Much Ado About Nothing
by William Shakespeare

November 2017

These study materials are produced by Bob Jones University for use with the Classic Players production of *Much Ado About Nothing*.

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SHARING MASTERWORKS OF ART

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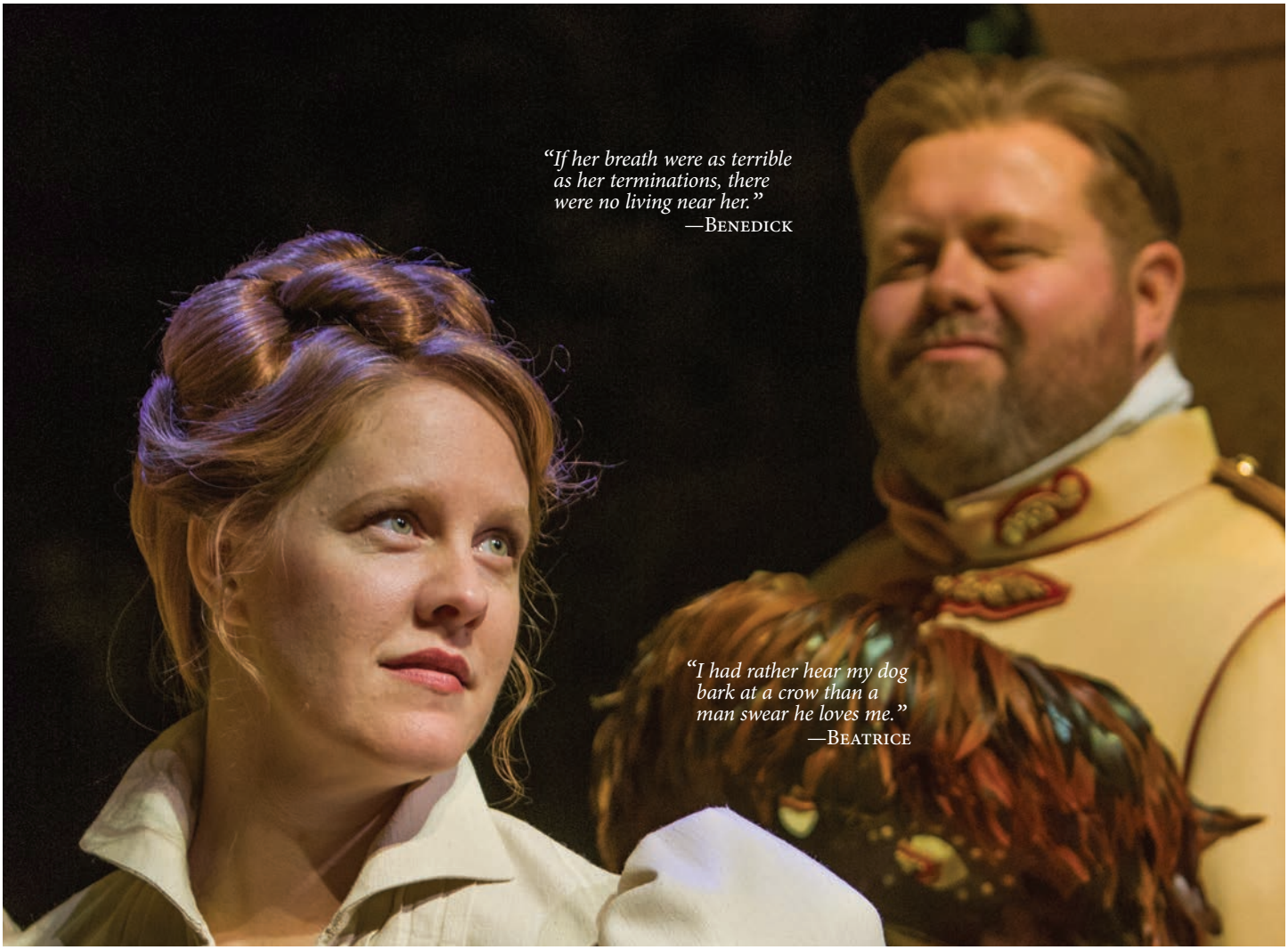


Erin Naler as Beatrice and Paul Radford as Benedick, Classic Players 2017

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.

***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 foils, 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 plot of *Much Ado*, Shakespeare explores the ways in which human relationships can be destroyed by "nothing."

