

WORLDVIEW GUIDE

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING



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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.¹ 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"?

1. 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://internet-shakespeare.uvic.ca/m/lifetimes/plays/much%20ado%20about%20nothing/adomasks.html>.



WORLDVIEW ANALYSIS

Throughout *Much Ado*, Shakespeare examines the mechanism by which people “fall in love.”¹³ *Much Ado* often treats that “fall” rather 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).¹⁴ At the end of their constructed conversation, designed for Beatrice to overhear,

13. 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.

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

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, 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.

“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