *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Merchant of Venice* games constitute the occasion for a terminal testing of lovers. In *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Twelfth Night* games launch the Beatrice and Benedick romance and the Malvolio subplot—both of which threaten to eclipse the main action while deliciously prolonging it. And in *The Merry Wives* and *As You Like It* the “love” games of the wives and Falstaff and of Rosalind and
Orlando move to the main plot—becoming in the latter case the very heart of the play.

Although all these complications—parental opposition, death and threat of death, plays, and games—serve in Shakespeare's comedies to guarantee that the course of true love will not run smooth, and to provide audiences with the pleasant anxieties of sustained anticipation, by far the most common device for complicating the action is the multiplication of lovers. Multiplication occurs in every one of the comedies and romances—if one allows for the two generations of The Winter's Tale and counts both Ferdinand and Caliban as lovers in The Tempest. The causes and the effects of this multiplication are far too numerous and too varied for detailed analysis here. Sometimes, as with the quintupled pairs of Love's Labor's Lost and the quadrupled pairs of A Midsummer Night's Dream and As You Like It, the proliferation serves mainly to emphasize the absurd, capricious, and inevitable contortions of human beings when the amorous fit is upon them. Twelfth Night, All's Well That Ends Well, Measure for Measure, and Cymbeline use diversity of lovers to provide the impetus for self-discovery and personality readjustment. In each case sorting out all these characters takes time and fills the gaps in the comic continuum.

However, the examples of multiple lovers that interest me especially and to which I should like to draw particular attention are those where romantic figures seem curiously flat and/or schematically interrelated. These cases encourage audiences to view the stage action as a sort of psychomachia, even as they appreciate its imitation of life, and to anticipate resolutions which harmonize warring psychic elements even as they resolve complications of plot.

The affinity between the dialectical nature of drama and the allegorical habit of mind is abundantly illustrated by medieval morality plays; and it is obvious that a strong taste for allegory survived into the Renaissance. To categorize Shakespeare's drama as allegory is to diminish it; but to recognize traces there of the Renaissance proclivity for viewing human beings as composed of faculties and humours is to add resonance and historical texture to its characterizations and plots. An example of a play that invites such interpretation is The Comedy of Errors, where the female characters form a paradigm of stereotypes of women: the virgin, the whore, the virago, and the mother turned nun. It is one achievement of the play to harmonize the female fragments and to reconcile female principals with male prototypes—themselves functionally split into father, husband, and lover. Although the origin of this vision of divided psyches is in Plautus, Shakespeare responded to it enough to reproduce it; and because of it his play has an enduring mythical resonance which helps to account for its continued popularity. As I have shown elsewhere, the women of The Taming of the Shrew, particularly Katherina and Bianca, may be viewed like those of The Comedy of Errors as complementary facets of one whole—the ubiquitous fair and dark heroines of fairy tale and romance. The process of merging these two figures provides one dimension of the reluctant, amorous delay that constitutes the body of the comedy.

Much Ado About Nothing similarly rewards analysis as a study of delay caused by the need to integrate parts—in this case with emphasis on the males. Names provide some clues to the function of the parts. The name Claudio, perhaps because of its association with such Claudian emperors as Nero and Caligula, seems to be linked in Shakespeare's mind with varieties of illicit sexuality—manifesting itself in the readiness of this Claudio to imagine sordid sexual dalliance, as well as in the premature embraces of the Claudio of Measure for Measure, and culminating in the incestuous sheets leapt to with such dexterity by Hamlet's uncle. Hero's name is mythical, androgynous, and as blankly unspecific as her character. The delightful Beatrice and Benedick, apparently Shakespeare's original inventions, are universally agreed to be the soul of the play. And yet, in spite of their vitality, their very names suggest more baldly than most Shakespearean denominations their salient qualities. Beatrice, born as she says under a dancing star, is a woman who brings blessedness. And Benedick is not only blessed but also one who speaks well—he has more lines than anyone else in the play, and, as Beatrice remarks, he is (at least in the first two acts) always talking. In many ways he is the central character of the drama, even more than Beatrice since we see more of him and have more insight into the stages of his conversion. And yet Beatrice, usually a reliable witness, calls him a “stuff'd man” (I.i.58-59) and one who has lost four of his five wits and is now “govern'd with one” (I.i.66-67). I should like to suggest...
that the delaying action of *Much Ado* is actually the process of restoring Benedick to his full faculties and that his psychic drama is played out by other male characters in the play.

Benedick arrives in Messina a successful warrior and an experienced man of the world—one whom Beatrice says she knows of old (I.i.144-145) and one who has previously won her heart with false dice (II.i.280-281). He talks wittily and well, but he harps even more obsessively than other Shakespearean males on the specter of cuckoldry which haunts his vision of the marriage bed. Beatrice says, “he hath every month a new sworn brother” (I.i.72-73) and asks of the messenger who announces the soldiers’ imminent arrival, “Is there no young squarer now that will make a voyage with him to the devil?” (I.i.81-83). Such an alter ego does indeed appear in the form of the curiously characterless Claudio, whose outstanding qualities are his youth and his vulnerability to deception. One can easily imagine him to personify a younger Benedick, one who might have played his lover false out of his own insecurity when faced with the uncertain nature of sexual fidelity. This is the Claudio who watches with credulity the dumb-show of sexual betrayal on Hero's balcony and whose rash acceptance of appearance metaphorically destroys his betrothed bride. This is the Claudio who must indeed—as Beatrice later commands—be killed, or at least recognized for what he is and brought under control before Benedick can achieve a harmonious union. Benedick does successfully master this latent side of his nature, as he reveals in the final scene when, after Claudio identifies his friend with “bull Jove” in an image which joins the divine and the animal, Benedick calmly accepts the designation, signifying perhaps that godlike reason must cohabit with bestial passion, and adds that such a bull was the father of the bleating, calf-like Claudio.

If Claudio represents the callow, youthful Benedick, Don Pedro suggests a more sedate and parental aspect of his character. Don Pedro actually identifies himself with Jove when he is dancing with Hero at the masked ball. As the diviner aspect of Benedick he twice expresses a serious desire to marry Beatrice, valuing her justly and without any sense of risk in his proposal. He is declined because Beatrice wants a complete man and sees that he is only a part to be worn on Sunday. But the noble Don Pedro is brother to Don John, the darker side of rationality. Don John is a one-dimensional villain—the embodiment of lurking resentment and malice, which though once forgiven, reappears to destroy relationship. It was such a shadowy, suppressed self, we feel, who earlier could have caused Benedick to play Beatrice false. As a manipulator of unresolved doubts and suspicions, Don John orchestrates the midnight scenario which plays out Benedick's nightmare and demonstrates the consequences of mistrust. A kinship between Benedick and Don John is first signalled by Beatrice, who, noting that Don John rarely speaks and that Benedick talks too much, suggests that an excellent man could be made “just in the midway” between him and Don John (II.i.6-7). Benedick himself reveals his intuitive knowledge of John's nature after Hero's betrayal when he leaps instantly to the conclusion that “The practice of it lives in John the Bastard, / Whose spirits toil in frame of villainies” (IV.i.188-189). The process of recognizing and dealing with Don John coincides with Benedick's realization of his ability to love Beatrice, and remarkably this revelation does indeed change his pattern of speech. After more than two hundred lines in the first two acts, Benedick speaks only six lines in Act III, gradually regaining a modified and less frivolous verbal dominance in Act V. In III.ii Don John enters to reveal to Claudio Hero's reputed “infidelity” at precisely the moment when Benedick has retired with Leonato to request Beatrice's hand. It is almost as if the imminence of commitment has conjured up the previously suppressed malign agent.

But this same dangerous moment calls up another figure from the murky recesses of Benedick's mind—the valiant Constable Dogberry. If Dogberry is one of Benedick's missing wits, he is the “common wit” which grounds the other four. Bumbling, illiterate, and only dimly if stubbornly competent, he seems the obverse of the eloquent and articulate courtier, but the two men share the love of language, the experience of reverses, the hope to “comprehend all vagrom men” (III.iii.25), and the desire to have “every thing handsome about” them (IV.ii.85-86). And it is Dogberry's stumbling progress toward the revelation of truth which condemns Don John to “everlasting redemption” (IV.ii.56-57) and frees society, at least momentarily, of his presence. Dogberry is the weak but persistent voice of instinct which helps Benedick to believe Beatrice and resolve to “kill” the rejecting Claudio. Since Benedick never shares the stage with Dogberry nor Dogberry with Don
John, the characters provide interesting opportunities for doubling of roles. Either Dogberry and Don John or (less plausibly) Dogberry and Benedick could be played by the same actor.

Once Benedick has, in the words of Margaret, “become a man” (III.iv.87) by uniting his own quality of speaking well with the soberer aspects of Don Pedro and Dogberry and by reconciling himself to Claudio and acknowledging Don John, the amorous delay is prolonged only by the dance which Benedick insists must precede the wedding in order, as he says, to “lighten our own hearts and our wives’ heels” (V.iv.118-119). The future looks bright for both the loving couples. But it is not without a lingering shadow. Prompted perhaps by Claudio's reference to “bull Jove,” Benedick makes one last horn joke, urging the Prince to marry, and assuring him that “There is no staff more reverent than one tipp'd with horn” (V.iv.124). It is as if the word “horn” evokes the memory of Don John, and the play ends with the news that his flight has been arrested and that he will be brought back to Messina. This is not good news, and it is perhaps significant that Benedick rather than Don Pedro or Leonato promises to devise “brave punishments” for him on the morrow (V.iv.128). We are left to wonder whether he can also live at peace with this thing of darkness he has now implicitly acknowledged as his own.

In Much Ado About Nothing the slow, painfully pleasurable process of uniting Benedick's five wits and effecting his betrothal to Beatrice reminds us of the importance of reluctance as well as delay in the argument of comedy. It would be hard to imagine two more determinedly reluctant lovers than Beatrice and Benedick. This reluctance adds greatly to our pleasure in their courtship and capitulation. It is not just that easy victories are boring victories, though it is partly that. And it is not just that we enjoy seeing long-vaunted independence humanized. It is also that reluctance is a genuine and powerful component of sexual encounters. One does not give up individual identity easily or relinquish it permanently.

In Milton's description of Eve's “sweet reluctant amorous delay” the word “reluctant” sounds a jarring note in Paradise, even as it serves onomatopoetically to retard the cadences of the line and contribute to its hypnotic euphony. Milton uses forms of the word “reluctant” five times in Paradise Lost, and in every other case it is associated with serious revolt, usually resistance against God. We cannot afford to underestmate its weight in the description of Eve. We remember that she was in fact openly reluctant when, soon after her creation, she preferred the enchanting grace of her own reflected image to the less obviously attractive manly virtues of her new spouse. Reluctance is a stage of her discovery of marital bliss and remains a pleasurable dimension of its enjoyment.

A similar pattern prevails in Shakespeare's comedy, which, though it often seems to be much ado about nothing, is as deeply concerned with the business of life as his tragedy is. Shakespeare shows us in his comedies that, like Cressida and Cleopatra, and Eve and John Milton, and all the writers of so-called “new comedy,” he understood the pleasures of sweet amorous delay. But he also alerts us to the stubborn, perhaps irreducible reluctance that paradoxically enhances rather than diminishes the miracle of harmonious union.

Notes

2. Quotations from Shakespeare refer to The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

Criticism: Themes: Paul Skrebels (essay date 1997)

Teachers and students studying Shakespeare's plays in the classroom (and teaching is surely another form of study) face a crisis, but the crisis is not a new phenomenon. It has existed at least since the early years of the twentieth century, when bodies charged with implementing educational policies in English-speaking societies—the Newbolt Committee in Britain after the First World War is often cited, but each nation has its own equivalents—saw fit to reaffirm the place of “Shakespeare” in the school curriculum as a cornerstone of literacy and a mark of the educated citizen. The resulting establishment-sponsored educational programs, supported by the New Critical agenda of academics on both sides of the Atlantic, took root very quickly, so that the heads of English Literature departments in schools and colleges who declare Shakespeare study optional sooner or later find themselves called to account by concerned civic groups, often via the press.

The attitude of Professor Michael Wood, in a keynote address to British English teachers, that “Shakespeare can look after himself, he is not an endangered species, and doesn't need our protection” (Wood 1994, 19), may be refreshing to some and profoundly threatening to others. But without the daily classroom efforts of teachers, the species’ gene pool surely would have diminished to the point where the creature would now be confined to a highly specialized habitat and only occasionally observed at night. Our concern that this may already be the case is not eased by Wood's adding teasingly that if Shakespeare “couldn't look after himself, it would not … be at all a bad idea for someone else to have a spell as national poet. Marlowe, for instance, or Webster, or Aphra Behn” (19). Fine, but those of us in the rest of the English-speaking world committed to and charged with passing on Shakespeare to the next generation might be left crying, like Caliban, “The red plague rid you / For learning me your language!” (Temp 1.2.366-67), as we scratch around desperately looking for a replacement. Our “national poets” occupy a different cultural space from that allotted to Shakespeare, whose work, historically placed at the very brink of the English colonial project, is one of the few common links we have between “English” cultures that need not involve the names of fast-food chains or multinational media empires. And emerging anglophone societies (including economically advanced ones like Australia, struggling to define itself through concepts such as multiculturalism) seem constantly to find in Shakespeare a perfect forum for questioning and experimenting with the culture which, willy-nilly, is theirs as well.

Given the prominence of Shakespeare in our heritage and his place in our educational systems, what then is the “crisis”? It is simply when students find themselves unable to engage with a text—typically an early modern one—either at the formal linguistic level, or at the broader narrative or structural level, the elements of which are usually taught under the labels of plot, character, and theme. This in turn gives rise to a condition of aporia that causes many students to dismiss the text as boring, old-fashioned, and irrelevant. They have a point. Recent critical discussion has reaffirmed the place of the reader/auditor/viewer in the process of making meaning, particularly in the interdisciplinary activity of sign system analysis called Cultural Studies. Antony Easthope, a proponent of the Cultural Studies line, explains the old “modernist” literary studies method as one which treats the text as “a self-defining object … sufficient to itself,” and then brings the reader to the text to appreciate its inherent and unified meaning. This process Easthope diagrams as

Reader r Text (=Author)

because it also involves a wish “to disclose the personality within the poem, the author within the text” (Easthope 1991, 12).

The emphasis now is on the inherent pluralities of texts, which do not exist independently of readers. It is the reader who imposes unity on a text, and readers can interpret texts in many different ways according to the
circumstances of their reading. The process is one “in which text and reader interact dialectically” (20-21), thus:

\[ \text{Reader} \times \text{Text} \]

The equal place afforded to readership in this paradigm raises the issue of the place a text can have in the lives of those who either cannot read it or cannot identify with it. For while it may be argued that even a papyrus scroll to someone unversed in hieroglyphics may convey an aura of “Ancient Egyptianness,” its inaccessibility as literary text must limit its role in the life of the observer. In our society, too, “Shakespeare” and “Shakespearean” can connote many things—usually associated with a hierarchy of cultural values—even for those who have never read a playtext or watched a performance. But what service are we doing students if our teaching of Shakespeare only reinforces such vague and possibly damaging associations, and fails to achieve at least a few points of reconciliation between them and the text?

Henry Giroux, in a recent article about the pedagogical value of cultural studies to modern youth, expresses urgency in his appeal for teaching practice to address students’ changing needs:

This is a world in which old certainties are ruptured and meaning becomes more contingent, less indebted to the dictates of reverence and established truth. While the circumstances of youth vary across and within terrains marked by racial and class differences, the modernist world of certainty that has traditionally policed, contained and insulated such difference has given way to a shared postmodern culture in which representational borders collapse into new hybridized forms of cultural performance, identity, and political agency.

(287-88)

In a culture where “identities merge and shift rather than become uniform and static” (288), it is not—and probably never was—enough to “do Shakespeare” and trust that exposure to the great man’s work will cast its civilizing spell. Objects preserved in glass cases, as beautiful and valuable as they may be, are still only the detritus of the past. In preserving them we render them fixed and lifeless, and leave to chance the possible impact they may have on people’s lives. But to insist that a cultural product be maintained within the curriculum is to state ipso facto that it is of vital importance in the lives of our students. More than ever, students need strategies for understanding—or at least coming to terms with—the world in which they must operate. Writing about the place of historical novels in children's literature but expressing similar concerns, John Stephens says that ours is a “highly technological and extremely acquisitive society, with great personal mobility and information resources,” but whose “systems and structures … tend to value doing and getting more than being” (203-4). A consequence of this has been “a loss of curiosity about and devaluing of interest in the historical past in late twentieth-century Western society caused by pressures to exist in the present and consider only the immediate future.” His conclusion should be regarded as foundational for the present discussion: “For teachers, the question becomes a matter of how readings of the past can be offered as a corrective to living in a fragmented, reified world” (203-4).

The methodological basis for teaching Shakespeare has to be derived from finding a place for his work in the postmodern world, and I believe that this concern already drives, at least implicitly, most pedagogical approaches. Teachers and educational resource groups strive constantly to make literary texts “relevant.” In the case of Shakespeare this involves strategies such as cartoon Macbeths and rock-opera Tempests, which under the formalist banner of New Criticism (the critical school which informed the learning of most teachers of English Literature) are scorned as paraphrase. Teachers may feel guilty that their classes are not really studying “literature”—perhaps they are not, and that may be a good thing. But while it is not the purpose of this paper to deal with the linguistic difficulties students may have in making meaning from Shakespeare, I hope to assuage some of the guilt by suggesting a way (or lending support for existing ways) of reading his
plays within the specifics of the culture in which teachers and students coexist.

There is a certain irony underpinning this conciliatory process. Although students tend to feel more keenly any gaps between the teaching of literature and their perceived needs in the “real world,” the theoretical positions of teachers and students often reflect the opposite. Michael Wood sums up this “most common clash between student and teacher in our discipline today” thus: “The teacher's a historicist and the student isn't. The student believes in universals and the teacher doesn't” (18). The point is well made, for even without the support of theory the teacher is more likely to promote a contextual approach simply through a wider knowledge of the circumstances of a text's production, setting, characters and so forth. This difference also, I suspect, has something to do firstly with the way people, particularly the young, are positioned by the media as “global villagers” and consumers of information, entertainment, and products promoted and distributed on a worldwide basis. Education and social status tend to make teachers more resistant to (but by no means immune from) this positioning, as does time of life, which is the second factor. Young adults are facing up to the “big questions” of existence for the first time, so that attention is directed to universal emotions at the expense of immediate cultural and historical circumstances. Nevertheless, as Wood points out, “The students are not wrong, of course; or rather the teachers are not simply right.” Whatever our “different critical heritages, … we need a dialogue here, not a simple conversion experience” (18).

That students are better at dealing with universals than with contingent aspects of Shakespeare's plays is likely to become more pronounced when the play under study is not obviously historiographical. The romantic comedies of the 1590s are particularly difficult to historicize: they seem to be “about” universal binaries such as love/hate, loyalty/deceit, and trust/jealousy, with little concern for the precise time and location of the action and fairly tenuous links to the political and social issues of the era of their production. It is no wonder that so often they are produced with eclectic, ahistorical, or anachronistic costumes and settings (“When in doubt, choose the Edwardian era,” I once heard a theater practitioner say), Kenneth Branagh's film version of *Much Ado About Nothing* being an obvious example. During my one opportunity so far to teach *Much Ado*, my efforts to deal with the play along broadly historicist lines proved rather limited. Students were able to describe the possible literary sources of the play, and to note that these in turn were indebted to classical sources. Acknowledgment of the influence of Castiglione's *The Courtier* on the exchanges between Beatrice and Benedick elicited discussions about relations between the sexes among the aristocracy, and spilled over into considerations of Elizabethan notions of courtliness. But for the most part, there was the ever-present danger that students would regard the play rather as Ben Jonson damned the efforts of Shakespeare and other rivals as “a mouldy tale, / Like Pericles, and stale / As the shrive's crust” (Jonson 1975, 283). This seemed particularly so when dealing with the linchpin of the plot, Don John's slander against Hero's virginity and Claudio's subsequent denunciation of her. While some students saw this as an inroad for considering Elizabethan sexual politics, their overriding reaction was that the incident no longer carried the same weight as it once may have. The significance of the episode was, for the students, grounded firmly in the past, and served to reinforce their sense of alienation from the text. Thus I ended the semester with a strong sense of missed opportunity, and a desire to historicize the play, and probably Shakespeare generally, from a different angle.

The poststructuralist critical project called New Historicism in the American academy and usually equated with Cultural Materialism in the British calls for texts to be read not as simple reflections of larger historical movements or of unified world pictures, but as constituents of the thing itself we call “history.” This thing in turn “is always ‘narrated’,,” so that the past itself can only be “represented” as a text, and the concept of “history” as a single entity becomes instead a collection of “discontinuous and contradictory ‘histories’” (Selden 1989, 95). A literary text should be seen “as largely replicating in its own dynamics and structure those of the culture at large … a molecular representation of the entire cultural organism, as it were” (Buchbinder 1991, 114-15). In other words, the tensions, contradictions, and struggles in the society in which the text was produced may be read in the text, as well as/instead of society's dominant and apparently unifying ideologies and philosophies.
There is another side to the new historicist agenda, however, which is of great value to the teacher of literature but which tends to get lost in the rush to revise our concepts of Elizabethan England or Romantic Europe. For if history is always a process of mediating the past, then

We can never transcend our own historical situation. The past is not something which confronts us as if it were a historical object, but is something we construct from already written texts of all kinds which we construe in line with our particular historical concerns.

(Selden 95)

Thus the new historicisms would seem to have more to offer the teacher of literature if the shift in emphasis moves away from analyzing past cultures through plays, popular songs, legal documents, iconography, travelers' tales, and so on, to examining aspects of our own culture and the way its texts are constantly shaped out of a reading of the past. Howard Felperin states the case well, in an essay which admits an important place in modern criticism for the often discredited romanticist notions of an idealized Shakespeare:

At a certain level, the historical text must always offer itself, and be received, as timeless and universal textuality even as it remains at another level remote and specific historicity—if it is to [be] interpreted at all. Otherwise the historical text would remain mute and impenetrable to any but its own culture and movement.

(14; original emphasis)

We are at last well on the way to reconciling the predisposition our students have for the universal qualities in texts with our own niggling concerns that somehow we must contextualize works within the specific cultures of their production. By allowing, as Felperin claims Coleridge and Hazlitt did, “for the possibility of analogy and communality between past and present based on linguistic and cultural continuity, … for a certain transhistoricity (as distinct from ahistoricity or transcendence),” we can be released from “the historical meaning of the text” (15), so that the culture we may concentrate on in our classes is our own.

Given this approach as a basis for classroom practice in the teaching of Shakespeare, the first step is to choose material from our own culture for reading (or viewing or hearing) in parallel with the play. The Cultural Studies agenda is concerned with “outlining ways high and popular culture can be studied alongside each other as forms of signifying practice” (Easthope 103), one of its premises being that “the split between high and popular culture—and the hegemonic effect likely from the superiority of high over popular culture—is vanishing in postmodern culture” (102). It might be added that this split was partly a product of time: what was “popular” once (commercial theater in Elizabethan times, for example) became “high” later; and partly of ideology: certain texts are privileged over others within a culture because they are seen to define a particular view of its “essence” (“conservative” Shakespeare is a compulsory part of the British school curriculum; “radical” Milton is not). The principle of a canon of literature works on what Easthope calls “the usual binary structure which includes one by excluding the other” (103), but in our eclectic world of information overload, can we justifiably study one text and not another on canonical grounds if “both … develop equally on the common ground of textuality” (103)?

I do not wish to promote, or be accused of, the idea that Cultural Studies and the new historicisms are merely different labels for the same set of practices. Nor do I have any illusions as to what we get up to as teachers of English Literature. As long as the discipline survives—and Easthope and others maintain that it has not much life left—English Literature will be about privileging certain texts in a manner with which exponents of Cultural Studies need not (and certainly would not) concern themselves. This discussion, after all, is about maintaining such a position for Shakespeare. But in the postmodern eclectic spirit we can borrow from the shared aims and methodologies of the new historicisms and Cultural Studies to break down some of the
elitism associated with “Eng. Lit.” Both schools of criticism “defy traditional distinctions between high and popular culture by breaching disciplinary boundaries” (Easthope 120) in their willingness to read non-canonical texts in conjunction with accepted literary ones. And the image of the “cultural materialist belie[ing] that his or her head is already under the water” rather than “standing safely on shore and gazing at the sea of history” (Hawthorn 1994, 134) is a valuable one for teachers adopting a historicist approach to literature. It requires that the investigator take full account of his or her historical location and of the historical life of literary works (including their life in the present time of the investigator), not just the historical situation of the work's creation and composition.