In a sense, much of the dialogue of *Much Ado* 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 as a kind of "merry war," "a skirmish of wit." Their style is brilliant, polished and sophisticated, and their words are as sharp as daggers. But when we examine their lines for substance, we find them to be no more than shallow, trifling talk.

The play dates from around 1598, a period in which the words "nothing" and "noting" were pronounced alike. (Cf. Es**th**er and **Th**ames.) Shakespeare uses this word to refer to one person's observing, eavesdropping on, or overhearing another person's words. All the characters in *Much Ado* constantly engage in "noting" each other. Their eavesdropping makes them more prone to error and misinterpretation of people and events.

"Noting" can bring about both negative and positive results. On the one hand, Hero's suffering is brought about by what other characters profess to have "noted" about her. On the other, the Friar "notes" certain qualities in Hero that convince him she is an innocent young woman. Beatrice and Benedick come together as a couple as a result of their friends' secret "notings." But it is the "noting" performed by Dogberry and the Watch that ultimately shapes events and relationships for good and brings about a festive ending to *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Finally, the word "noting" 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 2, Balthasar puns 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 resolve: "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 for his villainy. 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 to overthrow him. He refers to himself as a "plain-dealing villain," one who makes no excuses for himself or his general antipathy to love and faith.

Don John may be a prototype for the slanderous 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 feigning 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.

***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 bungling local constables Dogberry and Verges stumble upon the truth concerning Don John's villainous slander. 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 and refuses 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.

Past Productions

Nina Jean Lester as Beatrice, 1941

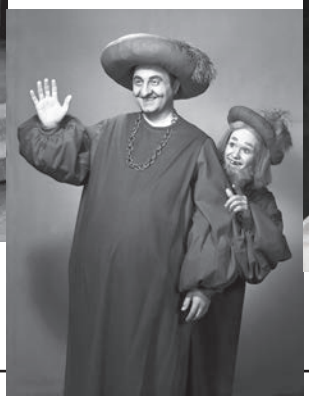
Beneth Jones as Beatrice and Bob Jones III as Benedick, 1963

Katie Meadows as Beatrice and Lonnie Polson as Benedick, 1994

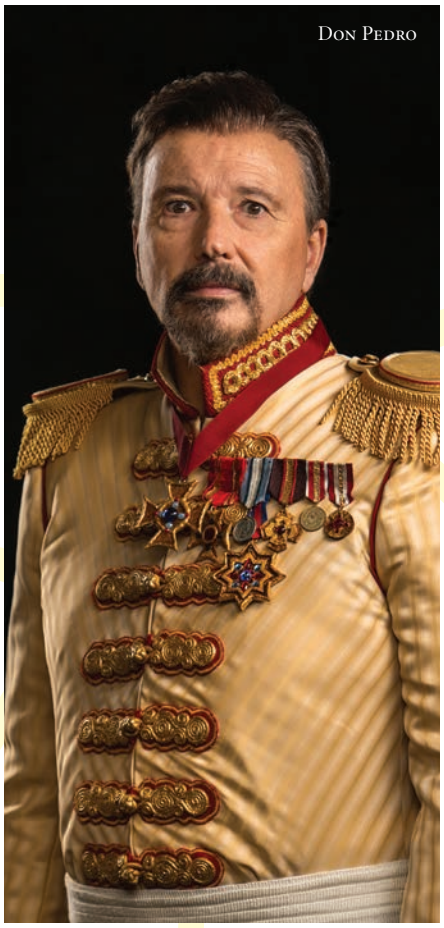
"Man is a giddy thing, and this is my conclusion."

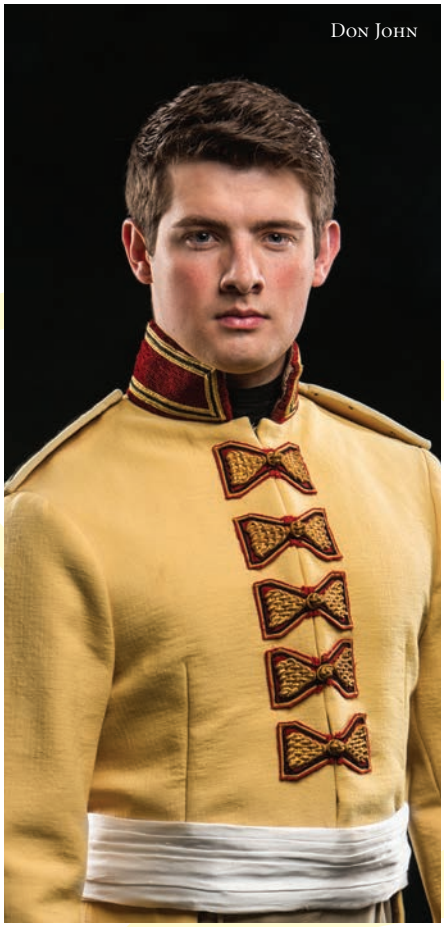
Don Ryerson as Benedick and Sharon Woodruff as Beatrice, 1975

