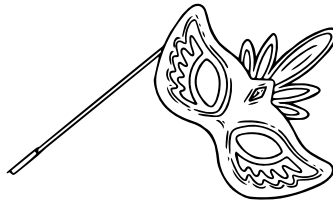


MUCH ADO  
ABOUT NOTHING

*William Shakespeare*

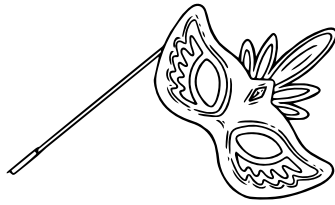




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## INTRODUCTION

If a theatrical performance is primarily seen and heard, the main action in *Much Ado About Nothing* is principally overheard. The act of noting defines the play.\* While this dependence on noting seems rather harmless if the task is tricking Beatrice and Benedick to fall in love, Claudio's mistaken noting threatens to upend the comedy and undo all of the matches. Can anything good come out of this chaos over "nothing"?

### The World Around

While little is known about the personal details of Shakespeare's life, recent scholarship has given careful attention to the quality of education available to Shakespeare at the grammar school in Stratford-upon-Avon and the classical texts available to him in sixteenth-century England. Shakespeare would have known a number

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\* The verbal play between "noting" and "nothing" is not merely a spelling similarity; in Elizabethan English they were pronounced similarly. We might call them Elizabethan homophones. See Michael Best, "Masks; much ado about noting," *Internet Shakespeare Editions*, (Victoria, BC: University of Victoria, 2001-2010), <http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/m/lifetimes/plays/much%20ado%20about%20nothing/adomasks.html>.

of classical mythologies, and Latin epics, lyrics, and narratives, like Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.<sup>\*</sup> Shakespeare writes within an early modern tradition wherein the act of reading involved rewriting. Adaptation and imitation were the literary and pedagogical values of the day. There were as many as seventeen variants of the slandered bride story when Shakespeare wrote *Much Ado* at the end of the sixteenth century.<sup>†</sup>

The themes of marriageability, potential sexual scandal, and ambiguous exchanges with suitors had a particular political relevance in Elizabethan England. One of the pressing concerns of the day was Elizabeth I's status as the unwed "Virgin Queen." In the latter half of Elizabeth's reign, there certainly was "much ado" in England about the possibility of a royal marriage that would restructure England's international alliances and provide the Tudor family with an heir to the throne. Three years after *Much Ado* appeared as a quarto text, Elizabeth I died without a husband or a biological heir.

Since the eighteenth-century, *Much Ado About Nothing* has been dated to 1600, which was the date assigned to the first quarto edition of the play.<sup>‡</sup> It was likely written just before then, since the names of the actors Kemp and Cowley appear in the speech headings of Act 4,

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<sup>\*</sup> For a survey of the range of classical texts in an early modern grammar school education, see Colin Burrow's excellent chapter, "Classical Influences," in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare's Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 97-115. Also Thomas Baynes's "What Shakespeare Learnt at School," *Shakespeare studies, and essay on English dictionaries* (London: Longmans, Green, and co., 1894), *Shakespeare Online*, 20 Aug. 2000, <http://www.shakespeare-online.com/biography/whatdidshkread.html>.

<sup>†</sup> William Shakespeare, *The New Oxford Shakespeare: Modern Critical Edition: The Complete Works*, ed. Gary Taylor, John Jowett, Terri Bourus, and Gabriel Egan, critical edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1440.

<sup>‡</sup> William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, ed. David Stevenson (New York: Signet, 1998), 150.

scene 2 instead of Dogberry and Verges, and Kemp had left the acting troupe in 1599.<sup>§</sup>

### About the Author

Baptismal records indicate that William Shakespeare was born in April of 1564. Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, a woman eight years his senior, in 1582. After the birth of their first daughter Suzanna and their twins Hamnet and Judith, Shakespeare moved to London to continue his work as an actor and playwright. His relatively rapid rise to popularity aggravated his contemporaries, for Robert Greene appears to call him as an “upstart crow” in his indirect address to Thomas Nashe, Christopher Peele, and Christopher Marlowe at the end of *Groatsworth of Wit* (1592).<sup>¶</sup>

Within ten years, Shakespeare and his acting troupe, which included the well-known actor Richard Burbage, received their patronage from the Lord Chamberlain and took on the name the Lord Chamberlain’s Men in 1594. They became the King’s Men in 1603 when James I became their patron. Shakespeare helped to found the Globe Theater that same year, and he continued to enjoy a tenth share of the profits until his death on April 25, 1616. Shakespeare was buried in his hometown of Stratford-on-Avon, where his tombstone left an ominous warning:

Good friend, for Jesus’ sake forbear  
To dig the dust enclosed here.