(134; my emphasis)

The approach outlined below does not dwell much on the theory that says that all text-making is ideological; nor does it prescribe necessarily “correct” readings based on class, gender, race and so on. Nevertheless, it is hoped that what follows upholds what Mellor and Patterson call “the right of English to claim for itself a specific type of pedagogy: one that focuses on developing in students the ability to interpret texts through the technique of ‘problematisation’” which in turn gives rise to the “production of particular readings” (49). And for those who think this is ideologically too thin, remember that teaching practice is ideological: by bringing cultural studies/new historicist methods to bear in literary study, we are adopting a specific ideological stance in relation to traditional hegemonic views about “literature.” This in itself should serve as a caveat to the unwary teacher who, casting about widely for texts from high and popular sources, may be called to account for those choices by students, parents, school heads, and the media.

The slur on Hero's chastity and her rejection by Claudio at the wedding is the aspect of Much Ado About Nothing which to modern readers might justify the play's title. This incident and the two characters involved are strongly tied to the generic formula of comic (but typically bordering on tragic) love complications and their eventual resolution. The whole originates from the older stories that make up the play's sources (reappearing in various forms in Othello, The Winter's Tale and Cymbeline [Cook 1980, 31]), and is an obvious target for the “mouldy tale” accusation. As such, it tends not to attract the same sort of interest as those things we like to think of as uniquely “Shakespearean,” epitomized in Much Ado in the characters of Beatrice and Benedick and their verbal battles. It is, after all, the “gloriously witty couple” (Branagh 1993, vii) that many famous acting duos choose to play. The challenge, then, is to transhistoricize the characters of Hero—described by one actress as “A dull and boring girl” and “a terrible part which it is almost impossible to make interesting” (quoted in Cook 49)—and Claudio—“an impossibly unromantic figure” (Mulryne 1965, 35; original emphasis)—and their predicament such that postmodern readers can accommodate them within their own culture.

One solution lies in teaching Much Ado in concert with the vast amount of material about the Charles and Diana scandals in the British royal family. Leonato's household is for all intents and purposes a court in miniature, and the manners and attitudes of its members and guests represent the traditions and customs common to contemporary European nobility. These traditions, customs, and attitudes still exist in the form of the various royal families of Europe, and nowhere more so than in the British monarchy, its very large extended family, and the aristocratic system actively promulgated in British society. Attitudes that the members of this system no longer have any influence must be qualified not only by the fact of their still considerable wealth, but by the amount of media space they continue to occupy and the debates in which they feature, for instance in Australia, where the pros and cons of republicanism flare up with every royal indiscretion revealed. The place of gossip, slander, and scandal in any construction of fame or celebrity is an important aspect of research into the lives of “the rich and famous,” and provides a convenient and, in terms of the popular culture in which our students are steeped, relevant point of entry for comparing the contexts and concerns of Shakespeare's era with our own.
Leonato may use the image of his daughter “fall’n / Into a pit of ink” (4.1.139-40) to describe the blackening of her honor, but the British royals would regard this as a very apt description of the gallons of printer’s ink expended in exposing every aspect of their lives and reputations in recent years. The anecdotes, observations, surmise, gossip, and media “beat-ups” published in unchartable numbers are the modern equivalent of the old chronicles in which “most chroniclers tended to take their information as they found it, and made little attempt to separate fact from legend” (Abrams 1988, 26). The brief analysis that follows draws on a number of the more “respectable” of these latter-day chronicles: mainly works that have appeared in book form—although a number have been serialized in newspapers, particularly the Murdoch press—some shorter news items, and a television documentary. The Branagh film merits attention not only because for many students it is likely to be the first, if not the only, means of dealing with the play as a performance text, but for its part in the current celebrity/royal-watching process. Less squeamish researchers will find the pit of ink getting deeper (and murkier) as they delve into the seemingly endless mass of related material appearing in the tabloid press, gossip magazines, current affairs television, and even the odd mini-series. Nevertheless, the value of such an undertaking in terms of the space that it creates for Shakespeare study in the postmodern world, and for the light it sheds on our own culture, cannot be overestimated, and should by no means be regarded as trivial or undignified.

The question of Hero’s virginity is not simply one of whether or not she is a virgin. Don John’s scheme involves Claudio’s witnessing Hero supposedly playing the “contaminated stale” (2.2.25) the very night before her wedding, so the focus is not so much on virginity for its own sake as on “Hero’s disloyalty” (2.2.48) and subsequent rejection in the interests of what “would better fit [Claudio’s] honour” (3.2.104-5). Claudio’s denunciation of her at the wedding is nevertheless couched in analogies of chastity and its opposite.

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. …

(4.1.57-60)

His classical reference begs for comparison with the Dian[a] of our own era, the Princess of Wales, who, despite attacks from her in-laws, the publication of a taped phone conversation with an alleged lover, and photographs of her bathing in the Caribbean or working out in a gym, manages still to maintain—as Hero does to Claudio, indicated in his use of “seem” and not “seemed”—an aura of the wronged heroine and the victim of the machinations of palace and media.

Diana’s rise from “stunning mediocrity” (Dempster and Evans 1993, 58) to “Pop Princess” (Burchill 1992, 237) was a direct result of her suitability as a virgin bride for the Prince of Wales:

Unlike some of the prince’s previous girlfriends, she had no “past,” no lovers to “kiss and tell.” Nor had she been in love before; the prince could expect that, as her first love, he would also be her last. She was young enough to be moulded to the role of wife and mother according to the needs of the monarchy.

(Dimbleby, 16 Oct. 1994: 2.1)

Innocence makes Diana malleable—grist to the monarchy’s mill, to be refashioned into a future queen—and “in love.” Yet, just as Benedick ironically calls the newly smitten Claudio “Monsieur Love” (2.3.35-36) because one who “was wont to speak plain and to the purpose, like an honest man and a soldier” (18-19) has now become “the argument of his own scorn by falling in love” (11-12), so Charles, brought up in a family notorious for its lack of emotional display, was out of his depth in playing the Inamorato. Thus “the Prince’s
attitude towards women was hardly admirable,” and according to “one of his polo friends,” in a tone that might well be Benedick's, Charles “is shy, he is sensitive, he is sometimes devastatingly lonely, but he is also a shit” (Dempster and Evans 105). But what is not mentioned in the many unfavorable reminders of Charles's response “Whatever ‘in love’ means” in the television interview given after the announcement of their engagement, is that Diana choruses “Yes” (The Windsors part 4). The dynastic imperative forces love out into the margins of marriage—an optional, if desirable, extra; hence the importance of loyalty as the standard for judging the behavior of both Hero and Diana.

Claudio's efforts to assess Hero's suitability also seem quite loveless. He bothers Benedick with “Is she not a modest young lady?” (1.1.153) and “I pray thee tell me truly how thou lik'st her” (165-66), and to Don Pedro's recommendation that “the lady is very well worthy” he asks brazenly, “Hath Leonato any son, my lord?”—to be reassured that “she's his only heir” (274-75). In a similar mix of uncertainty and brashness, Charles formed one attachment after another, and had no qualms when “the faces [of his girlfriends] … were paraded—like bartered brides-to-be—before the populace for its delectation” (Dimbleby, 23 Oct. 1994: 2.2) by a story-hungry press. Meanwhile, “The difficulties of finding a suitable bride were becoming larger every day, given the age factor—the older Charles got, the more difficult it was going to be to find a convincing and tasteful virgin—and given the press attention that by now was building up around the issue” (Dempster and Evans 106). Wilson obviously has missed the point in wondering “how or where this obsession with virginity developed” (Wilson 1994, 48), but he notes that “by the time Prince Charles was thirty years old, the mood had reached fever pitch” (48).

Charles at last made his choice in Lady Diana Spencer, and the fever pitch was such that their wedding on 29 July 1981 became “the greatest ceremonial event ever mounted in the history of the British monarchy” (Dempster and Evans 126). It was “the subject of the stupendous, unimaginably intense observation: 600 million people watched it on television” (Wilson 175), with the Archbishop of Canterbury—crosier in hand like Prospero's staff—declaring it “the stuff of which fairy tales are made” (Dempster and Evans 126). But if the romance comedy tradition as employed by Shakespeare in the 1590s demonstrates anything, it is that the story often does not end with the wedding:

either a wedding is legalized or about to be celebrated, or a union is consummated, early or in the middle of the play, but then the completion of the marriage is abruptly interrupted, and the heroine or her allies must perform a difficult task or resolve a quandary connected with the law before there can be a celebration on the stage.

(Salingar 1974, 302)

In Much Ado, Hero is denounced in the “overtly 'theatrical setting’” of the church wedding itself (Mulryne 35), and must “die” in order to be “reborn” as the chaste and fitting bride for a suitably chastened Claudio. Diana, “a real-life Cinderella—a bride who had so recently been the unhappy child of a broken marriage, miraculously reborn as an instant princess” (Dempster and Evans 126), soon found herself and her marital problems exposed to “all eyes, tongues, minds, and injuries” (4.1.243) on the stage of the world media.

In hindsight, there were signs threatening the fairy-tale image of the Wales' marriage from the outset. Charles, ever vacillating, and now lacking the guidance of his uncle the Earl Mountbatten, his Benedick and Don Pedro rolled into one but killed by an IRA bomb in 1979, came close to calling off the engagement, especially when Diana asked, “Would you marry me if I were not a virgin?” (Dempster and Evans 118). On a broader social scale, at the actual time of the wedding there were riots, looting, and burning in various parts of England, most notably at Toxteth, carried out by a “deprived, unhappy, disadvantaged population” (The Windsors part 4). The very minor position occupied by ordinary people in any construction of romance is made very clear in representations such as Branagh's film, where they are servants, revelers (only a step or two away from becoming rioters), and the crowd at the wedding, but voiceless and powerless otherwise. Their only
champions in the play, Dogberry and Verges, are portrayed at the very least as ridiculous and in the Branagh film as “mad” (Branagh 58 and 75), and the household breathes a sigh of relief as they exit.

Phyllis Rackin notes that “In a chronicle, the story of England is the story of its kings” (24), and Salingar points out that during the 1590s, “Shakespeare was writing comedies in alternation with the national history plays … And his comedies are related in form to his chronicles of the national monarchy” (254). Both form a part of the publicity that the Tudor monarchs actively sought “to authenticate their questionable claim to the throne” (Rackin 1990, 4), and Steven Mullaney's observation about how this was achieved makes clear how the process of textualizing authority positions us—the “common people”—as outside looking in:

In forums ranging from wonder cabinets to court masques and popular romances, from royal entries and travellers' narratives to the popular playhouses of Elizabethan London, the pleasures of the strange are invoked to solicit our attention as spectators, auditors, or readers.

(Quoted in Rackin 15)

Here we are, too, peering through chinks in the palace walls by means of television (the “wonder cabinet”), newspapers, and fifth columnist royal observers. The Windsors have been branded “the greatest performing monarchy in history” (Dempster and Evans 126) in their own efforts to court popularity and publicity, but as the current chronicles tell, they have paid a heavy price. Instead of being satisfied with covering royal turns at special occasions and then going away, like the helpful but aggravating Dogberry, the media intensified its royal watching to the point where they have been accused of anything from causing the breakdown of the three Windsor children's marriages to actively plotting the overthrow of the monarchy itself in the interests of republicanism. Shakespeare's plays, too, position audiences as royal watchers: his “stage world gravitates towards the great house or the court. He depicts the genius from the outside, but they stand at the centre” (Salingar 255). But while “the Privy Council and the Court nourished the professional drama … because it served their own interests” (Montrose 58), the drama in turn could not always accommodate the wish-fulfillment of its patrons. The requirements of the genre, rather than “doctrinal ends” (66), determine the world-picture. Call the tale a romantic comedy and the protagonists are set “on the threshold of marriage and parenthood” but not yet at the stage of “the consummation and procreation which guarantee the continuity of the socio-economic order” (67). On the other hand, call it a chronicle and the dictates of time take over, and “Time reveals not the restorative action of romance but the destructive action of history” (Kastan 1982, 75).

In recording the action of time, the chronicles of Diana and Charles show how the marriage soon made Diana feel the opposite of the fairy-tale princess. In Much Ado, Hero's continued attraction for the menfolk despite (and maybe even because of) her supposed guilt is revealed in the curiously paradoxical terms of her denunciation at the wedding, where she is called “pretty lady” (4.1.98), yet “most foul, most fair” (103) and “pure impiety and impious purity” (104). Diana, rapidly acquiring star quality “of truly international magnitude” (Dempster and Evans 138) the more she was courted by the media and the public, and for whom “the world was now literally a stage” (Burchill 238), nevertheless felt herself “the biggest prostitute in the world” in having “to live someone else's idea of who and what [she] should be” (Morton 1994, 2:1). Although the target of Don John's calumny, Hero is more the victim of the credulousness of Don Pedro and Claudio and their puffed-up sense of honor, not to mention her own father's willingness to join in the denunciation. Similarly, whatever stories might be circulated in the media, Diana's feelings of guilt and inadequacy arise from the attitude of the royal household itself, exemplified by the “four stinging letters from the Duke of Edinburgh” which “argued that Diana was far from innocent in the breakdown of her marriage and that it was difficult to blame Charles for seeking comfort with [Camilla] Parker Bowles” (Morton 1994, 2:2). By contrast, the Duke wrote Charles “a long and sympathetic letter … praising what he saw as his son's saint-like fortitude” (Dimbleby, 23 Oct. 1994: 2.3). Small wonder that Diana “began to suspect plots against her” (Morton 1994, 2:2), or that the rest of the chronicles to date tend to deal with Diana's exacting retribution from the Windsors in ways that cast her as Hero, Claudio, and even Don John. The necessarily brief summary that
follows is nevertheless sufficiently revealing.

As Claudio she becomes jealous and uncertain herself, suspicious “that her husband was persistently unfaithful” despite Charles's Hero-esque “declarations of loyalty and fidelity” (Dimbleby, 16 Oct. 1994: 2.2). As Hero she feels martyred to the cause of the monarchy: “Docile Diana” (Dempster and Evans 141) through whom “the royal family would be renewed, protected and loved for generations to come” (133). Yet just as Hero is reborn “Another Hero” while reasserting herself “a maid” (5.4.62 and 65), so Diana has re-emerged as “the Princess as Pop Star” and “an icon of sexy saintliness” (Burchill 240 and 243)—no longer a maid, to be sure, but one who attracts a loyalty that operates “beyond divorce and dishonour” (244). Part of this process of self-fashioning (to use a term of New Historicist guru, Stephen Greenblatt) involved Diana's almost certain active collusion in the production of that landmark chronicle of the Windsors, Andrew Morton's Diana: Her True Story, which painted the Wales' marriage as fraught with problems between an insensitive husband and a long-suffering wife (Wilson 1994, 54 and 143). Charles in turn authorized Dimbleby's biography, initiating “an extraordinary war … in print between the Prince and his wife … to bring [each] other into ridicule and contempt” (144). Like Don John, both parties cry out, “How canst thou cross this marriage?” (2.2.8).

It is as a potentially destructive influence on the Windsors that Diana plays Don John. In a secretly taped telephone conversation to a supposed lover in December 1989 published in the press as the so-called “Squidgygate” transcript in 1992, Diana bemoans the emptiness she feels “after all I've done for this fucking family” (Dempster and Evans 240), and makes other disparaging remarks about the Windsors.7 New historicist criticism often focuses on the way rulers legitimize their authority by making use of “already constructed dichotomies which establish the deviance of certain classes and groups” in order to “cast out specific others” (Selden 97). One of these forms of deviance is perceived as “sexual liberty” (97); but if the “demonisation of sexual deviance” is a means of reasserting “the relations of power” (97), then the assertion of sexual liberty can be regarded as a means of establishing a form of autonomy from the main power structure. Diana's apparent adultery (in word if not deed) is an assertion of this autonomy, and reinforces the chastity/loyalty association that prizes the virgin with no other loyalties, past or present. The extent to which she has become powerful enough in her own right to resist being cast out by the palace (and of the latter's growing impotence in her case) may be gauged in comparison to the fate of her sister-in-law, Sarah, Duchess of York.

Sarah tried to follow Diana's example by getting the press onside in her own marriage breakdown with Prince Andrew. But with the publication of the notorious “toe-sucking” photographs, the demonization of Sarah was complete: “Her position was irrecoverable … and her sordid life … contributed to the general cheapening of the Royal House in the eyes of the Press” (Wilson 1994, 153).8 Curiously, the Branagh film chose for its Margaret character a red-haired and freckled actress very reminiscent of Sarah. Yet in the film's depiction of the indiscretion which Borachio sets up to discredit Hero (which is only reported in playtext), there is no real possibility of an audience mistaking the Margaret-actress for the petite brunette cast as Hero.9 The film (made in 1992, The Windsors' annus horribilis) seems to highlight the moralistic/voyeuristic dichotomy intrinsic to our constructions of celebrity: “Everyone agreed that it was morally insupportable that such photographs [of Sarah's St. Tropez holiday] should be in circulation, and everyone bought the Daily Mirror on the morning that they were published” (Wilson 152). Helped by the conventions of romantic comedy, Margaret finds forgiveness in Leonato's household; lacking the support of media, public, and palace, Sarah is banished from the royal circle “under a cloud” (Campbell 1993, 207).

The transhistoricization of Much Ado opens up many other possibilities for analysis. One is the use of trickery and deception as romantic comedy trope and for gathering news. In the Branagh film point-of-view camera angles, eavesdropping, masquerade, and decoying are all used to excellent effect, suggesting paparazzi with telephoto lenses, bugged telephones, leaked stories to the press, and other devices that have eeked out the Diana and Charles chronicles. Another issue is the nature of status, privilege, and celebrity, which not only depend upon publicity yet are so easily its victim, but also seek legitimation through mutual association. Thus
members of the royal family try to broaden their popularity base by sharing the spotlight with film and media stars, from the Mountbattens visiting Chaplin in the thirties to the Windsors taking part in a celebrity TV game show in the eighties. Again, the Branagh film is a useful springboard in its transatlantic mingling of old- and new-world dynasties of stars celebrating a common Shakespeare heritage.

This discussion has attempted to support and develop the ways in which classroom teachers keep open a dynamic space for Shakespeare in the postmodern world, which is much more than just helping him to maintain a precarious foothold associated with half-forgotten rituals in rarefied environments. As Hamlet urges Polonius to see the members of the acting troupe “well-bestowed” and “well used,” because they (“and presumably their product” [Patterson 1988, 100]) “are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time,” so should we teachers of Shakespeare—frequently in danger of becoming Polonius-like in our opinions of our own learning—not scorn the use of the chronicles of our time to bridge the critical gap between “universal human themes” and the specific historical and cultural circumstances of a text's production and reception.

Notes

1. See Hawthorn 6-7 for an explanation of aporia. My use here is in the generalized sense of “irresolvable doubts and hesitations thrown up by the reading of the text” (Hawthorn 7). While Hawthorn points out that the term is “not normally used … in a pejorative sense” by critics (7), I believe that my use of the term is apt. Getting students to the stage of using this condition as a “site” where they discover “the freedom to play with the text” (7) is of course the rationale of this paper.

2. See Humphreys 5-23 for a detailed discussion of the play's sources.

3. Throughout this paper, New Historicism/Historicist denotes the specific (mainly American) school of criticism; new historicism/historicist is used for the general poststructuralist movement regardless of national/cultural adherence.

4. Wilson also employs the term “chronicles” to describe these texts (for example, page 46).

5. Some idea of these “faces” may be gained from the photographs in Dempster and Evans and in Campbell. The photographs in Morton, Diana: Her True Story, not only parade the stages of Diana's life before the reader, but do so in an intimate and perhaps even questionable manner, in effect positioning the reader as “catalogue browser” and Diana as potential “mail-order bride.”

6. See, for example, The Windsors part 4 for opinions about the role of Rupert Murdoch, whose News Corporation papers have regularly printed controversial material about the Windsors. Murdoch's status as Australian-turned-American citizen with huge interests and influence in Britain carries many resonances for an “empire writes back” perspective and critique. His father, Keith, a news correspondent in World War I, set a family precedent for attacks on the British establishment by daring to lay the blame for the military disaster at Gallipoli in 1915 on the ineptitude of British generalship; see C. E. W. Bean, Anzac to Amiens (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1946), 170.

7. Charles, of course was guilty of his own indiscretions in the “Camillagate” tape made at almost exactly the same time as Diana's conversation, and published in January 1993. While there was obviously a great deal of the double standard operating in relation to the two incidents in official circles, Charles seems to have lost much popular support as a result of the revelation, and “A sense of shame tormented him for months” (Dempster and Evans 220). Transcripts of both tapes appear in Dempster and Evans 231-64. See also Campbell 157-58 for some startling claims about parts of “Squidgygate” not released for publication.

8. The details of the incident are described in Dempster and Evans 205-8, who claim that the revelation of “Squidgygate” four days later actually saved Sarah from further ordeal by the media (208). It should be borne in mind that Sarah was already separated from Andrew at the time; Diana and Charles were not yet separated when the “Squidgygate” and “Camillagate” tapes were made.

9. “One seriously cool gal” claims the caption to an off-camera shot of her with sunglasses and cleavage (Branagh 126), as if desperately trying to offset the “boring girl” image of Hero and substitute instead a version of “pop princess.”
10. I owe the use of this quotation from *Hamlet* 2.2 to Patterson's very fine New Historicist “recovery” of the circumstances surrounding Shakespeare’s theater.

**References**


Much Ado about Nothing (Vol. 88): Introduction

Much Ado about Nothing

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 Extraites des oeuvres 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.
[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 Kallirrhoe. 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 Blanc (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,\(^3\) 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.\(^4\) 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?).\(^5\) 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, gullied, 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. Horrified, 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'. 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 'Iinogen' 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 Polynesso 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, 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 Leonato'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 bumblings produce 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 achieve 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 intriguer 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 intriguer'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 inhuman 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.

(II) BEATRICE AND BENEDICK

Beatrice and Benedick themselves, though not referable to precise sources, owe much to two traditions. These are those of the scoffer 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 scoffer, 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 twinkle 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 cruely 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 merye conceytes, and in every man’s countenaunce … a lovynge 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 manliness 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 indevoyr 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.20 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.21
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 critic, nay, a night-watch constable;  
> Than whom no mortal so magnificent! … Go to; it is a plague  
> Of his almosty 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 stayd 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 charde 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 Iustyces that had the charde, 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.\textsuperscript{28}

Dogberry's 'source', if seminally in some worthy of Grendon, lies rather among these anticipations, combined
with certain stage precedents,\textsuperscript{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 \textit{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 justice of peace';\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{31}

Notes

2. C. T. Prouty discusses and reprints this work, from the sole surviving copy in the Huntington Library,
in \textit{The Sources of 'Much Ado About Nothing'} (1950).
\textit{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 \textit{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. \textit{The Faerie Queene,} VI.vii. The parallel was pointed out by A. F. Potts in ‘Spenserian “Courtesy” and
“Temperance” in Shakespeare's \textit{Much Ado About Nothing},’ \textit{SAB} XVII (1942), and developed by C. T.
Prouty in \textit{The Sources of ‘Much Ado About Nothing},’ pp. 53-5.
11. See Mary Augusta Scott, ‘\textit{The Book of the Courtyer:} a possible source of Benedick and Beatrice’,
\textit{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 \textit{Much Ado} he had done nothing in dialogue
comparable to the freedom and ease of the \textit{conversazioni} in \textit{Il Cortegiano} (a dubious point); (iii) that,
wishing to brighten the semi-tragedy of Claudio and Hero, he found in \textit{The Courtyer} ‘a charming
witty pair [Lord Gaspare Pallavicino and the Lady Emilia Pia] in a dramatic dialogue’; (iv) that
though in their witty sparrings (like \textit{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 \textit{The Courtyer of Count Baldassar Castilio;} further editions followed in 1577 and 1588,
before the date of \textit{Much Ado}. Roger Ascham, in \textit{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
\textit{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 \textit{Satire
(ll. 27-50) the punctilious courtier is ‘the absolute Castilio,—/ He that can all the points of courtship show’. Everard Guilpin's Skialetlia (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 Lly, centres his picture of Cortegiano-like brilliance on what is also known as courtship—the verbal technique of wooing’ (op. cit., p. 334).
22. LLL, III.i.164-8, 191-3.
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’.
27. Shakespeare Society Papers I (1844), pp. 3-4.
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 Lly's Endimion see below, III.iii.i, 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)], Timbreo 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 and 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." 4 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 so."