Erin Jones as Beatrice and Stephen Jones as Benedick, 2007



Richard Rupp as Dogberry, 1975


Don Pedro


Don John

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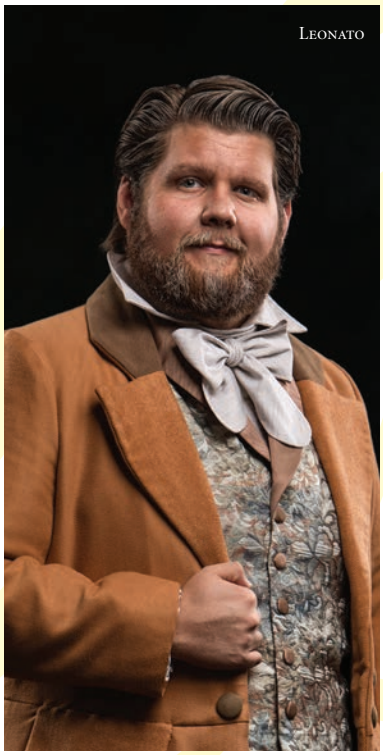
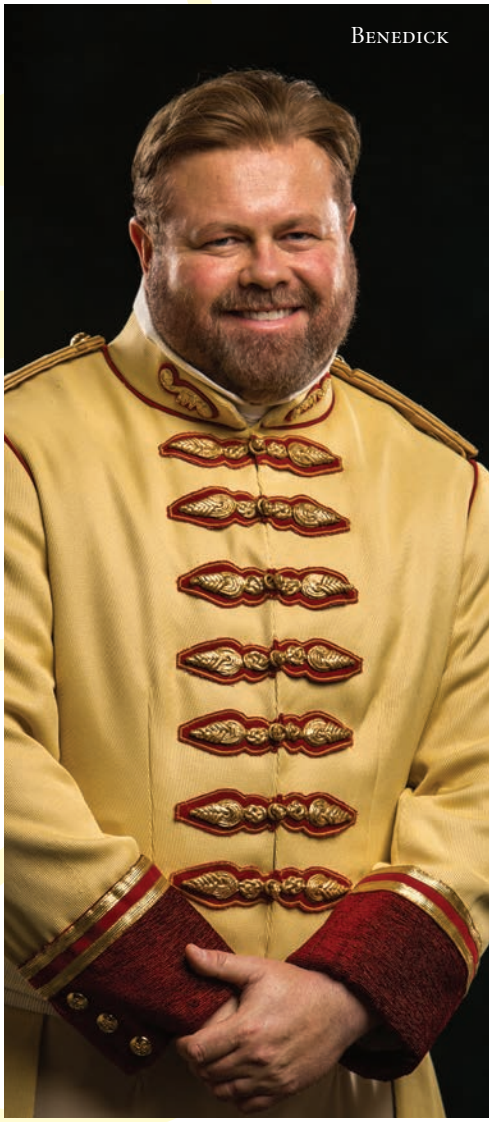
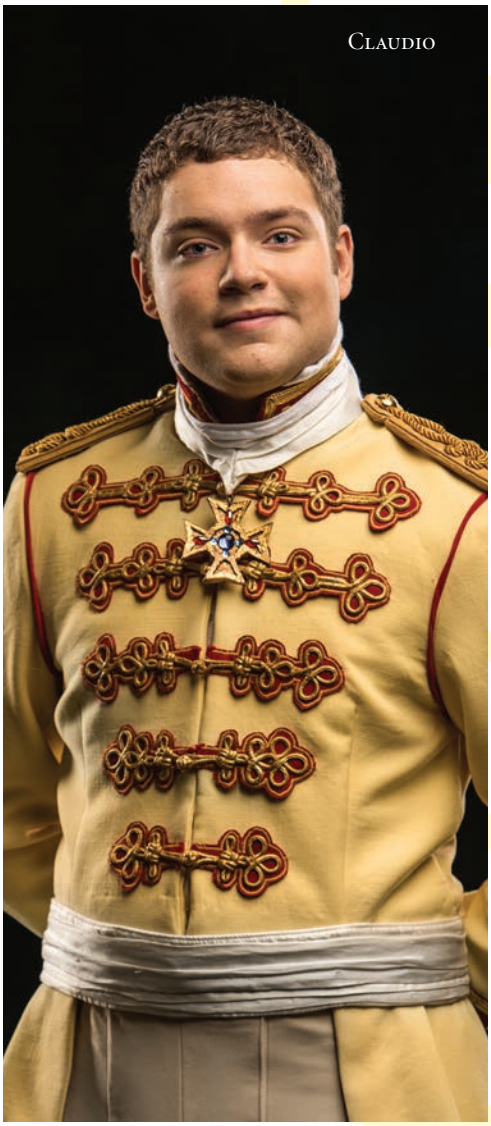
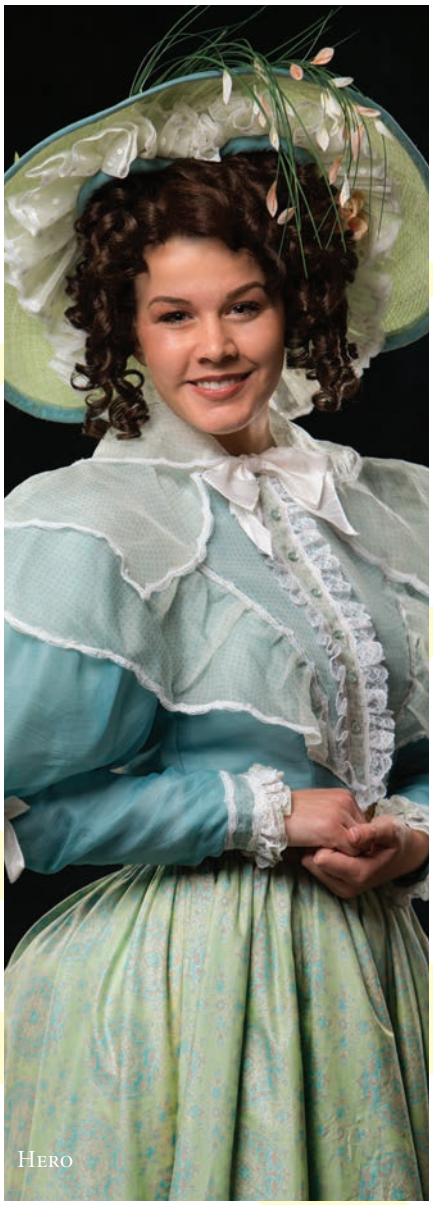