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§ *The New Oxford Shakespeare*, 1440. For the names of Kemp and Cowley in the quarto, see *Much Ado*, ed. David Stevenson, li. For Kemp’s departure from the company see William Shakespeare, *Much Ado about Nothing*, ed. F. H. Mares, updated edition (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 7.

¶ That the “upstart crow” refers to Shakespeare is, however, contested by some scholars. See Daryl Paksen, “Was Robert Greene’s ‘Upstart Crow’ the actor Edward Alleyn,” *The Marlowe Society Research Journal* 6, 2009, [https://www.marlowe-society.org/pubs/journal/downloads/rj06articles/jl06\\_03\\_pinksen\\_upstartcrowalleyn.pdf](https://www.marlowe-society.org/pubs/journal/downloads/rj06articles/jl06_03_pinksen_upstartcrowalleyn.pdf).

stage a scandal that will ruin Hero's reputation. The incompetent but ever vigilant constable Dogberry and his assistant Verges discover the author of mischief and slander, but they are too late to prevent a disastrously aborted wedding. Claudio, a rather rash and jealous young man, responds to Don John's "evidence" of Hero's infidelity just as Don John hoped he would: he shames Hero before the whole congregation at the wedding altar. Horrified, Hero collapses while Claudio, Don Pedro, and a (delighted) Don John storm off. The play threatens to end like the tragedy *Othello*, ruined by rumor and jealousy.

Friar Francis counsels the miserable Hero, her speechless cousin Beatrice, and the outraged Leonato to publish the news that Hero has died from the shock of the slander to allow opportunity for truth to prevail and for Claudio to realize his grievous error. During the long, sad days of waiting, Beatrice gives up her jesting, receiving Benedick's comfort and help. Benedick, who has fallen in love with Beatrice, finds his attachment to her stronger than his friendship with Claudio and the Prince; at Beatrice's request he challenges Claudio to a duel.

Once the Constable and Dogberry are finally able to make their report understood and Don John is revealed to be a scoundrel, Claudio is quick to repent. Don Pedro insists that, as penance, Claudio marry a niece of his who, wonder of wonders, looks a lot like the "dead" Hero. Benedick drops his challenge. Claudio returns to the altar to find this "niece" is none other than Hero! With Claudio and Hero married, Benedick asks Beatrice to marry him as well—but not without a last bit of sparring from his soon-to-be bride.

### Worldview Analysis

Throughout *Much Ado*, Shakespeare examines the mechanism by which people "fall in love." *Much Ado* often treats that "fall" rather

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\* In this way *Much Ado* shares an important theme with *Midsummer Night's Dream*, where Shakespeare imagines the chaos that ensues when magic potions dictate affections.



literally. A trap involving eavesdropping or overhearing is set for an unsuspecting character; inevitably the character takes the “bait” by believing the truth of the rumor. This is how Hero and Ursula describe the way that they will persuade Beatrice to fall in love with Benedick: Hero explains that Cupid’s “crafty” arrows wound “by hearsay” (3.1, p. 37), and when Ursula describes Beatrice as “a fish” coming to “devour the treacherous bait,” Hero clarifies that it is “false-sweet bait that we lay for [her ear]” (3.1, p. 37).<sup>\*</sup> At the end of their constructed conversation, designed for Beatrice to overhear, Ursula exults, “We have caught her, madam” (3.1, p. 40) to which Hero replies, “If it prove so, then loving goes by haps. / Some Cupid kills with arrows, some with traps” (3.1, p. 40). According to Ursula, to make someone fall in love, the god of love can either shoot someone with an “arrow of love,” suggesting that they fall in love at “first sight,” or rely on the power of hearsay or the praise of others. Don Pedro, who devised the scheme to “bring Signor Benedick and the Lady Beatrice into a mountain of affection” (2.1, p. 25), also claims the status of Cupid (2.1, p. 25). He argues that the party’s capacity to trick Beatrice and Benedick into falling in love means that they have displaced Cupid himself and have become “the only love-gods” (2.1, p. 25), arranging and manipulating the affections of others.