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.(7)

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.” 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.” 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
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. 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.

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 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 mariage 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.

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 wooed 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:

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.” 19

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.” 20 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. 21

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.” 22 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. Fé ничie, 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.'” 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.” 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.” 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 …” 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 …” 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 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.”

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:

\[
\text{Of this matter is little Cupid's crafty arrow made,}
\text{That only wounds by hearsay. (34)}
\]

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,” 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.” 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.” Thus these two are viewed as a sort of culmination of “the amorous conflict” which began “in the poetry of Wyatt.” 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 laughes, 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, whilst 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 spil, 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.” 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.” 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.”

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 curst.”\(^{56}\) 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 Braggadochio.\(^{60}\) 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.”\(^{61}\) Braggadochio 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.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{That idle name of loue, and louers life,} \\
\text{As losse of time, and vertues enimy} \\
\text{I euer scord, and ioyd to stirre vp strife,} \\
\text{In middest of their mournful Tragedy,} \\
\text{Ay wont to laugh, when them I heard to cry,} \\
\text{And blow the fire, which them to ashes brent ...(62)}
\end{align*}
\]

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,
Both soonest fall in disauentrous fight,
And yeeldes his cautiue neck to victours most despight.(63)

The blind god has triumphed over the rebel

Whose prouder vaunt that proud auenging boy
Did soone plucke 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.” 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.” 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 flouting jack, to tell us Cupid is a good hare-finder, and Vulcan a rare carpenter?” 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.” 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 scorners 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 auenging boy [will] soone plucche 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 fester's 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:
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 lover 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 lover” 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,”84 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.
2. Much Ado, I, i, 298-307. Of this passage Hazlitt (Characters of Shakespear's Plays [London, 1884], p. 210) 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 dribbed 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; XLI/19; XXXI/37; CXV/3.

19. Requests, LXV/55.

20. Requests, XCVI/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.

34. Much Ado, III, i, 21-23.


37. Ibid.

38. The Love-Game Comedy, p. 212.

39. Ibid., p. 231.

40. Ibid., p. 223.

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.

45. The Faerie Queene, VI, 7, 37.

46. Ibid., VI, 7, 38.
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.

62. The Faerie Queene, I, 9, 10.
63. Ibid., I, 9, 11.
64. Ibid., I, 9, 12.
65. Much Ado, I, i, 39-42.
66. Ibid., III, ii, 10-12.
67. Ibid., I, i, 184-187.
68. Ibid., II, i, 199.
70. George Gascoigne’s A Hundreth Sundrie Flowres, ll. 49-52, p. 203.
72. Ibid., pp. 80-82.
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."

   A Hundreth Sundrie Flowres, pp. 144-145.
Criticism: Character Studies: 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 every one 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.
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.

(1.1.290-93)

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 bearward, 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.”

(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
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” (1. 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 consummated, 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 had for a certainty, Don Pedro's patronage.

Apparently sensing that he is headed in a dangerous direction, Don Pedro suddenly breaks off. 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.
—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” (I. 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!” (II. 131-32). At this point, Claudio clearly contemplates shaming Hero in the church, and Don Pedro indicates a willingness to back him (II. 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” (I. 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 (II. 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 (I. 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 snap'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 whilst 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 ashamed?

MARGARET:


(3.4.28-31)

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, usurps 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:

Prince, thou art sad, get thee a wife, get thee a wife.  
There is no staff more reverend than one tipp'd with horn.

(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.

**Criticism: Character Studies: 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).\(^4\) (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.\(^5\) 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 “Poped” 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.\(^6\) 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. 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 néece, 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.

(443)
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 obay” (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” (In. 2,207).
Innogen and Guendolene are not necessarily meant to be contrasted in Holinshed, but the Quarto of *Much adoe* indicates a possible rereading of Holinshed that underscores the divide between these two figures. For the Guendolene plot is also a part of *Much adoe* 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, signior 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* (ln. 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 (ln. 152), and this self-description (his first line) is often taken as a declaration of moroseness, or, as Hero puts it, “melancholy” (ln. 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 stooed 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.11 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.

PRINCE[:]
I will not heare you.

(Ins. 2,194-95)

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 satisfie this good old man” (1n. 2,361), he will “bend under any heavy weight, / That heele enioyne me to” (1ns. 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 Adu* 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-Directions 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.

**Works Cited**


———. “‘The very names of Persons’: Editing and the Invention of Dramatick Character.” Kastan and Stallybrass 88-96.


Criticism: Production Reviews: Patrick Carnegy (review date 18 May 2002)


[In the following review, Carnegy offers a positive assessment of Gregory Doran's 2002 Royal Shakespeare Company production of Much Ado about Nothing, contending that the director crafted a delicate balance between the drama's urbane comedy and sinister undertones.]

The brilliant artifice of the wit in Much Ado is a dance over an abyss, and yet it needs firm ground if its steps are not to falter. What draws us to the play is delight in its exquisitely protracted verbal fencing between Beatrice and Benedick, played in Gregory Doran's new production by Harriet Walter and Nicholas le Prevost. Their sallies can bear a wealth of interpretation but need a context that will make light of the absurdities in the plotting.

Doran and his designer Stephen Brimson Lewis go the whole way with the Sicilian thing. Leonato's sun-baked terracotta villa rises up impressively behind Messina's town square; dogs bark, the famous marionettes are put through their paces, ragazzi tear about and bands strike up.

The period is quite precisely May 1936 when Mussolini's troops returned in triumph from Ethiopia (thus injecting new meaning into Claudio's naughty joke about being prepared to marry anyone but an 'Ethiope'). So, yes, it's once again that fascist milieu beloved of today's directors, though refreshing in that ominous
political overtones are absent. High spirits prevail. Dogberry and his Watch are the kind of idiotic law-enforcement officers cherished in any happy-go-lucky society. Don Pedro and his men look as though they could be in the army for the uniforms. The only discord of any consequence is that between Beatrice and Benedick. Against this, of course, has to be set the machinations of the blackshirt baddy Don John and his accomplices, but in truth they're rather like Herr Flick and his crew in 'Allo 'Allo, cranking the action along and really just there to wind up the fun.

This, then, is the kind of verismo staging that sends you back to the Sicilian storyteller Giovanni Verga and Mascagni's Cavalleria Rusticana. There is, however, a small but not insignificant problem in that Shakespeare's characters are not hot-blooded Sicilians but Brits, far better at playing with emotions in words than living them through. What you've got here is Shakespeare's characters as tourists abroad. Not that this really matters unless you've been seduced by the Sicilian milieu and are puzzled why everyone's so fearfully English.

Harriet Walter begins promisingly enough in macho-Sicilian style by straddling the Despatch Rider's motorcycle (a role known neither to Quarto nor Folio). Later, in fuchsia-pink and with flowers in her hair, she has a stab at Carmen. Most disconcerting, though, is that for the crucial scene when defences tumble and cupid triumphs, she appears in appalling baggy trousers and with a sun-hat slung on her back as though she were Cherie in Tuscany. But of course it's the words that count and Walter puts them across with her characteristically sharp relish. When Benedick remarks that they are ‘too wise to woo peaceably’ she drops her jaw to flash her vixen's teeth. Doubtless, the impossible Cherie outfit simply signals that the folly of love has momentarily gained the upper hand.

A touch of frustration is evident in Walter's engaging performance as she's getting very little sexual energy back from le Prevost's Benedick. She's so fired up that Hero (Kirsten Parker) has to hose her down, while this Benedick is a bachelor almost beyond ignition. Prevost puts him across as a sardonically dry stalwart of the officer's mess. Settled down with his whisky to deplore Claudio's infatuation with Hero, he can't help twitching as he contemplates the kind of woman who might make a fool of him too. He is measured and not fantastical in his sparring with Beatrice. Even when they've declared their loves, he quickly retrieves his military bearing and brushes her hand from his shoulder as he departs to kill Claudio. You quake to think of their future.

Other sexual politics are also at work. Clive Wood's Prince, Don Pedro, is a commandant with a weakness for his junior fellow-officer Claudio (John Hopkins) verging on the inadvisable. One senses that the resonantly masculine Wood (who should have been playing Antony rather than Enobarbus in the Antony and Cleopatra running in repertory with Much Ado), was less than perfectly in tune with this camp perspective on Pedro.

This is a Much Ado rich in high jinks and vivid theatricality, but Doran eventually gives full measure to the darker side of the play. The transition from sunshine to shadow during Hero's cruelly aborted wedding is stunningly effective. And here Gary Waldhorn's impressive performance as Leonato, Hero's father, is crucial. In a chilling instant his urbanity and good humour yield to an anger and thirst for vengeance of truly Sicilian intensity. Much Ado may be a comedy, but Doran is surely right to insist we shouldn't forget the less than cheerful vision at its core.

Criticism: Production Reviews: Sarah Hemming (review date 8 August 2002)

In the following review of the 2002 Royal Shakespeare Company production of Much Ado about Nothing directed by Gregory Doran, Hemming contends that Doran's interpretation was unable to adequately link the dark and comic aspects of Shakespeare's drama.

Even Shakespeare's sunniest comedies have dark shadows. In Much Ado About Nothing the focus is on Beatrice and Benedick, the two sceptics whose romance is conducted through denial. But equally important is the contrasting love affair of Claudio and Hero, during which Claudio cruelly and publicly jilts Hero at the altar. What price love here? Little wonder Beatrice and Benedick are so suspicious of it. Gregory Doran's RSC production astutely aims to illuminate this context by setting the play not in 16th-century Messina, but in the Sicily of 1936—the returning soldiers have just conducted Mussolini's campaign in Ethiopia. In the world of The Godfather, the strict codes of honour and revenge make sense; in a country under Fascism, the play's concern with loyalty and betrayal hit home. It's a great idea and the production looks lovely on Stephen Brimson Lewis's evocative, sun-baked set, and yet somehow it doesn't quite convince.

While the programme notes talk about vendettas and the subservient role of women in this machismo-dominated world, you don't feel this oppression on stage, and so you miss the full horror of Hero's impotence. Occasionally the setting really works—when Hero's aged uncle suddenly draws a nasty little knife to threaten Claudio, for instance, then you feel the brooding violence that otherwise is largely absent. Elsewhere, there is a slight uncertainty about the staging, which often leads to performers telegraphing the subtext. Margaret, Hero's attendant, is a woman of lax morals—so here she sits with her legs wide apart. Don Pedro can't get a wife and here it's clear that he is really gay—an interesting idea, in this macho setting, but Clive Wood's performance is so wildly camp that it loses all subtlety.

The comedy too is often rather stilted. The eavesdropping scenes are funny, but marred by overplaying. It is a nice touch, for instance, for Hero (Kirsten Parker) and Ursula (Noma Dumezweni) to hose down the screen of creepers behind which Beatrice is hiding, but the gag is rather spoiled by overdoing it. And the whole comic subplot with Dogberry and his watch, always difficult to make funny, doesn't come off at all here.

To be fair, the production does also have some inspired comic touches. Benedick, recovering the morning after the party, drops two Alka Seltzer tablets into his water—then covers the glass to dim the resultant fizz. And the two leads are excellent. Harriet Walter and Nicholas le Prevost make a mature Beatrice and Benedick, which lends pain to their wariness. Walter's Beatrice has a brittle wit, born of experience, and her rage at Hero's fate is palpable. Le Prevost is a superb Benedick: droll, world-weary, and wonderfully gawky in love. He plays his best lines with lovely timing and his attempts to read meaning into Beatrice's curt summons into dinner are delightful.

John Hopkins gives a fine performance as the superficial, self-regarding Claudio, and Gary Waldhorn brings expert timing and dignity to the part of Hero's father. And with the big scenes the production comes into its own. Hero's disgrace at the altar is painfully good, and, in a nice detail, the little pageboy is whisked away as the scene turns ugly. This is an attractive staging, full of such thoughtful little touches, and bowled forward by the brilliant energy of the two leads. Yet overall, the production rarely seems to relax enough to release both the comedy and the dark undercurrents of the play and so it misses its potential.

Criticism: Production Reviews: Gabriella Boston (review date 16 November 2002)

[In the following review, Boston admires the Jazz Age setting of director Mark Lamos's 2002 Shakespeare Theatre production of Much Ado about Nothing and praises Karen Ziemba's compelling performance in the role of Beatrice.]

*Much Ado About Nothing* at the Shakespeare Theatre is really something. It's energetic and funny, with fantastic acting and a set design that transports the audience back to F. Scott Fitzgerald land.

What better time in which to set this—one of Shakespeare's lightest comedies—than in the fun-filled Roaring '20s?

*Much Ado,* like many of the Bard's plays, revolves around mistaken identities, two couples in love and a mean-spirited, melancholy bad guy as well as an upstanding, refined good guy, who doubles as a matchmaker.

One couple—Beatrice, played by the radiant Karen Ziemba, and Benedick, played by funnyman Dan Snook—provide most of the comedy. They do it through body language, witty lines, dances and slapstick, eliciting plenty of chuckles and laughs from the audience.

Shortly after the curtain rises—revealing a bright green lawn, manicured bushes and long white balustrades (the makings of a '20s estate)—the two Bs tell us they have sworn off love, which in Shakespearean lingo means they are bound for each other's arms, but only after a bunch of twists and turns in the plotline.

The other couple, of the traditionally romantic ilk, consists of Hero, played charmingly by Kathleen Early, and her blond suitor, Claudio, played by Barrett Foa (who looks as if he's barely out of high school).

The matchmaker for both couples is Don Pedro, Claudio's brother, played by the handsome Peter Rini; he gives his role just the right balance of dignity and playfulness.

Enter the bad guy: Don John, illegitimate brother of Don Pedro, played by Glenn Fleshler, who gives a good amount of disdain for the happy and beautiful.

Don John convinces young Claudio that Hero is being unfaithful, and chaos reigns. Hero is abandoned by almost everyone at the altar where she was to be married to Claudio.

Even her father, Leonato, played by a delightful Michael Santo, scorns her and leaves her, collapsed in a puddle of tears.

Beatrice and Benedick, as well as a good-natured friar played by Edwin C. Owens, stay to console her. The two Bs vow to make things right.

The comedy that ensues includes funny, fast-paced performances by watchmen Daniel Stowell and Marsh Hanson. Hero's gentlewomen, played by Jordan Simmons and Celia Madeoy, are also a vibrant part of the farce (showing Shakespeare's affinity for creating comedy among common men as well as high-class folks).

The true star of this performance is Miss Ziemba. She is commanding in her role, showing her amazing range as Beatrice as she goes from happy to sad and flirtatious to compassionate.

A few steps behind Miss Ziemba in skill and radiance is Mr. Snook. His body language and grimaces are as funny as the lines he delivers, and he shows the kind of stage confidence his role as a womanizer and jester demands.
Both actors show great skill in making the transition from being standoffish to being very much in love with each other.

Enhancing Miss Ziemba's and Mr. Snook's colorful performances are the peppy set design by Riccardo Hernandez and costumes by Catherine Zuber, which include hip-hugging dresses that look particularly festive during what feels like an impromptu Charleston.

The music, directed by Lynne Shankel, plays an important mood-setting role in this production. When things are happy, the music belongs to the jazz age, and when things take a turn for the worse, Shakespeare's near-contemporary J. S. Bach takes over, providing the right kind of solemnity.

Director Mark Lamos does a fine job of bringing out the best in this old, oft-played comedy while adding a few new touches. The casting is fabulous, the idea of bringing musical elements into the mix is innovative, and setting the plot in the '20s is engaging.

This excellent production is not to be missed.

Criticism: Production Reviews: Freddi Lipstein (review date spring-summer 2003)


[In the following review of the 2002/2003 staging of Much Ado about Nothing at the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, D.C., Lipstein observes director Mark Lamos's reliance on low comedy to carry the play.]

In the Shakespeare Theatre's production of Much Ado About Nothing, director Mark Lamos has consciously chosen to emphasize the lighter side of the play, an approach that results in irreconcilable internal inconsistencies. Set in the 1920s, the play opens with Leonato and other characters sitting in a lush green garden, their heads turning from side to side following the sound of a tennis ball making contact with a racquet—perhaps a prelude to the back and forth wit of Beatrice and Benedick. The set is a carefully manicured lawn, reached by white marble stairways on either side and arched ivy-covered doorways in the back. Above is a walkway with a low marble balustrade. The movable trees and bushes are all neatly shaped pyramids.

As the messenger arrives to announce Don Pedro's return from the war, Beatrice and Hero enter from opposite sides of the lawn in chase of the tennis ball that has been “mishit.” The sunglasses and straw hats, lightweight suits, and Hero's and Beatrice's 1920s vintage white tennis frocks signal that it is summer. Later, at Leonato's feast, women wear colorful flapper-style dresses, and the masks at the ball are reminiscent of Mardi Gras.

From their first encounter, it is clear that this Benedick is no match for this Beatrice. Karen Ziemba is an intelligent and perky Beatrice, whose wit is not acerbic but good-natured. Benedick is not her intellectual equal. To compensate, Lamos has Benedick play to the audience, always taking us into his confidence, sharing his thoughts, and revealing a certain vulnerability. He is not a tough soldier hardened against women but, rather, a “professed tyrant” out of insecurity. He is easily gulled once he is “confident” that Beatrice actually loves him.

The gulling scenes are played as low comedy. Benedick sends his boy to fetch a book. The boy returns with a book as Benedick, by now hiding behind a bush, shoos him away as if Claudio, Leonato, and Don Pedro had not already seen him. Don Pedro, Leonato, and Claudio play the gulling over the top. Leonato, responding to
the suggestion that Beatrice counterfeits affection for Benedick, over-emotes “Oh God! Counterfeit?” When Don Pedro asks “What effects of passion shows she?”, Leonato is suddenly at a loss, and he looks to the others for help before he lamely comes up with “She will sit you—you heard my daughter tell you how” (2.3.107-11). They are so involved in weaving their deception that they fail to notice that Benedick has moved his hiding place. As they look around, Benedick's boy re-enters with a stack of books and leads them to where Benedick is now hiding.

When they exit, Benedick takes a few seconds to let the message sink in and then almost shrieks “Whoa!” and shakes himself. He then comes forward and takes the audience into his confidence as he rationalizes his instant attitude adjustment. When Beatrice comes to bid him come in to dinner, he strikes a pose to thank her but is thrown off guard by her response before he recovers and tries to interpret her “double meaning.”

Beatrice's gulling takes place among sheets hanging on the clothesline. Hero and Ursula weave among the sheets, and Beatrice “hides” in front of a sheet when they are behind, then ducks behind the sheet as they emerge. When they sense that she is hooked, they begin taking the sheets off the line. Beatrice moves among the sheets as they come down until she is standing in front of the last one. She runs behind a bush as they unpin the sheet. Her contemplation of the revelation of Benedick's affection is much cooler than Benedick's, but there is still the same sense that Hero and Ursula have played on her vulnerability. She is no less insecure than Benedick, but she has a harder time letting go of her defensive quick wit.

Don John's deception, although it results in the devastation of Hero, does not seem to be motivated by a deep hatred of his brother or of Claudio but, rather, by boredom and delight in making mischief for the sake of making mischief. The Dogberry-Verges scenes, with the potential for tedium, were well paced. Dogberry was a good-natured officer, the three characters of the “watch” appearing almost American Gothic with the tools of their trades.

The downside of Lamos' choice to emphasize the lighter aspects of the play is that Benedick must fight to regain his character in the second part of the play. When Benedick approaches the weeping Beatrice and protests his love for her, the text suggests tension, even potential shock, when she tests his love by asking him to “Kill Claudio,” but this line invariably resulted in laughter, halting the movement toward a deeper relationship between Beatrice and Benedick and lightening the seriousness of the shame and hurt to Hero.

The Friar emerges as the strong character in the rejection scene. He takes charge of his “lost” flock, advises them, and almost succeeds in reaching to the darker or deeper aspects of the play, but his small part, standing alone, cannot bridge the gap the director has chosen to create.

The production ends on a characteristically light note, with lively dancing, including a Charleston.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Russell Jackson (review date summer 2003)**


[In the following excerpted review of the 2002/2003 Royal Shakespeare Company season at Stratford-upon-Avon, Jackson summarizes the major dramatic movements and principal character interpretations that made up Gregory Doran's generally well-received staging of Much Ado about Nothing.]

The first two plays in the Stratford season were cross-cast in the supporting roles but did not share the same principals: Harriet Walter (Beatrice) and Nicholas Le Prevost (Benedick) appeared only in Much Ado About
Nothing, and Stuart Wilson and Sinead Cusack played only Antony and Cleopatra. Of the two productions, Doran’s Much Ado was the more successful, A permanent (and very solid-looking) set showed the exterior of Leonato’s villa stretching diagonally across and up the stage from the left-hand corner. The large porch, with a balcony reached by a flight of steps, dominated the center of the stage, while the downstage playing area represented the garden or a street, and the lighting on the warm sandstone evoked heat and Italian sunshine. For the garden scenes a trellis of greenery could be run across the stage in front of the house, and the chapel was represented by introducing an altar on the extreme left, a statue of the Virgin by the door, and rows of chairs to suggest the nave: the porch of the house now did duty as the entrance to the sacristy. Unlike [Kenneth] Branagh, Doran and his designer, Stephen Brimson Lewis, chose an urban rather than pastoral setting and indicated a specific time period as well. This was Sicily in the 1930s: Don John (Stephen Campbell-Moore) and Conrade (Ian Drysdale) wore the black shirts of fascisti, who might have been returning from the invasion of Abyssinia. I write “might have been” because there can be no exact parallel between the romantic military campaign in which Claudio has acquitted himself well and few have been lost with Mussolini’s far-from-credible imperial adventure.

However, so long as no one mentioned the war, the shift in period served the play well enough. At the opening of the play, townspeople were wandering about. Children played morra (an Italian version of scissors-cut-paper), and two elderly men (one Antonio, the other Verges) sat on the bench in front of the villa. A table downstage at the right indicated a cafe, and large marionettes hanging over the back of one of the chairs gave a hint of the Sicilian puppetry that the masked ball later took up. Borachio (John Killoran) slouched on, self-consciously aggressive in a leather jacket worn over an undershirt. When the dispatch rider arrived with news from the front, Harriet Walter, in trousers that brought Katharine Hepburn to mind, mounted his motorbike and started it. The freedom she claimed and the general alarm it caused were firmly indicated in this action. The other women wore simple cotton dresses in floral prints. Beatrice insisted on being different. When Don Pedro (Clive Wood) and his party arrived, for the most part nattily uniformed, Benedick—another tolerated and admired eccentric—soon relaxed into an amiable, comfortable slouch. His principal item of luggage was a carpetbag, from which he produced a bottle of spirits. (This was a private supply of alcohol, carefully returned to the bag after he had drawn on it.) Don Pedro was nervously enthusiastic, well turned-out, and slightly camp. Benedick had a few days’ growth of beard, and there was no spring in his step. He and Beatrice eyed each other across the stage before she initiated their first exchange of wit. When he turned his back on her as a way of having the last word, she seemed genuinely hurt. The dialogue between Benedick and Claudio (John Hopkins) had an edge, as though the seasoned campaigner felt himself challenged by the younger man’s callow enthusiasm.

There was a palpable psychotic element in Don John’s villainy: tortured by the prospect of Claudio’s happiness, he curled up in a fetal position centerstage and was brought out of his anguish by the prospect of a plot. In the masquerade the men wore costumes and masks that suggested the stock figure of the soldier-hero in Sicilian puppetry. Benedick’s mask and crested helmet were more outrageous than the rest, but the credibility of the “serious” mistaking by Claudio was maintained. The gulling scene began with a new variation on the business with the boy whom he sends for a book, who this time not only reappeared at an inopportune moment but insisted on a tip. Le Provost’s delivery of Benedick’s soliloquies was consistent with his performance throughout, being conversational and candid rather than self-conscious and showy. Beatrice (who appeared at the top of the steps with a dinner gong to summon him to dinner) delivered her verse soliloquy at the end of the scene with similar gravitas and simplicity, but this was in contrast to the farcical actions that accompanied her eavesdropping on Hero (Kirsten Parker) and Ursula (Noma Dumezweni): first she ran lapwing-like close to the ground, then she took up a position behind the shrubbery, finally moving down to the right, where Hero and Ursula, armed with a stirrup-pump and water bucket, soaked her under the pretext of watering the honeysuckle. Dripping, Beatrice stood centerstage for her soliloquy.

