More than 400 years after its first appearance in London, *Much Ado about Nothing* remains a popular stage play with both actors and audiences. Perhaps its success stems from Shakespeare’s compelling presentation of a number of themes with universal appeal, especially those related to courtship and marriage. In the plot of *Much Ado* young romantic love and faith at first fail, but ultimately true love triumphs.

In a broader sense, *Much Ado about Nothing* deals with the ways human beings perceive one another. We often fail to respond appropriately to the things we see and hear. Sometimes we make mistakes because someone else has deliberately deceived us. At other times we err accidentally because of our own fallible nature, or worse, we deceive ourselves into misjudging another person or misconstruing a situation.

All such serious considerations aside, Shakespeare makes us laugh along the way as his passionate plot moves toward a conclusion that embraces penitence, reconciliation and harmony.

“*I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me.*” —Beatrice

“If her breath were as terrible as her terminations, there were no living near her.” —Benedick

Erin Jones as Beatrice and Stephen Jones as Benedick, Classic Players, 2007
Much Ado about Nothing: Title and Date

Shakespeare’s Much Ado about Nothing consists of two interlocking plots that are tied together by the characters Claudio and Benedick, two companions of Don Pedro, the prince of Arragon. Although these two men are friends, they are polar opposites in personality. Claudio is quiet and passive; Benedick, talkative and energetic. The women they fall in love with, Hero and Beatrice, are also fools, or contrasting characters.

The action and theme of the plot featuring these four characters are summed up in Shakespeare’s most intriguing title, Much Ado about Nothing. All the “ado” in the play—the hustle, bustle, fuss and flurry—is based on the insubstantial nature, or “nothingness,” of the villain Don John’s false report about Hero. Claudio rejects his bride at the altar on the basis of hearsay and misinterpretation of an event that was staged to deceive him. Other characters also blindly accept false information and slander without questioning the source. Thus in the only truly serious part of the play—the hustle, bustle, fuss and flurry—is based on the insubstantial nature, or “nothingness,” of the villain Don John’s false report about Hero. Claudio rejects his bride at the altar on the basis of hearsay and misinterpretation of an event that was staged to deceive him. Other characters also blindly accept false information and slander without questioning the source.

Much Ado about Nothing is “nothing” because it has so little substance. The witty insults Beatrice and Benedick hurl at each other are airy and inconsequential. The two analyze each other’s phrases and turn them on end to communicate their vital discovery to each other. How is it that the word “nothing” was also used in the late 16th century to refer to music-making, or the singing and playing of “notes”? Shakespeare created the role of Balthasar in Much Ado for an actor who can sing and play a musical instrument to intensify the drama of the script. Scholars have conjectured that a well-known composer and singer from Shakespeare’s day, Jack Wilson (c. 1585-c.1641), was an early, if not the first, Balthasar. Just before singing “Sigh no more, ladies” in Act II, Balthasar purrs to Don Pedro, “There’s not a note of mine that’s worth the noting.” Ultimately, however, music signifies harmony and happiness in Much Ado. The play ends with Benedick’s resolution: “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.” The final line of the play, also spoken by Benedick, is “Strike up, music.”

“Let but Beatrice and Benedick be seen; lo, in a trice, the Cockpit, Galleries, Boxes are all full.”

—Leonard Digges (1640)

Don John
A Plain-Dealing Villain

Don John is the illegitimate brother of Don Pedro, Prince of Arragon. Shakespeare presents him in Much Ado as a stereotypical character who needs no motivation to overthrow him. Before the action of the play begins, he has led a rebellion against his brother. Although an illegitimate son in the playwright’s day often was not afforded the financial and social advantages his legitimate siblings might enjoy, Shakespeare does not have Don John verbalize this or any other motive for his revolt. As the plot of Much Ado unfolds, Don John schemes to destroy the love of Claudio and Hero, again for no apparent reason. He does, however, express resentment of Claudio, who has won military honors in the recent war and whom he considers a threat to his position. He refers to himself as a “plain-dealing villain,” one who makes no excuse for himself or his general antipathy to love and faith. Don John may be a prototype for the sinister Iago in Othello or Edmund in King Lear, characters whom Shakespeare would create roughly six years later. But he does not worry audience members in the way the villains of the tragedies do because he is not capable of hoping that he is other than he is. We never really believe that Don John’s plotting will succeed because he does not hide the truth about his own destructive nature.

His flight and apprehension are mentioned in a cursory way, but he does not appear onstage in Shakespeare’s festive finale and refuse to marry Hero, who faints and is presumed to be dead.

At Beatrice’s urging, Benedick challenges Claudio to a duel over the honor of Hero. Before the combat can begin, however, Don Pedro uncovers the truth about Don John’s plot to disgrace Hero. Believing that Hero is dead, Claudio agrees to make amends for his false accusations against his bride by marrying her cousin. When his unknown bride is unveiled at the wedding, all the romantic conflicts of the plot are quickly resolved, and the play ends with a joyful celebration of love.