Essentially all who participate in Don Pedro’s plan make an important assumption about the mechanism of love: they all bear witness to the fact that falling in love is a highly mediated activity. In other words, standing between any two lovers, you can usually find some kind of mediator: another character, a book, a letter, or perhaps rumors and hearsay, or, sometimes, diabolical plotting. “Cupid’s arrows” and “Cupid’s traps” are metaphorical and mythical descriptors for these mediators. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, one never simply falls in love.

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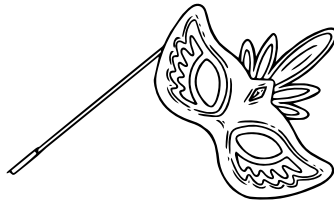
\* All citations to the play are given by act, scene, and page number of the Canon Press edition.

“Making” someone fall in love, therefore, requires an act of invention or artistry, and if we attribute less noble motives, we might describe the action as artifice or fabrication. The slippery boundary between different kinds of “makers” (with the inspired muse on one side of the moral spectrum and sly liar on the other) is one of the most animated debates in Elizabethan criticism.<sup>†</sup>

Now, if less-than-truthful mediators can move characters to fall in love, the play suggests that the reverse outcome is also a possibility: one might fall *out* of love in the same way one fell in—by traps. Don John is delighted by Borachio’s plan to call the maid-in-waiting, Margaret, to look out Hero’s bedchamber window in an “unseasonable instant of the night” (2.3, p. 26). Borachio explains that Claudio will witness “proof enough” in the scene to believe that Hero is being sexually promiscuous with another man since Hero and Margaret look similar enough to be mistaken for each other. According to Borachio, “there shall appear such seeming truth of Hero’s disloyalty that [Claudio’s] jealousy shall be called assurance, and all the preparations overthrown” (2.3, p. 34-5). Borachio perfectly anticipates Claudio’s reaction, as he later confides to Conrad: “Away went Claudio enraged, swore he would meet her [at the wedding], and there, before the whole congregation, shame her [...] and send her home without a husband” (3.4, p. 27). Claudio disgraces Hero publicly because Don John tells him how to interpret a pantomime he witnessed of Hero’s infidelity. As an evil mediator, Don John sabotages Hero and Claudio’s relationship by masquerading as Claudio’s friend. The play says as much about choosing wise counselors as it comments on falling in love. Here, as in so many Shakespeare plays, “the companion of fools will suffer harm” because our companions inform the way we interpret what we see (Prov. 13:20).

When we hear that the experience of love is mediated in *Much Ado*, we might be tempted to describe Claudio’s falling in love as an

<sup>†</sup> See Phillip Sidney’s *A Defense of Poesy* (1595).



## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

**Don Pedro:** Prince of Arragon

**Don John:** his bastard Brother

**Claudio:** a young Lord of Florence

**Benedick:** a young Lord of Padua

**Leonato:** Governor of Messina

**Antonio:** his Brother.

**Balthazar:** Servant to Don Pedro.

**Borachio, Conrade:** followers of Don John

**Dogberry:** a Constable.

**Verges:** a Headborough

**Friar Francis**

**A Sexton**

**A Boy**

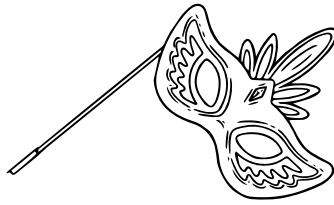
**Hero:** Daughter to Leonato

**Beatrice:** Niece to Leonato

**Margaret, Ursula:** Waiting-gentlewomen attending on Hero

**Messengers, Watch, Attendants, &c.**





## ACT I

### SCENE I

*Before LEONATO's house.*

*Enter LEONATO, HERO, and BEATRICE, with a Messenger.*

**Leonato.** I learn in this letter that Don Pedro of Arragon comes this night to Messina.

**Messenger.** He is very near by this: he was not three leagues off when I left him.

**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 bestowed much honour on a young Florentine called Claudio.

**Messenger.** Much deserved on his part and equally remembered by Don Pedro: 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.

**Leonato.** He hath an uncle here in Messina will be very much glad of it.

**Messenger.** 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.

**Leonato.** Did he break out into tears?

**Messenger.** In great measure.

**Leonato.** 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 than to joy at weeping!

**Beatrice.** I pray you, is Signior 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 Signior 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, subscribed for Cupid, and challenged him at the bird-bolt. 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.