Margaret (Sarah Ball) was treated with some subtlety and without any attempt to iron out the contradictions in the role. The second part of the performance began with Claudio downstage, covertly observing two
silhouetted figures making vigorous love. On the morning of the wedding, while Beatrice was desperately trying to treat her cold by inhaling the fumes from a steaming basin, Margaret dominated the scene. Her body language throughout had suggested a less restrained sexuality than that of the other women: earlier she had sat with her legs apart, smoking. Now, wearing only a slinky silk slip, she taunted Beatrice's reticence. It was credible that she should have relished what she thought a harmless but piquant adventure in borrowing Hero's dress for an amorous encounter, and during the church scene, she left hurriedly and in evident distress at the news of Hero's death. Despite this, her demeanor with Benedick in a later scene did not suggest a very profound remorse.

Doran staged the unhappiest scenes of the play forcefully but without melodrama. Leonato's grief in the church was quietly effective. He sat apart from the central group and did no violence to Hero. After the friar's insistence on Hero's innocence and his proposal of a strategy to prove it, Benedick exited with the others. He then came back in search of his cap and found Beatrice in tears. He restrained her lovingly as she writhed in anger at the thought of Claudio's betrayal of Hero, and his response to “Kill Claudio” was one of involuntary astonishment that turned quickly into resolution. Benedick's challenge to Claudio came as the unpleasant aftermath to the confrontation between Leonato (Gary Waldhorn), Antonio (Trevor Martin), and the two younger men. Don Pedro's strained attempt to ease the tension with a joke, which petered out embarrassingly, was of a piece with his nervously forced good humor throughout the play and prepared the ground for his exclusion from the general mood of rejoicing at the end.

The personable and engaging Claudio was sincerely contrite when he heard the news of Hero's death and seemed disturbed in the scene at her tomb. All the same, he still had some way to go in the acquisition of tact. In the final scene he insisted, “I'd hold my mind [to marry Hero] were she an Ethiope,” as he carelessly handed his gloves to Ursula—who happened to be black. He did realize immediately that he had put his foot in it, with a “take” that did something to acknowledge his blunder. The high spirits of the ending were qualified by the behavior of Don Pedro: Don John was marched onstage under escort (Conrade seemed to have changed sides), and after the confrontation, Don Pedro, having acquired a bottle, walked up the stairs and disappeared into the house. Margaret, in an irrepressible return to her independence, danced with Conrade and Borachio, giving them both the glad eye but jilting the drunkard in favor of the turncoat. All the characters except Don Pedro participated in the final dance.

Criticism: Production Reviews: Martha Tuck Rozett (review date fall 2003)


[In the following review of director Daniela Varon's 2003 Shakespeare and Company staging of Much Ado about Nothing at the Founders' Theater in Lenox, Massachusetts, Rozett praises Varon's fine realization of the play's festive qualities and comic virtuosity.]

Seldom does a Shakespeare play with a modern setting manage to evoke a particular time and place as thoroughly as Shakespeare and Company's production of Much Ado about Nothing. Daniela Varon's Messina, inspired by popular images of Sicily in the 1950s, is steeped in the culture of violence and family loyalty associated with the Mafia. The oft-repeated word “honor” becomes a keynote in this production, for as Varon says in her director's notes, she is interested in “what it is to speak and to act honorably, what it really is to be a man of honor, what honor truly means to a woman in a society that equates her honor with her chastity and that makes sexual dishonor a fate worse than death.” But Varon's Sicily is also splendidly festive, its atmosphere conveyed less by the simple set than by the veritable anthology of popular instrumental and vocal music in English and Italian that starts before the play begins and continues during the intermission and

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straight through to the play's end. A big old-fashioned radio is the production's most important prop, and live music is performed by Balthasar, a Sinatra-like popular singer who croons "Stranger in the Night" (in both English and Italian) into a microphone to the delight of the young women in the masked-ball scene. The line "Speak low if you speak love" inspires the lyrics for another of Balthazar's songs, and there is much dancing, some of it quite comical.

The Mafia motif means that the men, who are much given to hugging and kissing on both cheeks, wear two- or three-piece suits, narrow ties, and slicked-back hair. Don Pedro and his company arrive in Messina sporting fedora hats and toting rifles, which reappear later in the play when Benedick challenges Claudio to a duel. Don John is distinguished from the rest by a tough-guy accent, a black-and-white striped shirt and white tie, and a cigarette. Antonio, often played as a doddering old man, in this production has the look of an aging prizefighter, now relegated to watering the flowers but ready to rise to the occasion and present a formidable challenge to the slightly-built Claudio in 5.1. Switchblade knives make frequent appearances: Borachio uses one to spear an olive in his martini while Leonato, in a highly charged moment, brandishes a knife at Hero in 4.1 during his long, self-absorbed speech about how his honor has been besmirched.

Hero, Beatrice, and Margaret, whose costumes change in nearly every scene, generally wear 1950s-era wide circular skirts and little bolero jackets in bright colors, and in the final scene their veils are attached to big Sunday hats (Ursula, in contrast, is an old Italian lady dressed in black). The costumes and hairdos suggest a time when, in Varon's words, "Italian women were on the one hand newly enfranchised, on the other still domestically oppressed (not unlike their American counterparts)." Paula Langton's Beatrice, with her short curly hair and forthright manner, is the most enfranchised of the three; while the other women are clustered together in the background, she is playing chess with Leonato when the soldier enters to announce Don Pedro's arrival. All Beatrices are witty and self-assured—how could they be otherwise?—but this one can be especially fearless. Her comic riff, delivered in a Marlon Brando-as-Godfather voice, on the devil who guards the gates of hell (2.1.42ff) is a hilarious spoof of the Sicilian men's posturing. Later in this scene she is a little teary-eyed when Hero and Claudio pledge themselves to one another, which may account for her lapse of discretion. When Don Pedro gets down on one knee and says seriously, "Will you have me, lady?" the atmosphere becomes tense, for Beatrice has risked insulting the honor of this formidable and powerful man. His line "Your silence most offends me, and to be merry best becomes you […"] sounds almost angry; thus the plot to play matchmakers comes across as a face-saving measure to break the tension of the moment.

As Benedick, Allyn Burrows is a splendid match for Langton's Beatrice. He uses the deep thrust stage (newly reconfigured for this season in Shakespeare and Company's Founders' Theater) to great effect, darting from one corner to another and making eye contact with various women in the audience in 2.3 to illustrate the catalogue of women ("One woman is fair, yet I am well […]"). His signature prop is a short, rush-seated stool that serves as the bull's horns in 1.1. To spy on Don Pedro, Claudio, and Leonato, he takes his stool and newspaper into the seating area, falls off the stool a couple of times, then climbs along the scaffolding that supports the upper level, all the while adlibbing to the audience and muttering to himself ("Contemptible? I'll show you contemptible!"). In his light-colored baggy clothing (the only point in the entire play when any of the men appear informally attired) Benedick looks boyish and vulnerable, and his delight as he dances off-stage with a potted plant at the end of 2.3 or washes his feet and shaves in the onstage fountain in 3.2 seems like a momentary respite from the honor-bound masculinity that Sicilian society demands.

Every director of Much Ado has to decide what to do about Margaret, the unwitting agent of Hero's disgrace. This production's saucy Margaret is frequently onstage, moving set furnishings, dancing to the radio music, filling in for the boy Benedick sends for a book in 2.3, and enjoying the gulling of Beatrice from the side balcony overlooking the stage. Her romance with the masterful Borachio is established during the masked ball in anticipation of a mostly silent nighttime scene that Varon adds between 3.2 and 3.3. Margaret and Hero appear in a window, and Hero takes off her sequined jacket and hands it to Margaret, who puts it on as Hero leaves. Margaret then lets down a rope ladder for Borachio, and we watch, with Claudio, Don John, and Don
Pedro, as the couple embraces. When Borachio calls her “Hero,” Claudio lets out an anguished howl, and the scene ends. As in most productions of *Much Ado*, Margaret is present in the wedding scene. After Don Pedro describes what he saw (“Myself, my brother, and this grieved count / Did see her hear her, at that hour last night […]”), Margaret recognizes her complicity and rushes horror-stricken from the stage. There is much weeping among these emotional Italians (at various points in the evening Hero, Beatrice, Benedick, and Claudio are reduced to tears), so it is quite in character for Margaret to be weeping copiously at her next entrance in 5.2. But she soon cheers up and engages in witty banter with the verse-challenged Benedick, an about-turn that, if not entirely convincing, is in keeping with the play's emphasis on forgiveness and reconciliation.

This *Much Ado* has no shortage of comic business: Beatrice gets tangled up in a corset and clothes-pinned to the wash line as she hides from Hero and Ursula, and the Dogberry scenes are played to the hilt by a slapstick ensemble led by veteran Shakespeare and Company actor Jonathan Epstein. Epstein's Dogberry is dressed in full military regalia with a feathered Napoleon hat and an umbrella. He mops his brow continuously with numerous colored handkerchiefs, as if exhausted by the effort to make himself understood. He and Verges enter speaking Italian, and only after the latter, gesturing to the audience, says “No capice Italiano,” do they switch to English, with occasional lapses. There is much comic horseplay involving cappuccino cups and the props carried by the three Watchmen, a baker, a fisherman, and a miner. I'll pass over without comment the frequent use of round trapdoors through which the actors pop up and down like gophers, echoing last summer’s *Henry V*. Suffice to say that the comic scenes are a little longer and sillier than they need to be but that Epstein's Dogberry, like his Bottom a few seasons ago, is at once wonderfully dignified and utterly absurd. When Borachio confesses in 5.1, the audience senses that Dogberry still doesn't quite get it. The most important aspect of the incident, as far as he's concerned, is that Conrad called him an ass, and his air of injured dignity is both comic and sobering in a society where insult and slander are rife. Like so many of the play's characters, his honor has been grievously wounded, and his exit after passing the ceremonial hat and umbrella of office to one of the Watchmen is tinged with melancholy.

*Much Ado* is one of several Shakespearean comedies that end with music and dancing, and in this production the music and dancing have been so much a part of the action that it seems altogether natural for the accordions to crank out a lively two-step that becomes a delightfully witty series of curtain calls. There is a dark moment, of course, when the soldier arrives to say that Don John has been taken in flight and brought back to Messina. He presents Don Pedro with a package containing the black-and-white striped shirt and three dead fish, presumably a Mafioso sign that the bad guy is no more. Nevertheless, in the curtain-call dance Don John, a fish strung around his neck, steps nimbly with his fellow actors, and the evening ends on a decidedly festive note.

**Criticism:** Themes: Philip Traci (essay date fall 1982)


*[In the following essay, Traci discusses the motif of meddling in the affairs of others in Much Ado about Nothing, particularly with respect to the romantic relationship between Beatrice and Benedick.]*

However critics have viewed *Much Ado About Nothing*,¹ whether as happy comedy² or Shakespeare's most cynical study in the genre³, they have agreed that its title, despite its seeming throwaway quality, carries significance. Here, however, agreement ends. Dorothy Hockey sees a central pun in the Elizabethan pronunciation of “nothing” as “nothing”, which underscores, she points out, the noting and misnoting in the play.⁴ The pun is not without significance to such studies as those of Berry, Evans, and Lewalski, which focus in different ways on different levels of “knowing.”⁵ The differences among Claudio’s eyes, even when they
negotiate for themselves, the Friar's patient and compassionate observation, and Dogberry's Watch's foolish but saving discoveries are as obvious as significant.

The difference among the three are not only in the way in which they see and come to know, but also in the ways in which they react or let be. The title, I suggest, also implies that too much doing or meddling in the affairs of others—especially lovers—is less helpful to a healthy resolution than doing nothing more than allowing the natural course of events to take place.

Meddling is underscored in the text: While Claudio specifically asks Benedick if he has “noted” Hero, the Prince offers his assistance even before he is asked (I. i. 274-279). Before Don John asks Conrade and Borachio if they will assist him to cross his brother, the Prince (I. iii. 59-60), Conrade has asked him if he can make any use of his discontent (1. 34) and Borachio promptly provides him with the opportunity (11. 51ff.). Both the Friar and Dogberry and his men (whose values of course better reflect those of the play) bring positive results more through observation than meddlesome action. The Friar's long and highlighted speech (IV. i. 153-168) is in stark contrast to Leonato's hasty “Confirmed, confirmed!” (1. 148). He asks simply that he be heard a little (1. 153). Doesn't the line imply staging in which he passively, patiently watches all that has preceded? He has “only been silent so long” and only now “given way to this course of action” by “noting of the lady.” He offers as authority the fact that those gathered—loved ones of the bride and groom I should add—trust his reading, observation, experience, age, reverence, calling, and divinity (11. 163-166). That the Friar prefaches each of these appeals to authority with negatives (“trust not,” “nor,” etc.) underscores, I suggest, that he advocates pause, patience, and restraint, rather than action. The only advice he offers is to “pause awhile” (1. 198) to “let her awhile be secretly kept in, / And publish it that she is dead indeed” (11. 201-202). The Friar offers no specific course of action other than to let nature take its course so that Claudio's grief at Hero's “death” will naturally “restore” his love.

If the Friar's “counsel” lacks the tone of meddlesome ado, however, Shakespeare's addition to his source in the characters of Dogberry and his Watch underlines even more this course of benign neglect. The recent vogue for Keystone Kops with their attendant frenzy does not erase the passivity advocated in their lines. Dogberry, the chief, if shallow, fool who discovers what the wisdom of others could not—trust his reading, observation, experience, age, reverence, calling, and divinity (11. 163-166). That the Friar prefaches each of these appeals to authority with negatives (“trust not,” “nor,” etc.) underscores, I suggest, that he advocates pause, patience, and restraint, rather than action. The only advice he offers is to “pause awhile” (1. 198) to “let her awhile be secretly kept in, / And publish it that she is dead indeed” (11. 201-202). The Friar offers no specific course of action other than to let nature take its course so that Claudio's grief at Hero's “death” will naturally “restore” his love.

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Dogberry's charge continues to advocate non-intervention. While they may lay hands on a thief, for example, they must remember that “they that touch pitch will be defiled,” and even more significantly, with “such kind of men, the less you meddle with them, why, the more is for your honesty” (11. 48-50). “The most peaceable way for you, if you do take a thief, he observes, “is to let him show himself what he is, and steal out of your company” (1. 53ff.). Surely the admirability of such conduct by these “shallow fools” is underscored when the “wise” old Leonato's impatience before the wedding will not allow him to pause to listen to the Watch that has already captured the villains. “I must leave you,” he says, since he is “in great haste.” His offering wine to the Watch as he exits is one of his most commendable, if perfunctory, gestures in the play.

After his charge about the thieves, Dogberry, who has “been always called a merciful man,” and “would not hang a man by [his] will, much more a man who hath any honest in him,” suggests even less ado than Verges' charge that “if you hear a child cry in the night, you must call to the nurse and bid her still it!” When asked, “If the nurse be asleep and will not hear us?” he adds simply, “Why then, depart in peace and let the child wake her with crying: for the ewe that will not hear her lamb when it baes will never answer a calf when he bleats.” Leonato could well profit from such advice. And the advice, works, after all, for Conrade and Borachio are revealed more through their own confessions than through either arrest or examination.
While Shakespeare's other most notable additions to his source, Beatrice and Benedick, might seem to argue for the positive results of meddlesome matchmaking, the case, I suggest, is otherwise. Beatrice, after all, reminds us that Benedick “lent” his heart to her once before, when she gave him use of hers (II. i. 249-250). The cementing of their union by the characteristically meddlesome Prince, who has offered his services to Claudio and his hand to Beatrice with a superficiality outdone only by his despicable behavior in the church, would not be convincing. He decides to bring Beatrice and Benedick together only in order that “the time shall not go dully by us” “in the interim between Claudio’s betrothal and his marriage” (11. 323-324). The tenuousness of the union of the warring lovers as joined by the jovial medlers is emphasized both when Beatrice tests Benedick's love by ordering him to “Kill Claudio” (high meddling indeed!) and at the play's conclusion.

Such a focus on non-interferring heightens the dramatic sympathy of Benedick. While Dogberry's instinct and the Friar's trust have received ample critical attention, Benedick's virtues have not. It may very well be overreading to see Benedick's non-meddling in his “five wits … halting off” (I. i. 57), in his talking but nobody marking him (11. 103-104), his always ending “with a jade's trick” (1. 129), and bearing the disguised Beatrice's disdain when even “an oak but with one green leaf on it would have answered her” (II. i. 216). But the evidence does accumulate. He responds to her verbal sallies not with retaliation but by begging the Prince to send him on some errand “to the world's end” (11. 236-237), and instinctively responds to Beatrice's “Kill Claudio” with “Not for the wide world!” When Beatrice complains, “You kill me to deny it,” Benedick's “Tarry, sweet Beatrice” mirrors the patience that provides comic resolutions. Surely killing Claudio could not do that. Even when Benedick does agree to be Beatrice and Hero's champion by challenging his friend Claudio, he merely “discontinues” the Prince's company, leaves Claudio to his gossip-like humor (he certainly isn't in mourning yet for his lost bride), and even wishes Claudio peace until they meet again (V. i. 179ff.). Coming so soon after Leonato's aggressive “challenge to the tail of a man” (1. 66), the contrast is revealing.

But then the whole Beatrice and Benedick matchmaking is framed from beginning to end with indications that the lovers must join themselves. Without too much ado, the play suggests, the natural course of things would have led to their eventual marriage. Hero knows the Signoir Mountanto (I. i. 27) that Beatrice asks after is Benedick since he's all her cousin ever thinks about. Even the meddlesome Prince and Claudio know of their love or they wouldn't have set about to bring them together. The audience realizes that the labor is not Herculean, but comically inevitable.

Even as the Prince, Claudio, and Leonato prepare their meddlesome plot to join the witty lovers (with Benedick already in the arbor), the men enter “with Music” (s.d. ff. II. iii. 133). The lyrics of their song are not without significance to my focus:

Sigh, no more ladies, sigh no more!
Men were deceivers ever,
One foot in sea, and one on shore;
To one thing constant never,

the song begins. The refrain of “Then sigh not so, / But let them go” that echoes through the song merely repeats the advice that we have noted throughout the play as a whole:

Then sigh not so,
But let them go,
And be you blithe and bonny,
Converting all your sounds of woe
Into Hey nonny, nonny.
Sigh 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.

The strongest evidence, however, that the play points to the lovers themselves (or Providence) rather than the unsympathetic meddlers bringing about the union of Beatrice and Benedick is the ending. Even after Benedick has proven that he is willing to challenge Claudio to the death, Beatrice, who has up to now “against her will” been sent not only to urge him to dinner (II. iii. 226-227), but also to love him, once more challenges his love. And he, hers. Significantly, they have “own hands against [their] hearts” (V. iv. 91-92) to provide the “miracle” that joins them. To note the importance of this miracle at such a climactic point in the text (which could even now undo all that has been joined) is not, like Benedick, to see “a double meaning” where there is none (II. iii. 237), but rather to notice a motif the play emphasizes. That the miracle is here provided by the lovers themselves is as meaningful as “the miracle that Heaven provides” with Ragozine's death in Measure for Measure.

But if Benedick and Beatrice are, despite their surface contentiousness, willing to “follow the leaders” “in every good thing,” they (unlike Claudio, the Prince, Leonato, and Antonio) “leave them at the next turning,” “if they lead to any ill” (II. i. 135-138). Even Don John seems to follow in his meddling in the play. Don John merely mentions the marriage that will take place; Borachio offers the fact that he “can cross it” (II. ii. 3). While Don John asks how he can cross it, he must be prompted by Borachio that he “spare not to tell [his brother] that he hath wronged his honor in marrying the renowned Claudio (whose estimation do you mightily hold up) to a contaminated stale, such a one as Hero” (11. 19-22). Again Don John needs to be prompted. When he asks, “What proof shall I make of that?” Borachio replies, “Proof enough to misuse the Prince, to vex Claudio, to undo Hero, and kill Leonato” (11. 24-25). The order proves prophetic enough in the climactic order he reveals. It also makes clear the degree of wasteful suffering his meddling causes others in order to “misuse” the Prince.

Don John, though “a plain-dealing villain” (I. iii. 28), is thus rare among Shakespeare's villains in that another proposes his “miching mallecho” rather than his initiating it. He, like Antonio and Leonato, those “two old men without teeth” (V. i. 116), cannot “bite” (I. iii. 30-31). If Antonio's line that titles this paper is delivered to Leonato with comic impotence as he challenges Claudio and the Prince (“Come, 'tis no matter. / Do not meddle”), the line is not without significance to the play as a whole. So too is it important that Don John does not initiate the villainy. He is a villain appropriate for a comedy; dangerous enough to devise “brave punishments” for and yet not so powerful that he can defeat the festive and amorous victories at the play's end. As the pipers strike up and the dance begins, we realize that it is appropriate that Benedick, rather than the Prince or Leonato or Claudio, advise us that we “think not on him till to-morrow.” Without much more ado, the dance begins.

Notes

1. William Shakespeare, Much Ado About Nothing, edited Josephine Waters Bennett (1958, rpt. Baltimore, Maryland: Penquin Books, Inc., 1962), V. i. 100-101. All subsequent quotations from Much Ado in this paper are from this edition and are included in the body of the text.
2. John Dover Wilson, Shakespeare's Happy Comedies (London: Faber and Faber, 1962) is, of course, but one of those who have traditionally dubbed Much Ado one of the happy or “joyous” comedies.
3. M. M. Mahood in her introduction to volume 32, “The Middle Comedies,” of Shakespeare Survey, 1979, admirably surveys “a generation of criticism,” as she entitles her work. For those who see the harsher view of Much Ado, she points to A. P. Rossiter, Angel With Horns, and those who focus on the frailties of Claudio, pp. 1-13.
Criticism: Themes: John Drakakis (essay date 1987)


[In the following essay, Drakakis presents an interpretation of Much Ado about Nothing informed by post-structuralist theoretical principles.]

I

In 1834 Coleridge announced the transformation of Shakespeare from a professional dramatist into an individual consciousness whose plays were the repositories of timeless truths. Hence his assertion that Shakespeare “is of no age—nor, may I add, of any religion, or party, or profession”. With very few adjustments, the myth has proved durable, with those truths resurfacing recently as the “eterne mutabilitie” of the human condition, those “perennial, unhistorical variations of temperament” which comprise the irreducible core of “human nature”. Coleridge had already laid the foundations for the removal of Shakespeare from history some twenty years earlier, in about 1813, in some notes for a lecture in which he formulated a theory of dramatic character which was to receive its most sophisticated expression less than a century later in A. C. Bradley’s Shakespearean Tragedy (1904). The subject of those earlier remarks was, ostensibly, the relation between “plot” and “character” in Much Ado about Nothing in which he anticipated modern formalist distinctions between sujet and fabula, and the narratological distinction between histoire and discours:

Take away from Much Ado about Nothing 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; take away Benedick, Beatrice, Dogberry, and the reaction of the former on the character of Hero, and what will remain? In other writers the main agent of the plot is always the prominent character. In Shakespeare so or not so, as the character is in itself calculated to form the plot. So Don John, the mainspring of the plot, is merely shown and withdrawn.