Much Ado about Nothing: The Short of It

The Prince of Arragon, Don Pedro, returns from war with his victorious troops and his malicious half-brother, Don John, who provoked the war but for the time being seems reconciled to Don Pedro. The governor of Messina, Leonato, invites the royal brothers and their followers, most notably Benedick and Claudio, to be guests in his home. There Claudio quickly falls in love with Leonato’s daughter and only child, Hero. At the same time Benedick exchanges witty barbs with Beatrice, the niece of Leonato. Both Benedick and Beatrice, however, swear that they will never marry even though their friends surmise that the two are falling in love. Don Pedro makes arrangements for Claudio to marry Hero, but on the evening before the wedding, Don John tricks Claudio into believing that Hero has been unfaithful to him. Soon thereafter the bumbling local constables Dogberry and Verges stumble upon the truth concerning Don John’s villainous slanders. The two police officers are unable, however, to communicate their vital discovery to Leonato, who is making last-minute preparations for Hero and Claudio’s wedding. At the altar Claudio harshly denounces Hero, who faints and is presumed to be dead.

At Beatrice’s urging, Benedick challenges Claudio to a duel over the honor of Hero. Before the combat can begin, however, Don Pedro uncovers the truth about Don John’s plot to disgrace Hero. Believing that Hero is dead, Claudio agrees to make amends for his false accusations against his bride by marrying her cousin. When his unknown bride is unveiled at the wedding, all the romantic conflicts of the plot are quickly resolved, and the play ends with a joyful celebration of love.
Much Ado About Nothing
Coming to the Ark: Couples in Much Ado

Love affairs that are fostered by talk

Like several other Shakespearean comedies, Much Ado about Nothing culminates in-betrothal for more than one couple. In the cases of Claudio and Hero and Benedick and Beatrice, both pairs are well on their way to being man and wife at the close of the play. In terms of dramatic structure the story of Claudio and Hero would appear to be the main plot of the play. It is complete with a villain who would destroy the love of two beautiful young people.

The story of Benedick and Beatrice, in turn, generally regarded as the play’s secondary plot, a sequence of events that simultaneously parallels and contrasts to the plot of Claudio and Hero. It also serves to add interest and suspense to the main plot. Instead of clashing with a villain, as is the case for Benedick and Beatrice. The villainy serves to add interest and suspense to the main plot. Instead of clashing with a villain, as is the case for Benedick and Beatrice. The villainy serves to add interest and suspense to the main plot.

Like Beatrice and Benedick, the constable Dogberry likes to hear himself talk. But rather than displaying a dazzling wit like theirs, he slaughters words. He aims to employ a vocabulary that is far beyond his words are not components of, but rather completely different in meaning. For example, he uses the word “harmful” instead of “vanity” and even confuses “dramatis” with “satisfaction.” Clergy from his mouth, words are not components of, but rather impediments to, facts. Dogberry’s absurd logic and linguistic confusion make him one of the most amusing characters Shakespeare ever created. He has been called the playwright’s “first great comic creation.”

Dogberry: “Enter Will Kemp.”

We can gain valuable insight into Shakespeare’s characters in the few instances in which the playwright or his scribe, presumably inadvertently, records in a speech prefix the name of the actor who played a certain role in the play’s debut performance instead of the name of the character who speaks the lines. Throughout Act IV, scene 2 of Much Ado about Nothing—the scene in which the Sexton examines Borachio and Conrad after their arrest by the Watch—the prefixes for the character Dogberry indicate that the lines were spoken by Will Kemp. Rather than “Enter Dogberry,” the stage directions read, “Enter Will Kemp.” We know from sources outside Much Ado that Will Kemp was the chief company clown for Shakespeare’s acting troupe until 1599, when he was replaced by Robert Armin. After the change in company personnel, Shakespeare changed the essence of the characters he created for his chief clown, creating a new kind of fool who, rather than an ignorant fellow, is aware of his folly and intends to sound foolish. Shakespeare wrote the last role for Kemp, i.e., Dogberry, in late 1598 or early 1599. Later in 1599 he wrote the first role for Armin, Touchstone in As You Like It. There are no fools in the other two plays Shakespeare wrote in 1599, Henry V and Julius Caesar.

In addition to the Dogberry speech prefixes, Kemp’s name appears in a speech prefix for Peter in Romeo and Juliet. Scholars conjecture that he also took the roles of Bottom in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Costard in Love’s Labour’s Lost, Launce in The Two Gentlemen of Verona and Launcelot Gobbo in The Merchant of Venice. Kemp’s athleticism and ad lib lines endeared him to theater audiences.