**Leonato.** Faith, niece, you tax Signior Benedick too much; but he'll be meet with you, I doubt it not.

**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 trencherman; he hath an excellent stomach.

**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 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. 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.

**Messenger.** I see, lady, the gentleman is not in your books.

**Beatrice.** No; an he were, I would burn my study. But, I pray you, who is his companion? Is there no young squarer now that will make a voyage with him to the devil?

**Messenger.** He is most in the company of the right noble Claudio.

**Beatrice.** O Lord, he will hang upon him like a disease: he is sooner caught than the pestilence, and the taker runs presently mad. God help the noble Claudio! if he have caught the Benedick, it will cost him a thousand pound ere a' be cured.

**Messenger.** I will hold friends with you, lady.

**Beatrice.** Do, good friend.

**Leonato.** You will never run mad, niece.

**Beatrice.** No, not till a hot January.

**Messenger.** Don Pedro is approached.

*Enter DON PEDRO, DON JOHN, CLAUDIO, BENEDICK, and BALTHASAR.*

**Don Pedro.** Good Signior Leonato, you are come to meet your trouble: the fashion of the world is to avoid cost, and you encounter it.

**Leonato.** 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.

**Don Pedro.** You embrace your charge too willingly. 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.

**Don Pedro.** You have it full, Benedick: we may guess by this what you are, being a man. Truly, the lady fathers herself. Be happy, lady; for you are like an honourable father.

**Benedick.** If Signior Leonato be her father, she would not have his head on her shoulders for all Messina, as like him as she is.

**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.** Is it possible disdain should die while she hath such meet 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 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 scratched face.

**Beatrice.** 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, i' God's name; I have done.

**Beatrice.** You always end with a jade's trick: I know you of old.

**Don Pedro.** That is the sum of all, Leonato. Signior Claudio and Signior Benedick, my dear friend Leonato hath invited you all. I tell him we shall stay here at the least a month; and he heartily prays some occasion may detain us longer. I dare swear he is no hypocrite, but prays from his heart.

**Leonato.** If you swear, my lord, you shall not be forsworn.

[*To DON JOHN*] Let me bid you welcome, my lord: being reconciled to the prince your brother, I owe you all duty.

**Don John.** I thank you: I am not of many words, but I thank you.

**Leonato.** Please it your grace lead on?

**Don Pedro.** Your hand, Leonato; we will go together.

*Exeunt all except BENEDICK and CLAUDIO.*

**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?

**Benedick.** 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?

**Claudio.** No; I pray thee speak in sober judgment.

**Benedick.** 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.

**Claudio.** Thou thinkest I am in sport: I pray thee tell me truly how thou likest her.

**Benedick.** Would you buy her, that you inquire after her?

**Claudio.** Can the world buy such a jewel?

**Benedick.** Yea, and a case to put it into. 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?

**Claudio.** In mine eye she is the sweetest lady that ever I looked on.

**Benedick.** I can see yet without spectacles and I see no such matter: there's her cousin, an she were not possessed with a fury, exceeds her as much in beauty as the first of May doth the last of December. But I hope you have no intent to turn husband, have you?

**Claudio.** I would scarce trust myself, though I had sworn the contrary, if Hero would be my wife.

**Benedick.** 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? Go to, i' faith; an thou wilt needs thrust thy neck into a yoke, wear the print of it and sigh away Sundays. Look Don Pedro is returned to seek you.

*Re-enter DON PEDRO.*

**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. With who? now that is your grace's part. Mark how short his answer is;—With Hero, Leonato's short daughter.

**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.

**Don Pedro.** Amen, if you love her; for the lady is very well worthy.

**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 troths, 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 will die in it at the stake.

**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 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.

**Don Pedro.** I shall see thee, ere I die, look pale with love.

**Benedick.** With anger, with sickness, or with hunger, my lord, not with love: 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.

**Don Pedro.** Well, if ever thou dost fall from this faith, thou wilt prove a notable argument.

**Benedick.** If I do, hang me in a bottle like a cat and shoot at me; and he that hits me, let him be clapped on the shoulder, and called Adam.

**Don Pedro.** Well, as time shall try: "In time the savage bull doth bear the yoke.'

**Benedick.** 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 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.'

**Claudio.** If this should ever happen, thou wouldst be horn-mad.