Coleridge’s comments on Much Ado about Nothing, especially his suggestion that Don John, “the mainspring of the plot, is merely shown and withdrawn”, betray an uneasiness that once the identifiable elements of fabula and discours are stripped away, then we may be left with “nothing”, implying that what may really be at stake here is an irreducibly essentialist conception of “character”. What is at risk for Coleridge is the possibility that the play may not contain that “true idea” of which the dramatic structure itself is but an ancillary support. Indeed, the very title of the play is an affront to any expressive theory of meaning, and is, in many ways, a challenge to those forms of criticism based upon such a theory. If, after analysis, the textual representations of universal truths are to be dismissed as “nothing”, then even assuming a Coleridgean intentionalist theory of character, signification will depend upon a trust which we are invited to place in the critic’s own perception of a non-material reality whose essence is derived in stark opposition to textual appearances but whose ultimate location is beyond the play of difference which characterizes the act of signification itself. Thus, beyond that “nothing”, that material encounter with textual surfaces, there must be “something” more real, uncomplicated by the play of textual difference, a single meaning which it is the purpose of criticism to detach from the text.
This idealism (which lies at the root of much orthodox interpretation of Shakespearean Comedy) depends for its veracity upon a commitment to what Pierre Macherey has termed “the normative fallacy”, whereby a text may be modified, “in order to assimilate it more thoroughly, denying its factual reality as being merely the provisional version of an unfulfilled intention”. The recent placements of this critical strategy, along with aesthetics itself, within the purview of ideology—that hidden means of producing and reproducing as “natural” and “true” relations upon which particular social formations depend for their existence—has far-reaching consequences for the study of Shakespeare. Above all, it has served to bring sharply into focus the contradictions which lie at the heart of attempts to come to terms with Shakespearean Comedy in general and Much Ado about Nothing in particular. A classic example occurs in H. B. Charlton's book, Shakespearean Comedy (1938), in which he asserts, on the one hand, that “comedy is social rather than metaphysical or theological”, while, on the other, he seeks to locate “Shakespeare's comic idea” as what Charlton calls “his surest clue to the secret of man's common and abiding welfare”.

Recuperative ploys such as this are symptomatic of a tendency which would negotiate away those contradictions which constitute the “factual reality” of the play, reducing drastically its complex discursive structures, smoothing over its complex web of contested significations, in the interests of locating some controlling idea secreted at its core but anterior to its structure—in short, its “transcendental signified”. For example, John Russell Brown considers the structure of the play to depend “almost entirely on one central theme … that of appearance and reality, outward and inward beauty, words and thoughts—in short, the theme of love's truth”. More recent criticism of the play has undertaken to refine this “theme”, locating the conflict as being between “right” and “wrong deception” with the latter constituting an obstacle to aesthetic and moral harmony finally being overcome by those “good” values: “with suspicion replaced by trust, and with destructive biting by a marriage feast”. This type of treatment of thematic contrast in the play aways culminates in the proposal of the total eclipse of one term by another, and is symptomatic of a more generalized ethical criticism which claims to offer an objective, empirically derived record of the dramatic conflict, but which, in fact, imposes a theological pattern on the play. As such, this kind of criticism is always caught in contradiction by what Fredric Jameson has called “the mirage of an utterly non-theoretical practice”.

One of the most recent sustained examples of this kind of criticism is Alexander Leggatt's attempt to blend thematic unity and structural contrast together in his suggestion that the action of Much Ado about Nothing is structured around “an interplay of formality and naturalism”. Opposed though these structural elements may be, that conflict is ultimately resolved, and indeed dissolved, in the perception “that however individual we are we are ultimately bound by the rhythms of life, and we must follow the leaders”. Here textual difference and larger stylistic oppositions are neatly displaced by a meaning which is gently prized free from process to clear a path for the return of familiar essentialist distinctions: appearance/reality, formal/natural, individual/society. Yet in the final analysis these terms are seen as two sides of the same epistemological coin, so that the play can be made, as it were naturally, to yield up that truth artfully lodged at its centre: “the idea of human reality at the heart of social convention”. This, it need hardly be said, is a bourgeois, liberal humanist “reality” whose intentions are naturally expressed through “social convention”, though somehow individuals submit to its demands voluntarily through the imposition upon process of a mystifying logic: “we are ultimately bound by the rhythms of life and we must follow the leaders”. So totalizing a rhetoric of social and political quiescence presupposes an always already constituted bourgeois “subject”, but also calls to mind Walter Benjamin's astringent observation that there is “no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism”.

Leggatt's reading of the play, which conforms to the underlying theory of comedy proposed by Northrop Frye in his Anatomy of Criticism (1957), implies that Utopia is the ultimate objective of the comic action, and is realized at the point of the resolution of the action when the “inner” (“the idea of human reality”) harmonizes
with that which fully expresses it, the “outer” (“social convention”). If we theorize this critical stance, then it becomes clear that the moment of carnivalesque release which brings inner into conflict with outer, and which could be read in terms of a political rupture, is aesthetically necessary as the precondition for clarifying what is really a deep structural unity which exists between the two, and which the comic closure finally confirms. This moment of aesthetic closure, the culminating moment in the process of the production of harmony, marks the erasure of textual difference, and is, according to this problematic, the point at which the human essence achieves self-identity and reestablishes its existence beyond discourse. What this theory suppresses are those irredoulibly *dialogic* elements of discursive practice, whose challenge to official ideology is always recoverable from the text, and whose irrepressible presence signifies that meaning is always a site of ideological struggle. This is the carnivalesque discourse that resists domestication, directing us back to the place where meanings are produced. In the words of Valentin Volosinov: “there is nothing in the structure of signification that could be said to transcend the generative process, to be independent of the dialectical expansion of the social purview”.  

II

The reduction of the material contradictions which permeate the discourses of *Much Ado about Nothing* to an ordered hierarchy of fixed meaning is nowhere more evident than in the attempts to identify the *meaning* of the play's title. Since, apparently “nothing” and “noting” were homophones for the Elizabethans, it has been assumed that the play was about “noting” and “misingnoting”, but more recent criticism has sought to explore the sexual connotations of “nothing” as a synonym for what E. A. M. Coleman, careful to avoid any suggestion of prurience, calls “the female pudend”. “Nothing”, we may recall, was what Hamlet thought was “a fair thought to lie between maids' legs” (*Hamlet*, III.i.127), while in *Antony and Cleopatra* this metonym is made to stand for womankind generally, as Enobarbus, commenting upon Cleopatra's sexual prowess, is made to observe: “Under a compelling occasion let women die: it were pity to cast them away for nothing, though between them and a great cause, they should be esteemed nothing” (I.i.134-7). The location of gender in an *absence* which is both physical and cerebral, augmented with a language of valuation, reinforces the concept of the gendered female subject not in terms of an object or an essence, but a relation. Moreover, this is also true of “nothing” as it appears in *King Lear*, where Lear's chilling “Nothing will come of nothing” (I.i.92) emphasizes a process of “subjection” which reaches inwards towards a domestic filial relation, and outwards to the promised land which doubles as a marriage dowry and as the material expression of political power. It is, in the circumstances, insufficient to invoke a simple linguistic plenitude, pace the New Arden editor of *Much Ado about Nothing*, and to assert vacuously that “The play's title is, in fact, teasingly full of meaning.”

Clearly, there are considerable dangers in reducing *Much Ado about Nothing* to a unitary “meaning”, just as there are in reducing the conflicts in the play to a resolution between two terms for supremacy in which it can be assumed that ultimately the traces of that conflict will be erased. To the ever-growing list of binary oppositions to which the action of the play has been reduced, could be added “trust” and “transgression”, in so far as the preferred term in each equation is the index of a hypostasized meaning which is located beyond the essentially dialectical processes of signification altogether, establishing a permanent and unchanging “truth” about an equally hypostasized “human nature”. I propose to argue, drawing upon Saussure, that terms such as “trust” and “transgression” are, in fact, differentially derived, and thus must be “defined not positively, in terms of their content, but negatively, by contrast with other items in the same system. What characterizes each most exactly is being whatever the others are not.” Such terms—and they exist within the play—constitute the discourses through whose mechanisms reality is constructed, and it is important that an attentive criticism should do more than simply ventriloquize certain of the differentially constructed elements of these discourses as if they were objective truths. But, in addition to Saussure's radical perception, a distinction should be made between the notion of *difference* functioning within an abstract linguistic system and conservatively reinforcing the stability of the system itself (the project of the more domesticated forms of structuralism), and the manner of its operation dialectically within particular historically specific discursive
practices at the place where ideology reduces the plurality of possible meanings to singular meaning. To speak of “trust” and “transgression” in this context is not to ventriloquize the text's “secret coherence”. Rather, it is to insist that terms are forced into an axiological relation with each other through difference, and that to explore their dialectical relation is to lay bare the text's own ideological processes.

In purely bibliographical terms *Much Ado about Nothing* is already a deeply fissured text. The quarto of 1600, thought to have been printed from Shakespeare's foul papers, retains inconsistent speech-headings and, for the romantic essentialist, at least two puzzling scene-headings. Dogberry is variously referred to in speech-headings as “Const.”, “Andrew”, and “Kemp”, interpellations which traverse social role, dramatic/comic role, and the name of the actor who is behind the illusion. Dogberry is self-evidently the site of a full play of intertextual relations involving history, literary tradition, and professional theatrical practice. Similarly, though not quite to the same extent, Verges is variously referred to as “Headborough” and “Couly”.

More intriguing, the scene-headings for I.i. and II.i. contain references to the supposed wife of Leonato: “Innogen his wife” (I.i.) and “His wife” (II.i.). In Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, Book II, which contains a version of the plot of *Much Ado about Nothing*, the figure of “Inogene” appears as the wife of Brutus, “faire Inogene of Italy” (X.13) but it is generally thought that the references in Shakespeare's play are to an early draft, and since 1733 editors have systematically excised her from editions. Her name appears in Furness's variorum edition of the play, but for A. R. Humphreys she is a disturbingly Pirandellian figure, “an unrealized intention” and he goes on to assert with worrying certainty that “originally” Shakespeare “meant Hero to have a mother … but then found no use for her”.

In a play in which questions of identity and social role are consistently foregrounded, in which the paternalistic control and “silencing” of female characters is a norm, and in which the one exception to that rule can be metonymically reduced to the appellation “my Lady Tongue” (II.i.252), this reduction of the wifely role to silence—the position towards which Beatrice herself gravitates in the play—which diplomatically constituted texts have been prepared to excise, or banish to footnotes, represents in an unusually explicit form the place of the woman in the play's own network of significations. From the woman silence is expected, or achieved through genial coercion as she submits to the paternalistic power of her “governor”; at the moment of transformation from “shrew” to legitimate object of desire Beatrice internalizes this process: “And Benedick, love on, I will requite thee, / Taming my wildness to thy loving hand” (III.i.111-12). In such circumstances, the relegation of “Innogen” to the status of “an unrealized intention” conceals an essentially romantic theory of composition and is consistent with an empiricist theory of meaning. It rejects implicitly what Catherine Belsey has called the notion of meaning as “interindividual intelligibility”, abstracting meaning from the play's network of colliding discourses, and is thus caught in the act of processing “truth”.

But abstracting a transcendent “truth” from the discursive practices of *Much Ado about Nothing* is precarious, at best, since unlike most of Shakespeare's other comedies the play contains no identifiable centre in the form of a hero and/or heroine, and therefore contains no metonym for it. *Pace* Charles I, who designated the play “the comedie of Benedick and Betteris”, critics have been generally disposed to accord them this central position: “Beatrice and Benedick, resembling stars, but serving as planets, outshine those about whom they revolve.” Conversely, much critical effort has been expended in asserting the essential weakness of Hero, and the objectionable character of Claudio. Most critics have had some difficulty in coping with is the structural fact that the “plot” effectively deconstructs itself; the plan to bring Benedick and Beatrice together is undertaken using the same mechanism as that which Don John uses to drive Hero and Claudio apart. This difficulty has been negotiated either by extolling “right deception” or, more usually, by insisting that Beatrice and Benedick (like Petruchio and Katherina in *The Taming of the Shrew*) are essentially in love with each other, and always have been. One other feature of the play, which does not appear in any of the versions of the story which were current at the time of performance, is that the obstacle to the attainment of harmony is a villain of a special sort, not a harsh or impersonal social law dividing young and old. Don John's “malevolence and unsociability”, marked by “images of sickness, festering poison, and incompatibility (the canker-rose, the thief of love, the muzzled dog, the caged bird) and by themes of resentment and moroseness”
are, according to A. R. Humphreys, defined by his being “a rebel and a bastard”. In a play concerned with marriage and its impediments a reversal of Humphreys's formula would seem to be nearer the mark: Don John is a rebel because he is a bastard.

The question of Don John's bastardy is, in principle, similar to that involving the role of “Innogen” in that it is concerned with the whole issue of the construction of human subjectivity in the play. In general this issue involves what Althusser calls a “Law of Culture”, a collective term for those historically specific processes which are “the determinate ideological formations in which the persons inscribed in these structures live their functions”. Don John's subjectivity cannot be reduced to a role in an Oedipal drama, nor is it sufficient merely to explain his function in post-structuralist terms as a supplement at the origin which constantly resists the closure of the logocentric oppositions of the text (although at a purely formal level this is precisely what Don John does). Rather, he is to be situated at the very point where “pleasure” and “power” intersect. Don John is not “pleasure” standing in opposition to “power”, since, as Michel Foucault has observed: “Pleasure and power do not cancel or turn back against one another; they seek out, overlap, and reinforce one another.” Structurally he represents the material consequence of pleasure undertaken in defiance of the constraints of power, and thus, translated into historically specific terms, he is the “other” against which the political economy of Messina defines itself differentially. Don John is controlled by being accorded a “christian” subjectivity (his name is the commonest of Christian names according to the OED), but he is, by virtue of his illegitimacy, without a “surname” and therefore without access to the socially accepted political channels of the power/pleasure economy. Paradoxically, the definition of Don John's “subjectivity” involves exclusion from the political mechanisms of the social formation within which that definition is inscribed. It is a contradiction which Shakespeare broaches in the later play King Lear, in the figure of Gloucester's bastard son, Edmund.

In a provocative, but finally idealistic account of the play, Marilyn French argues that Don John's position is, in structural and epistemological terms, that of the “outlaw feminine”, and that his rebellion is “terrifying because it comes out of a sense of powerlessness and seems to want nothing”. This is to presuppose the existence of an essential “feminine principle” which will ultimately collapse sexuality into the gendered subject. The play itself inscribes femininity within a powerful masculine discourse, and it is in this context that Don John should be viewed as the product of the very type of violation of an institutionally derived femininity against which Messina's masculine “honour” code is differentially produced. Don John occupies, rather, the place of “transgression”, and as such in both historical and social terms he has neither legitimate political position nor self-identity; he is literally “nothing”, he does not and cannot signify in any actantial sense within a logocentric scheme of things. It is significant that though he supports Borachio's plot he is not the agent of its execution, and therefore to suggest that “he seems to want nothing” is to misread discursive practice as though it were simply an effect of essence. A better way of theorizing Don John's position is to suggest that he is “profanation”, in that he refuses to accept that the sacred has meaning, and this places him within Foucault's definition of “transgression” as “profanation in a world which no longer recognizes any positive meaning in the sacred”. But it is important to remember that Don John's transgression is emphatically not a liberation from ideology; on the contrary, his position in the play is conceptualized as part of an ethical universe—he is “evil”—and his radical freedom must be coerced. In general terms, therefore, we may say that Don John becomes the mechanism in Much Ado about Nothing whereby the plurality of possible meanings is ruthlessly reduced to a singular, authoritative meaning; this is performed by the forcible subjugation of the disruptive term “bastard”, which always returns and threatens to undo the social formation. It is no accident that the play begins with a military victory in which Don John was an adversary—if not the adversary—and it ends in a similar fashion.

In Much Ado about Nothing the management of sexual relations, and the construction of gendered subjects, is bound up with questions of power and hence of politics. Far from celebrating a “consonance” of “Head and heart, style and substance, convention and nature” in any naive or essentialist sense, the play's aesthetic presents through the symbolic language of festivity a victory by force over a particular threat to Messina's
determinate social institutions from a villain who “transgresses” its “ideological formations”, profanes its sacred values, and exposes a series of contradictions lying at the heart of its discursive practices. But of course Don John has no existence independent from Messina's institutions; he is a “visitor” certainly, but he is also the brother of the legitimate Don Pedro, “Prince of Arragon”. Thus, he represents the point at which relations of power manifest themselves negatively as “refusal, limitation, obstruction, censorship”, and as such his challenge to the formally constituted relations in the play appears, to use Foucault’s terms, “only as transgression”.33

What Don John's activities in the play highlight is a contest for “history” itself, opposing an “illegitimate” history that is forced to make itself against a “legitimate” history whose status is both sovereign and privileged. The result, however, is not a radical questioning in any conscious sense of the privileged status of historical narrative as such (a radical scepticism which might be taken to form one strand of post-structuralism in its Nietzschean guise), but a struggle for domination at the level of domestic relations at a time when “legitimate” history is under internal pressure to revise its own practices. The problems arise at the very point where “history” enters “discourse”. It is important to realize that we are not here dealing with an object, but with what Fredric Jameson has called an “absent cause”, which is only accessible in textual form, and that as such “it passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization, in the political unconscious”.34 The specific significance of this for a play such as Much Ado about Nothing is that its concern is never with an object, a transcendental signified, a “something” to which its discourses can ultimately be reduced, but with a series of overlapping class and gender relations which always already exist and which are inscribed within the political unconscious as “prior textualizations”. It is disturbance at the level of the play's symbolic language that gives us some purchase upon the text's unconscious processes, those areas of which it cannot expressly speak.

The term which occupies that point at which the full range of the play's interrelated discourses converge is “honour”, which can be separated out into its constituent elements; it is preeminently the term which mediates the play's masculine discourse, but it also inscribes within its historical narrativization of repressed social and political fears a feminine (or as Spenser's Faerie Queene would have it, a Foemen-ine) discourse of “chastity” or “virginitie”. It is in Marlowe's poem Hero and Leander, from which Shakespeare may have borrowed at least a name, that the relation between these terms is inadvertently demystified, to expose the whole gamut of masculine political relations as an “absent cause” (i.e. as a history) which can only be grasped in discourse. Leander, seeking to persuade Hero to submit, proffers the following argument:

This idoll which you terme Virginitie,  
Is neither essence subject to the eye,  
Nor to any one exteriour sence,  
Nor hath it any place of residence,  
Nor is it of earth or mold celestiall,  
Or capable of any form at all.  
Of that which hath no being do not boast  
Things which are not at all are never lost.(35)

From the woman's perspective there is a dilemma here between freedom of personal action on the one hand, and on the other the paternalistic constraint of a socio-sexual order in which female “honour” is both determined by, as well as determining, masculine honour. Helena in All's Well that Ends Well faces part of this dilemma when she debates the issue of female chastity with the aptly named Parolles: “How might one do, sir, to lose it to her own liking?” (I.i.165-6), and it resembles in its sentiments the position which Beatrice occupies initially in Much Ado about Nothing with her potentially subversive advice to Hero to defy her father if necessary and please herself in choosing a husband; “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’” (II.i.48-52). In Othello a segment of “textualized history” is transformed into a material object in an attempt to appropriate it for an alternative discourse; Desdemona's “virginitie” upon which Othello's masculine honour rests, becomes a handkerchief which he can, under guidance from Iago,
then re-textualize: “Her honour is an essence that's not seen, / They have it very oft that have it not: / But for the handkerchief—” (IV.i.16-18).

Female “honour” is valued in a paternalistic society only so far as it accepts inscription in the constellation of discursive practices designed to textualize masculine sexual and political impulses. Marlowe's Leander can introduce his textualization of “virginitie” with a statement about female “imperfection”: “Base boullion for the stampes sake we allow, / Euen so for mens impression do we you, / By which alone, our reuerend fathers say, / Wome receaue perfection euerie way” (lines 265-8). Within the Christian tradition these discourses converge in the heavily symbolic institution of marriage, within which the woman is simultaneously interpellated as the cause of man's fall and of his salvation; it is no accident that the etymology of Beatrice's name is “She who blesses”, while that of Benedick's is “He who is blessed”. In material terms marriage is also the institution through which possession and power are legitimized and consolidated, offering ”subjectivity” in the form of a social identity, and a range of discursive practices for internalizing these objective social relations at a symbolic level of emotions and affections. But differentially these positivities are defined against a constellation of anarchic “others” which collectively threaten to undo this symbolic order: the female refusal of paternal control; shrewishness, or the refusal to accept “silence”; infidelity and cuckoldry (the sexual expressions of a political anarchy); whoredom; suspicion; and—the consequence (significantly) of female promiscuity in an age without effective contraception—bastardy, that term which in the play's discursive economies opposes “honour”.

III

It may be argued that this is too heavy a burden of seriousness for a play such as Much Ado about Nothing to bear. But far from dealing with human abstractions which can be conveniently transported from one epoch to another, it is concerned with a series of historically specific social issues which collectively resist any idealizing critical gestures, and which Elizabethan society coped with by a form of marginalization through laughter. It is worth pausing briefly to suggest some of the ways in which these contested issues enter Elizabethan discursivities as “prior textualizations”.

The Second Tome of Homilies (1595) makes it very clear that female sexuality was conceived as part of a totalizing biblical narrative, although recently attempts have been made to suggest that this narrative was in the process of undergoing revision in favour of women during this period. Such revisionist claims, while not wholly inaccurate, present a polar alternative to the dominant ideology, and thus neglect to point out the contradictions which reside at the core of at least some of these revisionary texts. For the homilist in “A Homilie of the State of Matimonie”, authority in marriage rests firmly with the husband who “ought to be the leader and author of love, in cherishing and increasing concord, which then shall take place, if he will use measurablenes and not tyranny, and if he yeeld some thing to the woman”. The woman still requires to be controlled, however, since she is regarded as man's inferior in every way:

For the woman is a weake creature, not indued with the like strength and constancy of minde, therefore they bee the sooner disquieted, and they be the more prone to all weake affections and dispositions of minde, more then men bee, and lighter they bee, and more vaine in their fantasies and opinions.

A little earlier, in 1592, the Puritan Henry Smith had shifted the emphasis slightly in favour of women in his sermon “A Preparative to Marriage”, in which he explained the divine origins of the institution in the following way: “In the contract Christ was conceived, and in the marriage Christ was borne, that he might honor both estates: virginitie with his conception, and marriage with his birth.” But Smith then went on to point out that the bearing of children in marriage reflected “honour” on the woman, but, “for the children which are borne out of marriage, are the dishonor of women, and called by the shamefull name of Bastards”. A little later he condemned adulterers whom he “likened to the divell, which sowed other mens ground”,

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inscribing the woman within a discourse of property, and he cited scripture to demonstrate that for bastards “no inheritance did belong to them in heaven, they had no inheritance in earth”. 

Some six years later in 1598, probably the year in which Much Ado about Nothing was first acted, another Puritan, Robert Cleaver, building on Smith, could take the definition of marriage a stage further, not only “spiritualizing the household”, to use Christopher Hill's phrase, but rendering its relations explicitly political. In his A Godly Form of Householde Government, he noted:

A householde is as it were a little commonwealth, by the good government whereof, God's glorie may bee advanced, the commonwealth which standeth of seueral families benefited, and all that live in that familie may receiue much comfort and commoditie.

Both Smith and Cleaver are caught in contradiction as each makes a liberal gesture towards the woman's position, while preserving a vocabulary of social control which has its roots in a now seriously troubled biblical narrative. But it is on the question of sexuality that Puritan and homilist alike are at one. In the “Third Part of the Sermon Against Adultery” in the Second Tome of Homilies the pleasure/power axis is negotiated through the suggestion that sexual pleasure itself has its origins in Satan: “how filthy, beastly, & short that pleasure is, whereunto Satan continually stirreth us and moveth us”. St Paul's wry concession that “It is better to marrie then to burne” is here seized upon by the homilist as a desperate spiritual justification for what he, and later Cleaver, expresses as, in essence, the political management of sexual activity internalized as a structure of religious feeling containing its own tension between the world of the flesh and that of the spirit.

These are, of course, strands in a much larger body of discursive practices which, at a purely secular level, amalgamates neo-platonic, courtly, and romantic/poetic discourses, all of which are found in contemporary Elizabethan fiction, epic poems such as The Faerie Queene, the sonnet tradition, and courtier manuals such as Castiglione's The Book of the Courtier (1588).