Armin succeeded Kemp and changed the image of the chief company clown by his approach to such roles as Touchstone in As You Like It and Feste in Twelfth Night. In the words of Charles Boyce, “Armin was a small man whose skills were verbal and musical, in contrast to the physical humor of Kemp, and he was accordingly better cast as a clever fool than a bumbling clown.”

Like Beatrice and Benedick, the constable Dogberry likes to hear himself talk. But rather than displaying a dazzling wit like theirs, he slaughters words. He aims to employ a vocabulary that is far beyond his words are not components of, but rather impediments to, facts. Dogberry’s absurd logic and linguistic confusion make him one of the most amusing characters Shakespeare ever created. He has been called the playwright’s “first great comic creation.”

Dogberry serves as head of the local night watch, a crew of simple, incompetent policemen charged with keeping the peace. As their leader, Dogberry is tediously devoted to details and procedures, yet he entirely misses the spirit and intent of the law. With his bumbling manner and incomprehensible speech, he unintentionally confuses Verges, the second in command, and the other watchmen.

Like many of the other characters in Much Ado, Dogberry possesses a notable degree of pride. He sees himself as far superior to...
in position and wealth to his partners. However, because he has difficulty comprehending words, he is not easily insulted. When Leonato calls him "tedious," he takes the remark as a compliment. But when Conrade calls Dogberry an "ass"—a term derived from a donkey, or domestic ass, and used in Shakespeare's day to denote a vain, self-important, stupid person—his pride is deeply wounded. He remains fixated on this insult until his final exit.

But even though Dogberry and the Watch are inept, it is they who expose Don John's slander of Hero. In the words of Harold C. Goddard, "These plain watchmen in the routine performance of their duty uncover the truth that has evaded the clever and sophisticated."

Ironically, even before the wedding, the Watch unwittingly expose Don John's villainous plan to deceive Claudio into publicly renouncing Hero as promiscuous. Accordingly, they arrest Borachio and Conrade. Then Dogberry seeks out Leonato, father of the bride, even in the midst of the last-minute wedding preparations. But he is so long-winded and imprecise that Leonato fails to get the point and sends Dogberry off to interrogate his prisoners and prepare a written report of their offenses.

Had Leonato comprehended the information Dogberry proffers, the entire complication of the plot would have been averted. We know, however, that in the scenes that pass between the arrest of Don John's two agents of villainy and the final festive ending, the young couples learn valuable lessons about love and faith. And during the time they are developing toward maturity, Dogberry and his fellows keep the audience well entertained. The comic relief he and the Watch provide helps to maintain the comic tone of Much Ado even as Hero's potentially tragic plight unfolds. Then, in the words of Charles Boyce, Dogberry's "arrival as a comical deus ex machina resolves the plot on a note of hilarity."

---

**Duties of the Night Watch**

Verges. *If you hear a child cry in the night, you must call to the Nurse and bid her still it.*

2nd Watch. *How if the Nurse be asleep and will not hear us?*

Dogberry. *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 hear a calf when he bleats.*

—**Much Ado about Nothing, III.iii.65-72**

"No man shall, after the hour of nine at night, keep any rule whereby any such sudden outcry be made in the still of the night, as making any affray or beating his wife or servant or singing or reveling in his house, to the disturbance of his neighbors."

—**The Statutes of the Street** (1595)

"As breaches of the peace commonly occur by blasphemy, it follows that one who fears God must 'necessarily keep the peace.' And the fact mentioned that 'one who keeps the peace ought to enter into a quarrel with fear and trembling' applies, no doubt, to the legal attitude such a person would occupy, for in law one who is not in the peace himself cannot have his peace disturbed."

..."That the thief should be let go or even the crying child abandoned if the Nurse could not be found is, indeed, an extreme criticism of such officers' duties, and the ignorance of such officer is presented by the fact that it was not known that a lamb bleats, while a calf baes."

—Edward Joseph White

**Commentaries on the Law in Shakespeare** (1913)

---

**Shakespeare’s Sources**

The story of a bridegroom who is tricked into renouncing his bride as unfaithful exists in many variant forms, beginning with ancient Greek literature. But Shakespeare's main source for the Claudio-Hero plot was most likely Ariosto's long poem entitled *Orlando Furioso* (1516). In keeping with his usual practice of blending various sources, the playwright also employed some details from a novella by Bandello, another 16th-century Italian writer. In addition, he may well have been familiar with the version of the tale in Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (Book II, Canto IV) and/or other English works derived from Ariosto.

On the other hand, the Benedick-Beatrice plot is Shakespeare’s own creation. So is the plot involving the comic arresting officers Dogberry, Verges and the Watch. The incompetent constable was a type character on the English stage. Some five years before writing Much Ado, Shakespeare created a prototype of Dogberry, Constable Dull in *Love’s Labour’s Lost.*

---

These materials are original and ©2007, Bob Jones University, Dr. Janie Caves McCauley, writer. All rights reserved. No part of this study guide may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.