It is this whole precarious discursive edifice which produces Don John's subjectivity that is threatened in the play. That subjectivity is more than simply a marker of “plot”, however, in that Don John internalizes a range of related discursive positions which function from an ethical standpoint to contain his disruptive potential. In his essay “Of Friendship” Francis Bacon argued that “a natural and secret hatred and aversion towards society, in any man, hath somewhat of the savage beast”, and it is therefore not surprising to find Don John associated with images of bestiality; he is prepared to “claw no man in his humour”, and he asserts: “If I had my mouth I would bite, if I had my liberty I would do my liking:” (I.i.17 and 32-4). Moreover, in the essay “Of Envy” Bacon observes that “Deformed persons, and eunuchs, and old men, and bastards, are envious”, and he concludes that this characteristic is “the proper attribute of the devil, who is called The envious man, that soweth tares among the wheat by night.” Don John is also, as Hero informs us, “of a very melancholy disposition” (II.i.5), and therefore suffers from what, in the words of Timothy Bright's A Treatise of Melancholy (1586), is called “an unnaturall temper & bastard spirite”. Moreover, given the discursive practices within which “love” is textualized, Timothy Bright's designation of the related areas which are the grounds for Don John's challenge as “the primitive emotions”, is shown to be nothing more than an empirical reading of what we have seen is an objective social formation: in Bright's terms these are “love mixed with hope” which, we are told, “breedeth trust”, and “love mixed with fear”, which breeds “distrust”. Behind Bright's curiously untheoretical practice lie the twin discourses of salvation and possession. Thus, to adapt Foucault's remarks in relation to “madness”, Don John may be said to represent “an area of unforeseeable freedom” where sexual impulse is in danger of becoming unchained from those discourses which would hold it in place, and like the madman's frenzy Don John's bastardy represents “the secret danger of an animality that lies in wait”, which “undoes reason in violence” and truth through its violation of social norms.

It is here, however, that we encounter historically a mixture of fact and illusion. Peter Laslett has suggested that during the decade 1590-1600, while the population of England was a little over 4 million, bastardy accounted for just over 3 per cent of all births. But he also argues that while bastardy was an issue among
the dominant elite, in actual fact “The engendering of children on a scale which might threaten the social structure, was never, or almost never, a present possibility.” Lawrence Stone argues that there is tentative evidence to suggest that on a national scale the specific pressures applied in local communities within the sphere of sexual morality resulted in low illegitimacy ratios, and that when such community pressure failed, then “any constable was empowered to break into any house in which he suspected fornication or adultery to be in progress and, if his suspicions were confirmed, to carry the offender to jail or before a Justice of the Peace”. The role which Dogberry and Verges play in *Much Ado about Nothing* serves, therefore, to combine political and moral surveillance.

The picture which we get from *The Homilies* is, however, very different in emphasis: a difference, perhaps, between the “imaginary” and the “real”, which has come to designate for us the terrain of ideology. It would not be surprising to find both the political and domestic values which constitute the lived relations within ideology inscribed in the letter of the Law itself, especially in relation to the question of bastardy. In his *Commentaries on the Laws of England* the eighteenth-century lawyer Blackstone outlined explicitly the legal rights attaching to the state of bastardy. For the bastard:

> The rights are very few, being only such as he can acquire for he can inherit nothing, being looked upon as the son of nobody, and sometimes called *filius nulius*, sometimes *filius populi*. Yet he may gain a surname by reputation, though he has none by inheritance.

Excluded from all forms of inheritance, Don John is precluded from asking the question that Claudio asks Don Pedro concerning Leonato's possible “heirs”, since he has no name to promulgate. Legitimate marriage, Blackstone states, gives the husband access to all of the wife's property, though he does not suggest openly that the wife is property herself. Thus, while marriage itself legitimizes the transfer of property (the currency of power), reinforces a social and political identity through the sustaining of a family “name”, and is, to use Foucault's terms, that “deployment of alliance” whereby sexual activity enters into discourse, the bastard is without property, without identity, and stands as a defiant reminder of the underside of the pleasure/power axis as an anarchy consequent upon the transgression of its economies. In the legal and juridical sense of the term, and in a manner directly pertinent to Shakespeare's play, the bastard is therefore *nothing*, nonidentity in a society caught in the contradictory process of “naming” as the step towards “self-identity” but forced to confront, time and time again, the differential mechanisms of its own signifying practices.

**IV**

Thus far I have been concerned, selectively, with areas of what might be called “the political unconscious” of *Much Ado about Nothing*, and I have tried to show briefly how historically specific discursive formations “mythologize” a concrete history. In specific terms, faced with either formulating a concept of female sexuality or obliterating it by hiding it, the discourse itself “transforms history into nature”, to use Roland Barthes's terminology, naturalizing it as part of a totalizing theological narrative. This is not, of course, to collapse sexuality into the irreducibly metaphysical concept of “power”, but rather to suggest that these related discourses ensure the placing of individual subjects in relation to a state apparatus, one which masks, but which would by no means exclude the issue of the exploitation of one class by another. Thus marriage, which in *Much Ado about Nothing* is formulated as a “natural” occurrence (“In time the savage bull doth bear the yoke” (I.i.241-2)), becomes the domestic bulwark in the fight against “evil” waged on the terrain of “Christian faith”. “Faith” and “Trust” are important elements in this discourse, as the homily “A Short Declaration of The True and Lively Christian Faith” indicates. Here “inward faith” is described as being: “not without hope and trust in God, nor without the love of God and of our neighbours, nor without the feare of God, nor without the desire to heare God's worde, and to follow the same in eschewing evill, and doing gladly all good workes.” Those who perform “evill workes” and who “lead their life in disobedience and transgression or breaking of God's commandments without repentance” inherit, says the homilist, “not everlasting life but everlasting death, as Christ sayeth”. By reading these discursive practices “against the
grain”, so to speak, we can begin to see how, through “naturalization” of the contradictions of their material history, they conspire to reduce plurality of meaning to a single totalizing narrative which has as its desideratum political quiescence. Don John is a threat because he would return this discourse to the place where its writ of privilege does not run, but in the attempt to “recuperate” him (through physical coercion) the contradictions residing at the heart of the whole ideological apparatus of Messina are laid bare.

Everywhere in Much Ado about Nothing, from the Messenger's initial communication of Claudio's uncle's expression of joy, which “could not show itself without a badge of bitterness” (I.i.21-2) through to Benedick's final utterances in the play, the linguistic sign itself gapes to reveal the material process of its own production. Deception both does and undoes; it can destroy, but at the same time it can produce “honest slanders” which, as Hero ironically observes, “may empoison liking” (III.i.84-6). Moreover, by the time that Hero is in a position to generalize that “Some Cupid kills with arrows, some with traps” (III.i.106), she herself is caught proleptically in the articulation of her own “death”. But analeptically her comment recalls Benedick's earlier encoding of the figure of “blind Cupid” as the sign on “the door of a brothel-house” (I.i.234-5). For Benedick, liking is already “empoisoned” since the institution which Don Pedro assumes will transform the “savage bull” into a willing husband produces also an animal of a very different complexion: “pluck off the bull's horns and set them in my forehead … let them signify under my sign ‘Here you may see Benedick the married man’” (I.i.244-8).

After the failure of the first Don John plot it is Benedick's female counterpart in “apprehension” who can point to the canker of possessiveness, the “suspicion” or lack of “trust” enshrined at the heart of the notion of civility:

The count is neither sad, nor sick, merry, nor well; but civil Count, civil as an orange, and something of that jealous complexion.

(II.i.275-7)

Thus, at the heart of marriage in this play is a difference along whose axis of signification the gendered human subject is constructed; the woman is a “subject” and she “subjects herself” to the authority of father and husband, while her “virginitie”, textualized as “no thing” becomes, not a signifier of female essence, but rather of masculine honour. That woman in the play is positioned in masculine discourse is made clear in Borachio's chilling account of the purpose of the second Don John plot; the “poison” which the villain will temper will make it possible for him “to misuse the Prince, to vex Claudio, to undo Hero, and kill Leonato” (II.ii.28-9). Hero is here, literally, embedded in a masculine discourse, which will be undone when she is undone and which will be reinstated only when her “honour” is re-inscribed.

Against Hero's “subject” positions as daughter to Leonato, and as legitimate object of male affection, we must set Claudio's own constructed subjectivity. He has no independent autonomous “character” as many of his detractors mistakenly assume; rather, he moves through the play from one textual position to another. His military prowess, like that of Benedick, is already inscribed within the “prior textualization” of a masculine honour code, whose domestic inter-subjective manifestation is the discourse of formal courtship within whose boundaries Hero is herself inscribed. Don Pedro locates the smooth transition from soldier to lover: “Thou wilt be like a lover presently, / And tire the hearer with a book of words” (I.i.286-7). By contrast Benedick occupies a contradictory position, accepting the public militaristic discourse of masculine honour but rejecting its domestic inter-subjective analogue; faced with the prospect of encountering Beatrice, he expostulates to Don Pedro:

Will your Grace command me 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 the hair of the great Cham's beard; do you any embassage to the Pygmies, rather than hold three words' conference with this harpy. You have no employment for me?
This frivolous articulation of the discourse of courtly honour will be re-constituted in much heavier circumstances later in the play, when having been persuaded through a deception to negotiate the contradiction in his own position, Benedick's (I believe) now serious expostulations: "I will swear by it (my sword) that you love me, and I will make him eat it that says I love not you" (IV.i.275-6), and "Come bid me do anything for thee", are both met with Beatrice's stony imperative: "Kill Claudio!" (IV.i.286-7). Benedick's reluctance to defend "female honour" to the death makes him less than a man, as the now fully "subjected" Beatrice comes to realize:

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 a friend that 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.

The alleged loss of Hero's honour marks the point of Beatrice's entry into the very discursive formation that she had before resisted, while its re-constitution at the end marks the re-inscription at different levels of ideological practice of the masculine honour of both Claudio and Benedick. The latter's attempted resolution of the inconsistency of his position at the end: "for man's a giddy thing and this is my conclusion" (V.iv.106-7), effects the transformation from "history" into "nature" so characteristic of myth, but by this time the narrative has become a severely troubled one.

We need only to go back a little to find out precisely how troubled the narrative has become. From Claudio's articulation of "prior textualizations" of female beauty as: "a witch / Against whose charms faith melteth into blood" (II.i.169-70), through to Benedick's cynical jibes at cuckoldry, and his mischievous suggestion that Don Pedro may have stolen Claudio's "bird's nest", it becomes clear that "virginitie" is really a reification of the discourse of an authoritative and paternalist honour. Don Pedro interprets the issue as being one of "trust", and responds indignantly to Benedick's allegation of theft with: "Wilt thou make a trust a transgression? The transgression is in the stealer" (II.i.210-11). The violation of "trust"—the ideological catalyst which guarantees political quiescence—through Don John's persistent questioning of Hero's chastity, raises the disturbing spectre of a plurality of meaning which threatens the whole social order, and which renders Hero a plural object: "Even she—Leonato's Hero, your Hero, every man's Hero" (III.ii.95-6). The drama is played out, literally, over the undone body of Hero, which becomes the plural text upon whose surface is inscribed a range of competing meanings that jostle for supremacy. During the relentless deconstruction of the marriage ceremony Hero becomes for Claudio "this rotten orange" who is "but the sign and semblance of her honour" (IV.i.31-2), whose "blush is guiltiness, not modesty" (IV.i.41), and who is translated from a human subject into one of "those pamper'd animals / That rage in savage sensuality" (IV.i.60-1). For Don Pedro the whole issue reflects upon his "honour": "I stand dishonour'd that have gone about / To link my dear friend to a common stale" (IV.i.64-5), while instead of the legitimate re-naming of Hero as Claudio's possession, her female subjectivity is ruthlessly cancelled: "Hero itself can blot out Hero's virtue" (IV.i.82) leaving her the site of contradiction: "most foul most fair", and "Thou pure impiety and impious purity!" (IV.i.103-4).

This is a narrativization to which Leonato himself subscribes, as he transforms Hero's body into a "writing": "Could she here deny / The story that is printed in her blood?" (IV.i.121-2), lamenting her loss of value as a signifier in the masculine discourse of possession:

But mine, and mine, I lov'd, 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, that the wide sea
Hath drops too few to wash her clean again,
And salt too little which may season give
To her foul-tainted flesh!

(IV.i.136-43)

Here, in Messina we are offered a glimpse of a society inscribing a body in discourse, constructing a sexuality in historically specific ethical terms. It is because of the inscription of Hero's body within the ethical axis of “good” and “evil” that it can be subjected to an alternative reading; her blushing can be interpreted as marks of “innocence” and “maiden truth”, whose full meaning depends upon another sort of “trust” which can recuperate her body for a theological discourse. Significantly, this reading rests with the Friar:

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.

(IV.i.165-71)

It is this recuperative gesture which serves both to foreclose and provoke subversive questioning of the play's discursive structures, thus permitting a thoroughly “interrogative” reading of the conditions of their formation. As if aware of the Pandora's box of discursive possibilities which it has opened up, beyond the text's own powers of conceptualization, a truly dialogic voice is stifled in the play's retreat from those “real questions” of which Pierre Macherey speaks, which would seriously subvert its dominant ideology, proving the closure of the action “always adequate to itself as a reply”.

Heavily implicated in the whole textual process, while at the same time providing a class perspective on the action are Dogberry and the Watch. Dogberry and his colleagues are the instruments of government in Messina, but their collective inversion of sign and meaning represents an habituation of those self-cancelling devices which mark the discursive strategies of the “dishonour’d” Claudio. For Dogberry goodness and truth are punishable, with the victims having to “suffer salvation, body and soul” (III.iii.1-3), while allegiance and responsibility are the rewards of “desartlessness” (III.iii.9); also, the duty of the Watch is defined negatively: “We will rather sleep than talk; we know what belongs to a watch” (III.iii.37-8), while among the manifestations of Dogberry's “merciful” disposition is his willingness to let the “thief” banish himself: “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.56-9). Inscribed in such apparently delightful ineptitude is the sense of an imperfectly learned system of values which are imposed from above. In this respect Dogberry and his colleagues are not unlike Beatrice and Benedick who later ape imperfectly the discourse of romantic love, succumbing as they do to its imperatives but failing to internalize slavishly its discursive practices:

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, nor I cannot woo in festival terms.

(V.ii.34-40)
In this respect, though on a smaller scale than that of Beatrice and Benedick, Dogberry and the Watch elicit both ridicule and sympathetic laughter: as representatives of the Law on the one hand, but also as repositories of a popular resistance to its demands on the other. The one is inscribed primarily in the discourse of sexuality, while the other is inscribed in the discourse of class. But they overlap in a surprising way with Dogberry's insistence that as Messina's “subjects” he and his colleagues must be “suspected”: “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 …” (IV.ii.77-9). Here social position and gendered subject are glimpsed through a defensive gesture which asserts hierarchy at the same time as it undermines it. It is upon this precarious balance that the discursive formations of Messina rest. The “flesh”, a metonymy of Man's inheritance after Adam's “transgression” is textualized as a narrative which reproduces its own discursive practices, and it is no accident that the “prior textualizations” which drive Benedick and Beatrice together are, in the conflation of Dogberry’s “tediousness” and Leonato's impatient paternalism, the efficient cause of Hero's undoing.

Structurally Dogberry and the Watch occupy a potentially subversive position in the play, seeming to invert the letter of the Law. But even so they, like Benedick and Beatrice, can hardly be said to represent the “other” of official ideology in any Bakhtinian sense. Indeed, they are shown here to be the repository of values which are ultimately re-affirmed in the court of Messina itself. Borachio makes the point bluntly to Claudio and Don Pedro: “I have deceived even your very eyes: what your wisdoms could not discover, these shallow fools have brought to light …” (V.ii.226-9). The result is not a fragmenting, but a universalizing of Messina's ethical and discursive practices, while at the same time acknowledging local social antagonisms within this unified structure. Here, momentarily, the text gapes to reveal a glimpse of hegemony in the making.

V

It is this unity which Don John challenges, and into whose precariously balanced structures he must be coerced and held as the mark of “transgression”. But we should distinguish the manner of his marginalization from the recuperation, for the play's dominant discourses, of the seemingly independent figures of Benedick and Beatrice. Their admission coincides with the resurrection of Hero, her re-union with Claudio, and the capture of Don John; but even this process of re-inscription cannot be effected without recalling to mind the “other” of discourse itself irrepressibly lodged at the source of meaning as excess. To enter into discourse is to enter into a political semiosis, in which all communicative gestures are harnessed to the process of the production of meaning. In a potentially subversive gesture the merry-hearted Beatrice of Act II counsels Hero to “speak” to the silent (but, we recall, “civil”) Claudio, “or if you cannot, stop his mouth with a kiss, and let him not speak neither” (II.i.292-3).

But this proves no solution to the problem. Indeed, at the end of the play, and now constrained to accept herself the silence which is the modus operandi of the “wife” Innogen, the fully “subjected” Beatrice becomes the victim of her own strategy, as Benedick suppresses her former persona into “silence”: “Peace, I will stop your mouth” (V.iv.97). The gesture is, surely, intended to transcend the treachery of language itself, but Don John, the man who is himself “of few words” has got there before the lovers, drawing this gesture back into the material world of difference where meanings have to be contested. Benedick's gesture both unites and splits the lovers, as evidenced in Count Bembo's disquisition on kissing in Castiglione's The Book of the Courtier:

For since a kisse is a knitting together both of bodie and soule, it is to be feared, lest the sensuell lover will be more enclined to the part of the bodie, than of the soul: but the reasonable lover wotteth well, that although the mouth be a parcell of the bodie, yet it is an issue of wordes, that be the interpreters of the soule, and for the inward breath which is also called the soule.
This gesture of uniting two “soules” in spiritual bliss is also, paradoxically, a reminder of Man’s “transgression”. Thus, Benedick's words of advice to Don Pedro to “get thee a wife! There is no staff more reverend than one tipped with horn” (V.iv.121-2) both extols marriage and at the same time seeks to hold in place through laughter the “transgression” that threatens to deconstruct its “transcendental signified”. Thus, the platonic ideas of unity and harmony based upon a “trust” are defined only in terms of the proximity of their “other”, a “transgression” whose “author” is Don John, and whose image is variously the cuckold, the whore and, most politically subversive of all, the bastard.

At the end of the play it is the “whore”, that signifier of the defamatory “writing” on the body of Hero, who dies. Similarly, it is the bastard, Don John, who is rigorously coerced into the ritual affirmation of a collective solidarity which is aesthetic closure, by exclusion. Indeed, Don John's body will become the site of another “writing”, this time of a promissory and spectacular nature, connected with what Francis Barker has called “the … pageant of sacramental violence”.

Benedick's final words incorporate this “pageant” into the festive context of the ending itself with his exhortation to: “Think not on him till tomorrow; I'll devise thee brave punishments for him. Strike up, pipers!” (V.iv.125-6). But that process does not clear the path for a progress “through release to clarification”; rather, it constitutes a driving back down into the “political unconscious” of a force that, dispossessed from power, silenced by coercion, and re-inscribed in the pageant of Elizabethan juridical practice, seeks its revenge through the temporary colonization of those discursive practices which struggle to suppress it. Thus, the ending of Much Ado about Nothing offers no momentary perception of Utopia through the mechanism of carnival release; rather, it offers us an insight into a politics of comedy in which those strands which constitute the complex economy of power and pleasure are exposed, only to be concealed again within the naturalizing process of “myth”. The need for such mythologizing would have been rendered still more necessary for an Elizabethan audience when it is remembered that on the throne of England was a monarch who was both the public epitome of virgin “honour” and who, in the view of religious subversives, was the bastard child of Henry VIII.

Notes

3. Hawkes, Coleridge on Shakespeare, p. 115.
12. Ibid., p. 183.
21. See *The Faerie Queene*, Book IV, Canto X:

And next to her sate sober Modestie,  
Holding her hand vpon her gentle hart;  
And her against sate comely Curtesie,  
That vnto euery person knew her part;  
And her before was seated ouerthwart  
Soft Silence, and subsi""#e Obedience,  
Both linckt together newer to dispar,  
Both gifts of God not gotten but from thence,  
Both girkonds of his Saints against their foes offence.

(Ibid. p. 505)
26. The evidence for this is located usually in Beatrice's reply to Don Pedro's allegation that she has “lost the heart of Signior Benedick”:

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.260-4)
33. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (Brighton: Harvester, 1980), pp. 139-40. Dramatically speaking, he occupies a place which is not unlike that which Jonathan Dollimore ascribes to Marlowe's figure of Faustus who is the stimulus for a subversive questioning which is both foreclosed and provoked, although, of course, unlike Faustus, he is never allowed to occupy the central position in the play. See Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: religion, ideology and power in the drama of Shakespeare and his contemporaries* (Brighton: Harvester, 1984), p. 110.
34. *Political Unconscious*, p. 35.

37. The Second Tome of Homilies (London, 1595), sig.Gg5r.

38. Ibid., sig. Gg5v.


40. Ibid., p. 4.

41. Ibid., p. 12.


43. Homilies, sig. L5r.


46. Ibid., p. 25.


50. Ibid., p. 154.


55. See Louis Montrose, “The Place of a Brother” in As You Like It: Social Process and Comic Form”, Shakespeare Quarterly, 32, 1 (Spring, 1981), 28-54; see especially his comments on Shakespeare’s exploration of the conditions “in a rigorously hierarchical and patriarchal society, a society in which full social identity tends to be limited to the propertied adult males who are the heads of households” (p. 35). My own conclusions depart radically from Montrose on the question of “subjectivity”, and I cannot accept his conclusions concerning Shakespeare’s plays as “reflections” of conflict (p. 54).

56. Homilies, sig. C8r.

57. Ibid., sig. D3r.

58. Cf. Montrose, “The Place of a Brother”, p. 49 on the issue of “Charivari”: “traditionally the form of ridicule to which cuckolds and others who offended the community’s moral standards were subjected”.

59. Macherey, Literary Production, p. 131.


**Criticism: Themes: Morriss Henry Partee (essay date 1992)**


>In the following essay, Partee probes the thematic conflicts of Much Ado about Nothing by exploring the play's structural tensions between comedy and tragedy. The critic also 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
Finding the balance between the two plots of *Much Ado About Nothing* continues to challenge readers. While most critics agree that Claudio's relationship with Hero forms the underlying structure of the play, the Benedick and Beatrice material has always attracted far more interest and acclaim. This fascination with the background or subplot calls into question Shakespeare's artistry—the ponderous comedy of situation may seem unworthy to co-exist with, much less to contain, the brilliant light-hearted comedy of manners. Such a literary reading proceeds from the questionable assumption that every dramatic figure should have the full panoply of emotional depth assigned to actual people. The diversity of attributes assigned to Benedick and Beatrice naturally offers the intuitions of critics far more scope for explication than does the relatively straightforward narrative of attraction, betrayal, and reconciliation that surround Hero and Claudio. On the other hand, respect for the play's original (and primary) status as an immediate dramatic production may correct this distortion of the subsequent literary artifact. Attention to the temporal succession of episodes in performance (whether publicly in the theater or privately in the study) reveals a superb generation and release of tension in the small world of Messina.

Framed by the ongoing broader political antagonism of Don Pedro and Don John of Arragon, *Much Ado About Nothing* successfully tempers the potential tragedy of Claudio's actions with the resolution of the deep-seated conflict between Benedick and Beatrice. The momentary hiatus in the antagonism between the brothers from Arragon offers the bastard the opportunity for introducing his machinations into the fragile arena of Messina. This displaced animosity complicates the transition of Count Claudio from his prior military obligation to Don Pedro to the romantic concerns long held by Benedick, his new friend and social inferior. To mute the effect of such intense animosity in the main plot, Shakespeare not only employs superficial, often incoherent characterization but also implants extensive implausibility into the action. These logical discontinuities help the audience to look past local incidents of emotional involvement with these one-dimensional dramatic figures. In addition, the playwright creates a background of unusual vitality. The emergence of Beatrice and Benedick from their isolation and underlying melancholy generates sufficient interest to help distance the intense confrontation of the primary action. The play's comic irresolution into forgiveness ultimately detaches all characters from the consequences of their action. Much ado fades into nothingness.

I. ANXIETY IN MESSINA

Shakespeare encapsulates the tension surrounding Claudio's betrayal of Hero in the church scene by placing this potentially tragic action within the broader context of Don Pedro's inexplicable incursion into Messina. Assigning the glory of the military overthrow of Don John to Count Claudio, Shakespeare gives Don Pedro chiefly personal and political authority. Therefore, the ruler of Arragon must bear full responsibility for casually introducing the malevolence of his illegitimate sibling into the unsuspecting and defenseless society of Messina. Moreover, this leader not only fails to provide subsequent monitoring of his brother's activities but also offers the opportunity for the bastard's machinations. Neglecting political responsibility, Don Pedro demonstrates interest primarily in socializing with Leonato and confirming his subordinates in marriage. The shadow brother simply takes his cues from Don Pedro. Perverting the theatrical devices which Don Pedro benignly uses to secure the marriages of his subordinates, Don John continually seeks to “appropriate a power the play seeks to lodge with the legitimate brother.”

Shakespeare circumscribes the ability of Don Pedro to function as a stabilizing force in this work. Although the play gives no definitive age for him, his susceptibility to the conspiracy of Don John, his status as a potential lover, and his close association with the exceptionally young Claudio could suggest youth and inexperience. And although the alliance of Claudio and Don Pedro appears secure—indeed, Richard A. Levin argues their relationship to be excessively enmeshed—even the secluded Hero knows that political relationships are inherently unstable. Moreover, further distancing his status as a ruler from the focus of the
play, Don Pedro's ambiguous role as a potential lover himself challenges class structure. Where even Hero, the daughter of the governor of Messina, is beneath his birth (II. i. 165), Don Pedro's proposal of marriage to the dependent Beatrice reveals a disregard for his social obligations to his state (II. i. 326; II. iii. 168-70).  

The highly structured and fragile society in Messina magnifies the impact of such destabilizing forces. Whereas Venice always represents an exotic and sophisticated city for Shakespeare, Messina—which can with reasonable confidence rely on the watch of Dogberry for security—suddenly receives an influx of a conspicuously cosmopolitan army: Don Pedro of Arragon, Claudio of Florence, and Benedick of Padua. “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.” The absence of an alternate, more ideal, world intensifies the sense of compression and magnifies the impact of scandal as Shakespeare portrays “the absoluteness of the evil of slander.” The unquestioned acceptance of patriarchal authority heightens the sense of constriction. Although the dependent Beatrice can flaunt these demands with impunity, Hero (like Cordelia in King Lear) manifests—at least on the surface—an almost supernal docility concerning her marriage.  

The governor of this city, the aged and feeble Leonato, demonstrates neither insight nor authority. A clear terminus to his authority already appears in the emphasis on his having only one child, a female in an intensely patriarchal society (I. i. 294-95; IV. i. 127-28). His primary function—besides welcoming Don Pedro to Messina—consists of enunciating the expectations of the patriarchy to Hero. An uneasy mixture of violence and passivity, this figure alternates between raging at Hero and railing at her abusers (IV. i. 190-200; V. i. 45-109). Lack of a strong secular center of political authority necessitates the sudden insertion of the Friar as the agent of social reconciliation. Leonato then lapses into almost complete submission: “Being that I flow in grief, / The smallest twine may lead me” (IV. i. 249-50). Nor does he develop initiative. When the watch has vindicated Hero, his determined refusal to confront disruptive influences (V. i. 259-61) resembles more the ineptitude to which Dogberry counsels the watch (III. iii. 28-82) than the rage of an abused father and magistrate.

An awareness of time's passing gives an undercurrent of urgency to Much Ado About Nothing. Reflecting comedy's typical employment of the fantasy of a timeless eternity, Beatrice contemplates an eternity of jesting with bachelors in heaven (II. i. 48-49), while Hero fantasizes about being married forever tomorrow (III. i. 101). But more profoundly, the special characteristics of this play come from ‘the manner in which ‘time and place’ do not ‘cease to matter,’ but matter very greatly.” The spacial limitation of the setting solely to Messina emphasizes the effect of time on the characters. Even the bland Hero has melancholy premonitions of the future; her heart is exceedingly heavy as she thinks of her wedding dress (III. iv. 24-25). Beatrice more specifically foresees the decay of marital relationships (II. i. 72-80), and Benedick laments the ephemerality of reputation (V. ii. 77-80). Timing, of course, profoundly affects the plot. Dogberry's inability to communicate his apprehension of the malefactors to Leonato in timely fashion precipitates the anguish of Hero; the news of Don John's stealthy departure comes just in time to confirm the confessions of Borachio and Conrade.

The compression of the ambience of Messina encourages the audience to see a personal inertia in the dramatic figures. The pun on the similar pronunciation of nothing and noting in the title of the play immediately introduces the theme of static contemplation. The lack of autonomy of the characters reduces them to mere noting or observing of others. Claude has carefully noted Hero before going to war (I. i. 298), and the sparring of Beatrice and Benedick necessarily proceeds from close observation of each other. The plot itself depends on even more disengagement: eavesdropping or overhearing dominates the action. Dogberry instructs the watch to observe but not to apprehend malefactors. Don Pedro and Claudio are content merely to overhear the supposed infidelity of Hero. Obviously, a less emotionally restricted Claudio would have immediately confronted the woman he supposes to be Hero and her paramour, thus exposing the stratagem of Don John. And, of course, a major source of humor in the play derives from the benign gulling of Beatrice and Benedick as they listen in on supposedly private counsels.
This temperamental passivity leads to a dangerous deadening of the intellect in the dramatic figures. “Throughout the play every character is required to observe and judge, and almost every character judges poorly.”

All levels of society are affected. The highly placed Don Pedro and Claudio as well as Leonato misjudge Hero while the lowly Dogberry can see the ignorance of Verges, but not his own (III. v. 9-12). Incapable of focusing on any topic and bewildered by words, Dogberry can penetrate the treachery of Borachio only by implausible fortune. Throughout the play every character is required to observe and judge, and almost every character judges poorly (IV. ii. 74-75). Neither Benedick nor Beatrice can see through the deception of the overhearing, and even when they are teased later, they show no indignation at being manipulated. All of the lovers in this romantic comedy must rely on external agents to establish satisfactory relationships. Benedick and Beatrice as well as Claudio “suffer from self-absorption, with its corollary of misplaced faith in the sufficiency of one's own knowledge, and thus all three are easily led into mistakes about themselves and about others.”

A complete resolution of this stubbornness is far from assured. Benedick concludes with his determination to be indifferent to the opinions of others. “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” (V. iv. 105-08).

The conspicuous sexual tension which so obviously drives Claudio's aggression towards Hero transpires against a subtle background of the melancholy surrounding the minor characters. Shakespeare assigns some interiority to the buffoon Dogberry by the startling discordant revelation that this constable has had losses (IV. ii. 84). And we discover that Hero and Beatrice have “noted” the dour expression of the caged and defanged Don John (II. i. 3-5). The humor surrounding Benedick and Beatrice especially derives from compensation for unhappiness. The past in Much Ado About Nothing holds few explicitly pleasant memories for these socially subordinate characters. We find that the mother of Beatrice cried as her daughter was born (II. i. 334-35), and at the news of Hero's engagement, Beatrice declares herself to be sunburned and unmarriageable. Benedick likewise has difficulty in securing longterm relationships. According to Beatrice, Benedick has trouble keeping friends, possibly because of his excessive dependency on them (I. i. 86-90). Isolation intensifies grief. Benedick aptly declares that “every one can master a grief but he that has it” (III. ii. 28-29). Like Brabantio in Othello and Macduff in Macbeth, Leonato scornfully refuses verbal consolation. Declaring his radically unique status, the grieving father would admit only a person with a mirror image of his suffering to offer comfort (V. i. 5-32).

Exclusive focus by critics on the compensating mechanism of wit generated between Benedick and Beatrice improperly ignores the underlying distress that necessitates the humor in the first place. Both figures show signs of continued injury caused by the verbal thrusts within the play. Although the merry war between Beatrice and Benedick offers the conventional society of Messina a momentary release from its tedium (I. i. 61-64), Beatrice recalls with some chagrin the earlier disruption of her relationship with Benedick (II. i. 278-82). Skillfully mocking Benedick's military and personal standing with Claudio and Don Pedro, Beatrice taunts Benedick by saying that as the Prince's jester he is often not noticed, but laughed at and beaten. Then he falls into a melancholy and does not eat (II. i. 146-150). Benedick worries about the possible truth of this jest, and indeed in act five Don Pedro and Claudio seek him out to amuse themselves (V. i. 122-24). And on the other hand, Benedick ridicules not only the appearance but also the wit of Beatrice, her one defense against her inherent lack of social standing as a poor relation of Leonato.

Verbal hostility extends far beyond these two sparring lovers. From the beginning, a constant verbal sparring tempers the emotional bonding between friends. A persistent, low-grade irritability persists throughout the entourage both of Don Pedro and Leonato. Benedick sneers at Claudio's interest in love just as Margaret will jibe at the newly smitten Beatrice later. This barely disguised hostility comes closer to the surface in the “honest slanders” (III. i. 84) which Hero applies to the hidden Beatrice (III. i), Claudio to the hidden Benedick (II. iii). Whereas socially mandated decorum initially maintains cordiality between the two leaders themselves, Leonato unproductively confronts Don Pedro and Claudio while awaiting vindication of Hero. And Claudio in his turn displays an unseemly contempt for the old man who was to be and is to be his
father-in-law (V. i. 115-16).

The ubiquitous references to adultery and illegitimacy provide an ominous social context for the extreme innocence of Claudio. The malevolent Don John, of course, represents the tangible embodiment of bastardy. None of the figures in this play find that moral codes materially aid them in managing the torment and frustration arising from their fundamental ambivalence concerning chastity and sexuality. Jealousy powerfully drives Claudio to suspect first Don Pedro and then the illusory lover of Hero. Although Claudio demonstrates sufficient eloquence among his fellow males, he cannot verbally woo Hero. This lack of intellectual communication finds a counterpart in his emotional retardation. Oblivious to the difficulty in radical changes in human bonding patterns, he glorifies his absolutely platonic relationship with Hero as the necessary legitimate precursor to marriage (IV. i. 53-54).

Nevertheless, jesting can offer some relief. Words have, as Beatrice recognizes, a power to keep people “on the windy side of care” (II. i. 315). The alternative to revealing one's sorrow is to “waste inwardly” (III. i. 78). “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.” Accordingly, Leonato jests publicly about the possible illegitimacy of Hero, and Benedick constantly reflects his masculine insecurity concerning being cuckolded. Beatrice herself recognizes the possibility of Benedick's impregnating her. She would not have him put her down, lest she “should prove the mother of fools” (II. i. 286).

However entertaining in itself, the gulling of Beatrice and Benedick nevertheless introduces a potentially tragic antagonism into the unravelling of the primary plot. As in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the leader—here Don Pedro—suggests a dramatic entertainment for alleviation of the frustrations attendant upon upcoming nuptials. Accordingly, in language of violence which constantly recognizes an intrusion upon the autonomy of Beatrice and Benedick, the conspirators seek to incorporate the wounded, but fiercely independent, agents into the general amorous ambience of Messina. The virtually instantaneous success of the schemers testifies to the fragility of the delusional—indeed self-destructive (III. i. 26-28)—animosity which has been generating the verbal sparring of the two. Nevertheless, social honor stands in the way of true intimacy. Stripping the focus of authority from the friar, Beatrice abjures the passivity of Leonato. She would have Benedick “Kill Claudio” (IV. i. 289). Such fierce loyalty to her friend, however intrinsically admirable, under the best circumstances offers a momentary threat to the ultimate harmonious union of a repentant Claudio and a vindicated Hero. At the worst outcome, this action of revenge against the young and formidable warrior could very well result in the death of her lover. Transposed into the genre of romance, Claudio as “an apprentice Othello” could easily kill someone, and Benedick certainly lacks the heroic stature of his literary predecessor, the Rinaldo of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. Beatrice (and the audience) would have no way of knowing at this point that mere dismissal would greet Benedick's challenge to Claudio (V. i. 145-50).

The major tension of the play, of course, derives from Claudio's repudiation of Hero. The brittleness of this society and the explicit presentation of this attack on stage give this episode an unusual, almost inappropriate, weight. Reverberations of the passion displayed in the church scene make problematic any easy resolution into unrestrained good cheer. The personal authority of Rosalind will enable the audience to look past the attempted fratricide which underlies *As You Like It*, and the resilience of Viola will help shift our focus from the social unrest in the court of Orsino and in the household of Olivia in *Twelfth Night*. But in *Much Ado About Nothing* Hero lacks the personal dimension and Beatrice lacks the social standing to intervene effectively; as “obsessed by illusory dishonor, the Bastard's dupes intensify their own serio-comic ordeals.” The brutal public denouncement of Hero's supposed private sins generates not only her humiliation but also the intense anger of her father first towards her and then towards her accusers. Shakespeare certainly set himself a challenge to maintain a comic equilibrium in the midst of such raw tensions.

**II. IMPLAUSIBILITY AND THE COMIC RESOLUTION**
The energy with which Shakespeare invests the conflicts in *Much Ado About Nothing* requires a variety of on-going powerful devices to drain away the tension. Exaggerated implausibilities within the plot itself help to segment the potentially tragic action into episodes of merely comic intensity. The title's combination of energy and negation in its “much ado” and “nothing” has identified for the audience the ultimate lack of meaning at the outset of the performance; evil (represented by the one-dimensional Don John) has initially no cause and finally no effect. Whereas cunning in a motiveless malignancy like Iago would threaten the equilibrium of any play, here Don John lacks initiative and perspicacity. Completely out of touch with social and personal issues, he seems to believe firmly that Don Pedro truly woos Hero for himself (II. i. 155-57). Moreover, he relies entirely on Borachio for planning the deception of Claudio. A self-proclaimed plain dealing villain, he resorts to the coarsest of subterfuges. Appropriately, the least sophisticated clown in Shakespearean comedies foils this one-dimensional villain; full revelation of his duplicity can be only a matter of course—when, not if.

Despite the intensity of Claudio's confrontation with Hero, Shakespeare surrounds this encounter with sufficient absurdity to allow the audience a measure of comic detachment. First, we might reasonably expect the rumors and uncertainty surrounding Don Pedro's intentions in wooing Hero to have warned all concerned about jumping to conclusions in subsequent matters of wooing. Especially dubious would be any insights from Don John, who eagerly verified the rumor about the supposed treachery of his brother (II. i. 169-70). Second, obscurity surrounds the chamber-window scene, an event “whose non-representation is a precise corollary of its inscrutability.” Whereas a tragedy will place on stage Othello's overhearing of Cassio's supposed gloating to Iago of the infidelity of Desdemona, we learn about this deception in the comedy through the narration by the drunken Borachio (III. iii. 144-63), “a virtuoso display of lateral thinking.” We thus see the results of Don Pedro's own account of this episode (IV. i. 88-94) already knowing of the detection of the subterfuge. Third, Shakespeare gives no plausible explanation concerning the substitution of Margaret for Hero. Although Beatrice has been her bedfellow for the entire previous year, neither she nor Hero offers any reason for this particular hiatus.

The lack of diverse characteristics assigned to the figures in the main plot helps the audience focus on the external plot rather than conjecturing about some pain in an imaginary felt life. The major characters manifest a comic inconsistency rather than a tragic complexity. The conventional comic exclusion of productive work from the focus of the play prevents them from striking the audience with full humanity. The cessation of the civil war in Arragon leads to an indefinite holiday in Messina, a location where the primary enterprise consists of romance. Only a few of the lesser figures—the friar, the sexton, the boy—and the incompetent watch engage in their professional activities. This limitation of necessary human activity automatically eliminates a major source of character depth. The ineluctable ambiguity surrounding Don Pedro, the most powerful authority in the play, frustrates his emergence as a sympathetic, coherent character. He remains forever trapped within the layers of the playwright's revisions; the text itself, probably deriving from Shakespeare's foul-papers, offers “a becoming, a process, not a finished product.” Prospective characters such as the wife of Leonato and the son of Antonio appear in hints, only to vanish into wordless, actionless oblivion. Thus we should not be too surprised that Don Pedro's initial status as a rival lover to Claudio conflicts with his later role as a genial “love-god” (II. i. 384-86). “The misapprehension of the father and uncle as to who the suitor is, since it promises a contretemps which never in fact occurs, has the effect of a false start.” As I have argued concerning the Antonio of *The Merchant of Venice*, Don Pedro fades from his early significance as the pace of the play speeds increasingly toward the reconciliation and marriage of the young lovers. Originally the heroic conqueror of Don John, Don Pedro becomes merely a fellow penitent with Claudio, and he simply joins Leonato and his brother, the insignificant Antonio, as one of the triad of uninvolved spectators to the nuptials of the reconciled young lovers.

The character inconsistency of the confederates involved in defaming Hero with the window scene cuts deeply into the plausibility of the action. Margaret in particular remains an enigma. A close friend of Hero as well as a witty and generally sympathetic figure, she apparently participates vigorously and convincingly in
the treacherous impersonation of Hero. Despite the improbability of her remaining naïve during such an extended charade, Borachio declares that she had no awareness of the circumstances surrounding her role of mimicking Hero (V. i. 300-03). Presumably present along with the entire entourage of Hero at the wedding, Margaret nevertheless remains silent during Claudio's violent confrontation of Hero. And ultimately, the investigation (conducted entirely off-stage) of Leonato largely exonerates her: “Margaret was in some fault for this, / Although against her will” (V. iv. 4-5).

The male conspirators likewise yield their potential character consistency to the demands of the plot. Borachio offers sufficiently diverse characteristics to defy a coherent psychological interpretation. He clearly knows the likely effects of his scheme: “to misuse the Prince, to vex Claudio, to undo Hero, and kill Leonato” (II. ii. 28-29). Yet Borachio not only instantly surrenders to the incompetent watch but also readily confesses his villainy to Don Pedro (V. i. 230-44). Moreover, the relationship itself of Borachio and Margaret stems from plot necessity rather than from any subtle characterization. Whereas the uncle which Claudio has in Messina gives a possible dimension to the youth's interest in Hero, the general membership of Borachio in the entourage of Don John of Arragon gives this schemer no such depth. In addition, Don John puts a seal on the ineptitude of villainy in this play. Even if Borachio had not confessed, the bastard's unexplained sudden flight would at the very least cause suspicion of his role in the defamation of Hero. Reflecting the fundamental lack of passionate intensity throughout this play, even Don John will face no real sanctions. Shakespeare's putting his ultimate disposition in the hands of the humorous Benedick instead of the more aggrieved Claudio suggests a light penance for this scapegoat. “As the pipers strike up and the dance begins, we realize that it is appropriate that Benedick, rather than the Prince or Leonato or Claudio, advise us that we ‘think not on him till tomorrow’.”

The deliberate shallowness of Shakespeare's depiction of Hero and Claudio facilitates their bland adaptability to the demands of the plot. The playwright matches the youth of Claudio (I. i. 12-15) to that of Hero (I. iii. 56); the Count's awkwardness and essential passivity as a lover and Hero's complete apathy concerning the choice of a spouse reduce the appearance of individual autonomy. Claudio in particular appears “in a series of cameos. … We are to penetrate successive frames of mind as significant points in a passionate history and make the necessary imaginative leaps for ourselves to link them together.” Only in the renunciation scene at the church does this type of the courtly lover assume “an inner life.” The totality with which he gives himself away to Hero (II. i. 308-09) deprives Claudio of any subsequent response to love and beauty in the future when he thinks she is unfaithful (IV. i. 105-08).

However repulsive his public shaming of Hero appears, Claudio's error proceeds from ignorance and mistaking (V. i. 275), and he preserves some measure of our sympathy in the intense grief which accompanies his denunciation of Hero (IV. i. 100-108). 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.” At Hero's vindication, Claudio again gives up his autonomy in accepting blindly any revenge proposed by Leonato.

Unreconstructed aggressiveness has been exorcised in the church scene and the ritual expiation makes possible a second chance.” Hero's symbolic death, sanctioned by the holy friar, gives both of them a new identity: “when I liv'd, I was your other wife, / And then you lov'd, you were my other husband” (V. iv. 60-61). As Leonato says, she died only while her slander lived. Repentance having created a new character for Claudio, a spirit of forgiveness can now free him and other characters from the consequences of their action. The revenge of Leonato towards Claudio dies with his marriage to the supposed cousin of Hero (V. i. 292).

In addition, the successful resolution of the long-term conflict in the subplot mitigates the intensity of the brief acrimony of the lovers in the main action. The verbal pyrotechnics set off between Beatrice and Benedick provide a brilliant descant to the main action. “Shakespeare's definitive treatment of the amorous agon occurs in Much Ado About Nothing; there is probably no other amorous agon in world literature that can match it in
profundity, tenderness, wit, and sheer joyfulness.”29 The reconciliation of these lovers has already begun by the time of the conflict between Claudio and Hero. Given the pretext of the staged overhearings, Benedick and Beatrice swiftly testify to the strength of their underlying bonding by the speed of their recognition of their true feelings. Granted the autonomy of conscious recognition of their hidden feelings, they voluntarily decide to change their behavior. Benedick will be “horribly in love with her” (II. iii. 235) while Beatrice will tame her “wild heart” to his “loving hand” (III. i. 112).

Shakespeare stresses the durability of this transformation. Their new-found resolutions withstand the test of some friendly social ridicule as Claudio and Don Pedro mock Benedick for shaving and perfuming himself (III. ii. 44-51) while Hero and Margaret tease Beatrice for having “turn'd Turk” (III. iv. 57). And, indeed, separated by the assertiveness of Beatrice from his male friends, “Benedick never returns to the old male camaraderie.”30 Moreover, Shakespeare provides his typical reassurance to the audience concerning the stability of this newly re-established relationship by extending the time between initial declaration and final resolution, for Benedick must prove himself to Beatrice by confronting Claudio. Shakespeare completes his approval of their alliance by allowing them a return at the end to healthy teasing (V. iv. 91-97), a distancing that the playwright consistently deems necessary to a successful marital relationship.

In short, the critic may retain an indignation at the actions of Claudio and Don Pedro, of course, but such a reader carries a grudge longer than the concerned figures in the play do.31 Holding that Don Pedro and Claudio have “the very bent of honor” (IV. i. 186), these characters blame only Don John. Despite psychological probability, few signs of anger remain at the end of the play. Hero eagerly accepts her role of the wife of Claudio, and Claudio shows no resentment towards Benedick or Leonato for their challenges to him. Even though “the ambivalence in the insistence on women's chastity right along with the appreciation of her sexual responsiveness remains at the end of the play,”32 the marriages will alleviate at least momentarily the real melancholy and the isolation which appeared at the beginning of the play. The suffering of both sets of the lovers during the course of the play prevents the overly facile romantic relationships that Shakespeare deems dangerous to married love, and the inherent comic discontinuity of episodes and characters allows the dramatic figures a fresh, uncomplicated start.

Notes

2. Reflecting Shakespeare's pervasive admiration of twins, Portia in The Merchant of Venice reasons that friends who spend a great deal of time together begin to resemble each other: “There must be needs a like proportion / Of lineaments, of manners, and of spirit” (III. iv. 14-15).
4. III. i. 9-11. All quotations are from The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).
5. Beatrice recognizes how inappropriate such a proposal is. She would not marry him “unless I might have another for working-days. Your Grace is too costly to wear every day” (II. i. 327-29).
32. Williams, p. 44.

**Much Ado about Nothing (Vol. 88): Further Reading**

**CRITICISM**

*Presents* Much Ado about Nothing's Beatrice as an example of the “female ego ideal” in Shakespearean drama.


*Offers a moral and impressionistic assessment of character in Much Ado about Nothing.*


*Provides an introduction to Much Ado about Nothing that focuses on the performance history of the drama.*


*Examines* Borachio's allusion to the shaven Hercules in Act III, scene iii of Much Ado about Nothing.


*Reflects on the characterization of Hero and Claudio in Much Ado about Nothing.*


*Argues that* Much Ado about Nothing is actually the subtitle of a drama originally called Love's Labour's Won.

Friedman, Michael D. “Male Bonds and Marriage in *All's Well* and *Much Ado.*” *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 35, no. 2 (spring 1995): 231-49.

*Probes the opposition between male social relations and the impetus toward marriage depicted in Much Ado about Nothing and All's Well That Ends Well, particularly emphasizing the ways in which this conflict is reflected in theatrical interpretations of Benedick and Bertram.*


*Describes* Much Ado about Nothing as a tragicomedy concerned with the themes of deception and self-awareness.


*Summarizes* the composition, sources, stage history, structure, characterization, and thematic framework of Much Ado about Nothing.

Analyzes assorted examples of verbal wit, wordplay, pun, and parody used in Much Ado about Nothing.


Categorizes and studies the various rhetorical devices—including anaphora, antimetabol, and punning—found in the language of Much Ado about Nothing.


Explores the balance between individualism and social responsibility depicted in Much Ado about Nothing, with particular regard to the figures of Don John, Claudio, Beatrice, and Benedick.


Suggests that Shakespeare imaginatively altered his source material, including the writings of Ariosto, Spenser, and Sidney, to form his dramatic comedy Much Ado about Nothing.

**Critical Essays: Much Ado About Nothing: The Unsociable Comedy**

**Barbara Everett, Somerville College, Oxford**

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 humiliating and jilted by her courtly 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 griefe 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 griefe 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 mutely 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-trick 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 depth 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
decieves 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 unhappinesse, 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 woee 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'.

Quotes

Quotes in Context: "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.

Quotes in Context: "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.

Quotes in Context: "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 shame Lives in death with glorious fame.

Quotes in Context: "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. . . .BENEDICK Gallants, I am not as I have been.LEONATO So say I, methinks you are sadder.CLAUDIO I hope he be in love... .BENEDICKI have the toothache.DON PEDRO Draw it.BENEDICK Hang it.CLAUDIO You must hang it first, and draw it afterwards.DON PEDROWhat? Sigh for the toothache?LEONATO Where is but a humour or a worm?BENEDICK Well, every one can master a grief but he that has it.CLAUDIO Yet say I, he is in love.

Quotes in Context: "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—the niece of Leonato, Governor of Messina—has engaged in a rhetorical war of comic badinage in 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 in which the other's love is described 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:

BEATRICE I wonder that you will still be talking, Signior Benedick. Nobody marks you.BENEDICK What my dear Lady Disdain! Are you yet living? BEATRICE It is 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. BENEDICK Then 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. BEATRICE A 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.

Quotes in Context: "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, sobs, 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.

Quotes in Context: "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.

Quotes in Context: "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?

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.

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. . . .

Quotes in Context: "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.

Quotes in Context: "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"):

DOG Berry

If 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?

DOG BERRY

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.

Quotes in Context: "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
naive, 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:

DOG Berry: 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– DOG Berry: 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 occasion 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 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.

Character and Theme Quotes: Essential Quotes by Theme: Deception

**Essential Passage 1:** Act 1, 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.
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 than 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.
Short-Answer Quizzes

Short-Answer Quizzes: Act I, Scene 1 Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. Who was victorious in the battle that preceded the opening of the play?

2. What is the relationship between Don Pedro, Claudio, and Benedick?

3. Why is the speech of Leonato, Don Pedro, and Claudio so rigid? What does their style tell us about their characters?

4. How does Beatrice cover up her concern for Benedick?

5. What simile does Beatrice use to describe Benedick's faith?

6. During their wordspar, what accusations do Benedick and Beatrice hurl on each other?

7. What is the greatest fear of Claudio and Benedick?

8. Have the characters met before?

9. What about Hero is of major concern to Claudio?

10. Which character reveals his misogyny? Is this misogyny real?

Answers
1. Prince Don Pedro of Aragon won the battle.

2. Both Claudio and Benedick fought bravely for the prince.

3. The speech of Leonato, Don Pedro, and Claudio shows their adherence to courtly manners and rituals. Their style betrays an addiction to convention.

4. Beatrice covers her concern for Benedick through her witty downgrading of him.

5. Beatrice states that Benedick wears his faith but as the fashion of his hat.

6. Benedict accuses Beatrice of being disdainful and Beatrice accuses Benedict of being a pernicious lover.

7. Both Claudio and Benedick fear becoming cuckolds.

8. Yes, they have met before.

9. Claudio is concerned about Hero's chastity.

10. Benedick reveals his misogyny. The misogyny is merely a whetstone for his wit.
Short-Answer Quizzes: Act I, Scene 2 Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. Who overheard the conversation between Claudio and Don Pedro, and where did he hear it?

2. Why does Antonio tell his brother about this conversation?

3. What is the misinformation conveyed in this scene?

4. How quickly does news travel in Messina and in what manner?

5. How did this misinformation probably come about?

6. How is "nothing" used as a pun in the title of this play?

7. Is there any other word used in the title of the play which might also be a pun?

8. What does the action of the scene tell us about hearsay?

9. Leonato prefers to treat the information he received in this scene as a dream. Why?

10. Who will tell Hero the news?

Answers
1. Antonio's servant overheard the information in the orchard.

2. Antonio tells Leonato about this conversation in order to prepare him for the situation and give him some time to prepare his answer.

3. The misinformation conveyed in this scene is that the prince is in love with Hero and will ask her hand in marriage for himself.

4. News travels very quickly in Messina and is spread by word-of-mouth.

5. The misinformation of the servant is most likely due to the fact that he heard only part of Don Pedro's and Claudio's conversation.

6. Nothing was pronounced like noting during Elizabethan times.

7. "Ado" may be a pun for adieu, the French word for farewell, which characterizes the characters' formal breakups as a result of the misinformation generated in the play.

8. The action of this scene tells us that hearsay is oft repeated.

9. Leonato treats the information he learned in this scene as a dream because it is hard for him to readily accept the reality that the prince is in love with and wants to marry his daughter, a commoner.

10. Leonato directed Antonio, her uncle, to tell Hero of the prince's plans.
Short-Answer Quizzes: Act I, Scene 3 Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. How is Don John related to Don Pedro?
2. What is Don John's mood in this scene?
3. Under what planet is Conrade born?
4. What kind of advice does Conrade give Don John?
5. How does Don John respond to Conrade's advice?
6. What information does Borachio bring to Don John?
7. What effect does this information have on Don John?
8. Why are Conrade and Borachio willing to assist Don John?
9. Where does Don John go at the end of the scene?
10. How does Shakespeare use repetition and contrast in this scene?

Answers
1. Don John is Don Pedro's illegitimate brother.
2. Don John's mood is foul, based on his willfulness and impatience.
3. Conrade is born under the planet Saturn.
4. Conrade, hoping to appeal to Don John's ambitions, advises him to stay within the prince's good graces until he is able to devise a solid plan to undo his brother and his court.
5. Don John tells Conrade he has no intention of following anyone's will, even for the sake of flatters other than his own.
6. Borachio informs Don John that the prince is being entertained at supper at Leonato's, where he will woo Hero for Claudio.
7. Don John, envious of Claudio because he bested him in battle, decides to cross him.
8. Conrade and Borachio agree to help Don John in his deception in order to satisfy their own ambitions, should Don John one day become prince.
9. Don John goes to Leonato's house to join the party given for his brother Don Pedro, and to seek a means of crossing Claudio.
10. In this scene, Shakespeare repeats the motif of noting, or eavesdropping, with Borachio, and contrasts Don John's resentment with Don Pedro's forgiveness. Stylistically, Don John's clipped, obsessive speech is void of
any geniality.

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Act II, Scene 1 Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**
1. To what dances does Beatrice compare wooing, wedding and repenting?

2. Whom does Ursula dance with and how does she recognize him?

3. What statement of Benedick preceded Beatrice's put-down of him during the dance?

4. Whom does Don John purposefully mistake for Benedick?

5. Which characters have soliloquies in this act?

6. Would Benedick marry Beatrice if she were "endowed with all that Adam had left him before he transgressed"?

7. Was Don Pedro able to win Hero for Claudio?

8. When will Claudio and Hero's wedding take place?

9. Whom does Don Pedro think would be an excellent wife for Benedick?

10. Leonato predicts that Benedick and Beatrice, after one week of marriage, will be in what condition?

**Answers**
1. Beatrice compares wooing to a Scotch jig, wedding to a measure, and repenting to a cinquepace.

2. Ursula is dancing with Antonio, Leonato's brother. She recognizes him by the waggling of his head and the dryness of his hand.

3. Benedick told Beatrice that someone had told him that she was disdainful and had her wit out of the Hundred Merry Tales.

4. Don John purposefully mistakes Claudio for Benedick.

5. Claudio and Benedick have soliloquies in this act.

6. No, Benedick would not marry Beatrice, even if she were endowed with all that Adam had left him before he transgressed.

7. Yes, Don Pedro was able to win Hero for Claudio.

8. Claudio and Hero will marry seven days later, on a Monday.

9. Don Pedro thinks that Beatrice would be an excellent wife for Benedick.
10. Leonato predicts that Benedick and Beatrice would, if married but one week, talk themselves mad.

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Act II, Scene 2 Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**
1. What is the first thing that Borachio tells Don John?
2. Who is the architect of the plan to slander Hero?
3. What does Don John state would be medicinable to him?
4. What did Borachio tell Don John a year ago?
5. What role has been assigned to Don John in this plan?
6. Who will be mistaken for Hero?
7. What role will Borachio play?
8. What effect do the plotters expect to have on the prince, Claudio, Hero, and Leonato?
9. How is the only way the plan will succeed?
10. How much will Don John pay Borachio for his deceit?

**Answers**
1. The first thing Borachio tells Don John is that he can cross the marriage between Claudio and Hero.
2. Borachio is the architect of the plan to slander Hero.
3. Don John states that any cross, any impediment to the marriage of Claudio would be medicinable to him.
4. Borachio told Don John that he is in the favor of Margaret, Hero's waiting-gentlewoman.
5. Don John's role is to first plant the slander in Don Pedro's mind and then to offer him proof.
6. Margaret will be mistaken for Hero.
7. Borachio will play the role of Hero's lover.
8. The plotters intend to misuse the prince, to vex Claudio, to undo Hero, and to kill Leonato.
9. The plan will only succeed if Don John can first convince Don Pedro that his honor has been sullied by arranging the alliance between Claudio and Hero.
10. Don John will pay Borachio a thousand ducats for his deceit.
Short-Answer Quizzes: Act II, Scene 3 Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. What is orthography? Who has turned orthography?

2. What graces does Benedick seek in a woman?

3. To what does Benedick liken Balthasar's singing?

4. When does Shakespeare reference the title of the play?

5. Why does Benedick dismiss the thought that he is being gulled?

6. From whom do the plotters claim to have received their information?

7. Who fears that Beatrice will die and why?

8. How in love with Beatrice does Benedick declare he will be?

9. Did Beatrice call Benedick into dinner on her own initiative?

10. At the end of the scene, what does Benedick spy in Beatrice?

Answers
1. Webster defines orthography as the art of writing words with the proper letters according to standard usage. Claudio has turned orthography.

2. Benedick expects a woman to be rich, wise, virtuous, mild, noble, of good discourse, and an excellent musician.


4. Shakespeare references the title of the play before gulling Benedick.

5. Benedick dismisses the thought that he is being gulled because he does not believe that an elder such as Leonato would be in on such a plot.

6. The plotters claim to have received their information from Hero.

7. Hero fears that Beatrice will die because of her unrequited love for Benedick.

8. Benedick declares that he will be horribly in love with Beatrice.

9. No, she did not. Against her will, Beatrice was sent to call Benedick into dinner.

10. Benedick spies some marks of love in Beatrice at the end of this scene.
Short-Answer Quizzes: Act III, Scene 1 Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. On whom do Hero and Ursula play the gull?
2. Where is Beatrice during this scene?
3. Who told Hero that Benedick was in love with Beatrice?
4. What character defects does Hero ascribe to Beatrice?
5. How would Beatrice treat a fair-faced man?
6. Why does Hero say it is useless to mention these defects of character to Beatrice?
7. What counsel does Hero intend to give to Benedick?
8. Which scene in the play does this one parallel?
9. How does Cupid kill?
10. Which faults does Beatrice willingly give up in her soliloquy?

Answers
1. Hero and Ursula play the gull on Beatrice.
2. Beatrice is hidden in the honeysuckle arbor.
3. Don Pedro and Claudio told Hero that Benedick was in love with Beatrice.
4. Hero states that Beatrice is disdainful, scornful, and full of intellectual pride.
5. Beatrice would swear that the gentleman be her sister.
6. Hero says that it is useless to mention these defects of character to Beatrice because Beatrice would respond with mockery.
7. Hero intends to counsel Benedick to fight against his passions.
8. This scene parallels the preceding scene, in which Benedick was similarly gulled.
9. Cupid kills some with arrows, some with traps.
10. Beatrice willingly surrenders contempt and maiden pride in her soliloquy.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Act III, Scene 2 Questions and Answers
Study Questions
1. When does this scene take place?

2. What is Benedick's observation about grief?

3. Has anyone seen Benedick at the barber's?

4. What does Claudio say about Benedick's jesting spirit?

5. What malady does Benedick claim to have?

6. Who shall be buried with her face upwards?

7. Who invites Leonato to walk aside with him?

8. Why does Don John include Claudio in his conversation?

9. What does Don John tell Don Pedro and Claudio?

10. What invitation does Don John extend to Don Pedro and Claudio?

Answers
1. This scene takes place the night before the wedding.

2. Benedick observes that everyone can master a grief but he that has it.

3. No. But the barber's man has been seen with Benedick.

4. Claudio says that Benedick's jesting spirit is now crept into a lute string and now governed by stops.

5. Benedick claims to suffer from a toothache.

6. Beatrice will be buried with her face upwards.

7. Benedick invites Leonato to walk aside with him.

8. Don John includes Claudio in his conversation because the matter he speaks of concerns him.

9. Don John tells Don Pedro and Claudio that Hero is disloyal.

10. Don John invites Don Pedro and Claudio to witness Hero's disloyalty with their own eyes and ears.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Act III, Scene 3 Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. Who gives the charge to the watch?

2. How does Dogberry instruct: the watch to handle a thief?
3. What is the meaning of the phrase, "my elbow itched"?

4. In what manner does Borachio utter all to Conrade?

5. What does Borachio call a thief?

6. From where did Don John, Don Pedro, and Claudio witness Borachio wooing Margaret in Hero's name?

7. Who believed the staged deceit?

8. What did Claudio swear to do and why?

9. Who charges Borachio and Conrade?

10. How does the watch describe Borachio and Conrade?

Answers
1. Dogberry gives the charge to the watch.

2. Dogberry instructs the watch to, if they take a thief, let him show himself what he is and steal away out of your company.

3. "My elbow itched" is a proverbial warning against questionable companions.

4. Borachio, like a true drunkard, utters all to Conrade.

5. Borachio calls fashion a thief.

6. Don John, Don Pedro, and Claudio were in the orchard when they witnessed Borachio woo Margaret in Hero's name.

7. Don Pedro and Claudio believed the staged deceit.

8. Claudio, enraged, swore to disgrace Hero before the congregation the next morning at their wedding ceremony.


10. The watch describe Borachio and Conrade as "the most dangerous piece of lechery that ever was known in the commonwealth.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Act III, Scene 4 Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. Who does Hero send to wake up Beatrice?

2. What piece of clothing does Margaret try to talk Hero out of wearing?

3. Who does Hero call a fool?
4. Who is not feeling well?
5. Approximately what time is it?
6. What are Beatrice's symptoms?
7. Who attempts to wordspar with Beatrice in this scene?
8. What remedy does Margaret suggest for Beatrice's malady?
9. What is another name for benedictus?
10. What announcement does Ursula bring at the end of the scene?

**Answers**
1. Hero sends Ursula to wake up Beatrice.
2. Margaret tries to talk Hero out of wearing a specific rebato.
3. Hero calls both Margaret and her cousin, Beatrice, fools.
4. Beatrice is not feeling well.
5. It is approximately five o'clock.
6. Beatrice's symptoms are that she is stuffed and cannot smell.
7. Margaret attempts to wordspar with Beatrice in this scene.
8. Margaret suggests carduus benedictus as a remedy, lain on the heart.
9. Holy thistle is another name for benedictus.
10. Ursula announces that the wedding party has arrived to escort Hero to church.

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Act III, Scene 5 Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**
1. Where does this scene take place?
2. Who visits Leonato in this scene?
3. Why doesn't Leonato listen to them carefully? 4. When Dogberry describes Verges' wits as not so blunt, what did he really mean?
5. What is Dogberry's response when Leonato tells him he is tedious?
6. What is Leonato's response when he finally understands that they have apprehended two people?
7. What hospitality does Leonato offer Dogberry and Verges before he leaves?

8. What message is brought to Leonato?

9. What direction does Dogberry give to Verges?

10. Why does Dogberry want a learned writer?

**Answers**
1. This scene takes place in the hail of Leonato's house.

2. Constable Dogberry and Headborough Verges visit Leonato.

3. Leonato doesn't listen to them carefully because he is distracted with the wedding, and in a hurry to get there.

4. Dogberry meant that Verges' wits were not so sharp.

5. Dogberry, upon being told that he is tedious, returns the compliment.

6. Leonato tells them to take the examination and to bring it to him.

7. Leonato offers wine to Dogberry and Verges.

8. The messenger tells Leonato that the wedding party is waiting for him to give his daughter in marriage.

9. Dogberry directs Verges to go to Francis Seacoal and bid him bring his pen and inkhorn to the jail.

10. Dogberry wants a learned writer to set down their excommunication (examination).

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Act IV Scene 1 Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**
1. How does Claudio reject Hero?

2. What does Don Pedro call Hero?

3. What fate does Leonato wish upon his daughter, Hero, after she swoons away? And what extreme measure is he willing to take to bring it about?

4. Did Beatrice sleep with Hero the night before?

5. Who declares his belief that Hero is innocent?

6. Whom does Benedick intuit as the author of the slander?

7. What does Friar Francis direct Leonato to do?

8. For whom does Beatrice weep?
9. Who confess their love for each other?

10. Who will Benedick challenge?

**Answers**

1. Claudio rejects Hero contemptuously as a wanton.

2. Don Pedro calls Hero a common stale.

3. Leonato wishes his daughter dead and he is willing to kill her himself.

4. No, Beatrice did not sleep with Hero the night before.

5. Friar Francis declares his belief that Hero is innocent.


7. Friar Francis directs Leonato to hide Hero away, to announce that she died upon being accused, and to hold public mourning for her.

8. Beatrice weeps for her cousin, Hero.

9. Beatrice and Benedict confess their love for each other.

10. Benedick will challenge his friend, Claudio.

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Act IV, Scene 2 Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**

1. Who is provided with a stool and a cushion?

2. Is Dogberry's examination of the prisoners direct and to the point?

3. Who moves the examination along and keeps it on point?

4. What does Dogberry whisper into Borachio's ear?

5. What is the testimony of the watch?

6. What is Dogberry's response upon hearing the watch testify that Count Claudio intended to accuse and refuse Hero?

7. Who confirms the testimony of the watch?

8. Who leaves to show Leonato the examination?

9. Does the news of Hero's death upon wrongful accusation have any effect on Conrade?

10. What does Dogberry want everyone to remember?
Answers
1. The sexton is provided with a stool and a cushion.

2. No. Dogberry's examination is extremely tangential and practically pointless.

3. The sexton moves the examination along and keeps it on point.

4. Dogberry whispers into Borachio's ear that "it is thought that you are false knaves."

5. The watch testifies that they heard Borachio call Don John a villain, who paid him a thousand ducats for slandering Hero and state that Count Claudio would disgrace and refuse Hero.

6. Upon hearing of Count Claudio's intention to accuse and refuse Hero, Dogberry tells Borachio that he will "be condemned into everlasting redemption for this."

7. The sexton confirms the testimony of the watch.

8. The sexton leaves to show Leonato the examination.

9. The news of Hero's death upon wrongful accusation has no effect on Conrade. On the contrary; it sobers him not at all, and he calls Dogberry an ass.

10. Dogberry wants everyone to remember that he is an ass.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Act V, Scene 1 Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. What kind of philosopher does Leonato say never existed?

2. Which characters challenge Claudio?

3. What is Benedick's reply when asked by Claudio if he will use his wit?

4. What does Benedick tell Claudio and Don Pedro about Don John?

5. What does Borachio tell Don Pedro about the watch?

6. Does Leonato accept Borachio's claim to be solely responsible for Hero's death?

7. Does Borachio name Margaret as a co-conspirator in the slander of Hero?

8. What penance does Leonato give to Claudio and Don Pedro?

9. What does Dogberry want Leonato to remember when punishing Conrade?

10. Whom will Leonato talk with and why?

Answers
1. Leonato says, "[t]here was never yet a philosopher that could endure the toothache patiently."
2. Claudio is challenged by Leonato, by Antonio, and by Benedick.

3. Benedick replies, "It is in my scabbard. Shall I draw it?"

4. Benedick tells Claudio and Don Pedro that Don John has fled Messina.

5. Borachio tells Don Pedro "[w]hat your wisdoms could not discover, these shallow fools have brought to light."

6. No. Leonato tells Borachio that Don Pedro, Claudio, and Don John had a hand in it.

7. No. Borachio declares Margaret innocent of any conspiracy in the slander of Hero.

8. As penance, Leonato assigns them the task of informing Messina of Hero's innocence. Claudio will hang an epitaph upon her tomb, sing it to her bones that evening, and marry his niece, sight unseen, the next morning.

9. Dogberry wants Leonato to remember, when punishing Conrade, that he called him an ass.

10. Leonato will talk with Margaret to find out how her acquaintance grew with Borachio.

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Act V, Scene 2 Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**

1. Who does Benedick meet at the opening of the scene?

2. Was Benedict born under a rhyming planet?

3. Does Beatrice come when she is called by Benedick?

4. What news did Beatrice want to find out?

5. What does Benedick tell Beatrice about Claudio?

6. For which of Benedick's bad parts did Beatrice first fall in love with him?

7. Why does Benedick suffer love for Beatrice?

8. Why can't Benedick and Beatrice woo peaceably?

9. Who is Don Worm?

10. What news does Ursula bring?

**Answers**

1. Benedick meets Margaret at the opening of the scene.

2. Benedick was not born under a rhyming planet.

3. Beatrice comes when she is called by Benedick.
4. Beatrice wanted to find out if Benedick challenged Claudio.

5. Benedick tells Beatrice that Claudio undergoes his challenge.

6. Beatrice first fell in love with Benedick for all of his bad parts.

7. Benedick suffers love for Beatrice because he loves her against his will.

8. Benedick and Beatrice are too wise to woo peaceably.

9. Don Worm is the action of the conscience, traditionally described as the gnawing of a worm.

10. Ursula brings the news that "It has been proved my Lady Hero hath been falsely accused, the Prince and Claudio mightily abused, and Don John is the author of all, who is fled and gone."

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Act V, Scene 3 Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**

1. Where does the action take place?

2. What is the action?

3. Who reads the epitaph to Hero?

4. After reading the epitaph, what does Claudio do with the scroll?

5. Who sings the hymn to Hero?

6. Who is the goddess of the night?

7. How often does Claudio vow to perform this rite?

8. At what time of day do they end their rite?

9. Who dismisses the mourning company?

10. What will Claudio and Don Pedro do next?

**Answers**

1. The action takes place at the tomb of Hero, in the monument of Leonato.

2. The action is a public rite of mourning.

3. Claudio reads the epitaph to Hero.

After reading the epitaph, Claudio hangs up the scroll. Balthasar sings the hymn to Hero.

6. Diana, the moon goddess and patroness of chastity, is the goddess of the night.
7. Claudio vows to do this rite yearly.

8. They end their rite at dawn.

9. Don Pedro dismisses the mourning company.

10. Claudio and Don Pedro will change their clothes and proceed to Leonato’s.

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Act V, Scene 4 Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**

1. Who is declared innocent?

2. When Benedick asks Leonato for Beatrice's hand and Leonato reveals the double gull, what is Benedick's response?

3. Who is the masked lady that Claudio swore to marry and how does he respond when she unveils herself?

4. What paper does Claudio produce?

5. How does Benedick stop Beatrice's mouth?

6. What is Benedick's conclusion?

7. Who wants to dance and why?

8. What advice does Benedick give Don Pedro?

9. What news does the messenger bring?

10. Which plays of Shakespeare end with a dance?

**Answers**

1. Hero, the prince, and Claudio are declared innocent.

2. Benedick's response is, "[y]our answer, sir, is enigmatical."

3. Claudio is amazed to find the masked lady that he swore to marry is none other than Hero.

4. Claudio produces a paper containing a halting sonnet written by Benedick.

5. Benedick stops Beatrice's mouth with a kiss.

6. Benedick's conclusion is "man is a giddy thing."

7. Benedick wants to dance to lighten their hearts and their wife's heels.

8. Benedick advises Don Pedro to "[g]et thee a wife, get thee a wife."
9. The messenger brings the news that Don John is taken and will be brought back to Messina.

10. No other plays of Shakespeare end with a dance.
Teaching Guide

Teaching Guide: 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 wordspar 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 persevere 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.