Leonato

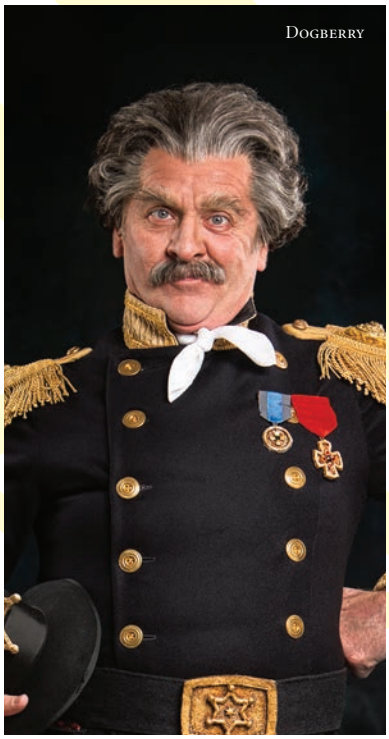

Benedick

Much Ado About Nothing

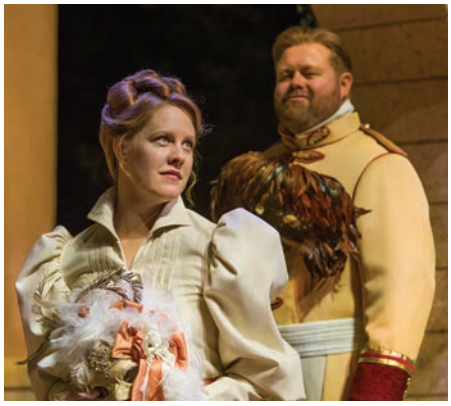

Claudio


Hero


Beatrice


Dogberry

"Coming to the Ark": Couples in *Much Ado*



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 is, in turn, generally regarded as the play's secondary plot, a sequence of events that simultaneously parallels and contrasts with the plot of Claudio and Hero. It also serves to add interest and suspense to the main plot. Instead of clashing with a villain who creates an impediment to their love, Benedick and Beatrice themselves create the gulf of words that separates them as lovers. Benedick is a confirmed bachelor, and Beatrice preaches against marriage. But while both of them scoff at the very idea of romance, audience members see through this appearance to the reality of their attempts to hide their true attraction to each other.

As part of the play's exposition, Shakespeare creates a prior relationship for Benedick and Beatrice. The lines suggest that in the past the two have had an unsuccessful attempt at romance or at least a significant quarrel, but this is not a well-developed part of the play's exposition.

The Claudio/Hero and Benedick/Beatrice plots are similar in some respects and different in others. Both plots feature a male character who renounces his potential female partner because of his pride. Claudio's pride stems from his shallow sense of honor—Benedick's from his selfish desire to remain independent. Similarly, Hero and Beatrice are opposites in personality, but their destiny is the same, for in the end true love prevails for both.

Shakespeare brilliantly melds the two plots together and brings both of them to a climax at Act 4, Scene 1, the scene of Claudio and Hero's disrupted wedding. The crisis for the bride and groom becomes the turning point in Benedick and Beatrice's relationship. Claudio's unjust accusation that Hero is an impure young woman ignites a new sense of unity and trust between Benedick and Beatrice. They join forces to exonerate their friend.

Interestingly, Shakespeare wrote the Claudio/Hero plot largely in poetry—his unrhymed iambic pentameter—and the Benedick/Beatrice plot in prose. This distinction is appropriate to his characterization, for Claudio and Hero have a formal, traditional courtship. Marriage is a socio-economic arrangement for them, made by Don Pedro and Leonato. They do not communicate directly until after they are betrothed. Then after Don John persuades Claudio that Hero is a "rotten orange" who has been foisted off on him through an arranged marriage, he repudiates her publicly.

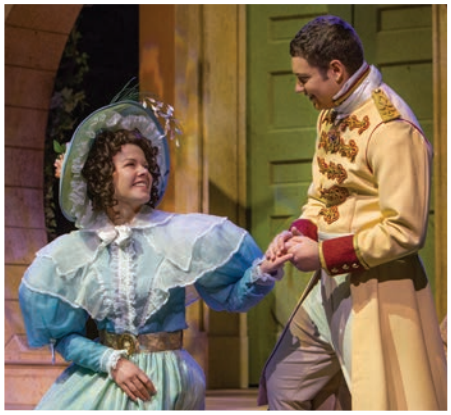
But Benedick and Beatrice are not a conventional pair. They do not subscribe to the romantic norms that their more docile friends take for granted. Instead they are plain-spoken, disdaining romantic convention and responding to each other with brilliant wit, intoned with cool detachment. The one exception to this distinction is that after Beatrice "overhears" her friends speak of Benedick's love for her, she bursts out into poetry, decrying her own pride and vowing to tame her wild heart to Benedick's "loving hand."

Thus the mistress of words finally succumbs to words herself. She dismisses the "much ado" she has created through her own "pride and scorn" and, in her wittiest manner, bids it "adieu." Similarly, Benedick is caught in "Cupid's trap" and immediately changes, declaring, "I will be horribly in love with [Beatrice]."

In most productions Benedick and Beatrice hold audience interest to a greater degree than Claudio and Hero do. In the early years after its appearance in London, *Much Ado About Nothing* was performed several times at the court of King James I. In 1613 Shakespeare's troupe, the King's Men, performed the comedy as part of the festive celebration for the marriage of James' daughter, Princess Elizabeth, to the Elector Palatine. Later King Charles I, who owned a Second Folio of Shakespeare's work (1632), wrote on the *Much Ado* title page, "Bennedik and Betrice." When in 1861 the French composer Hector Berlioz wrote an opera based on *Much Ado*, he named his work *Béatrice et Bénédict*.

Granted, Claudio and Hero are a bland couple compared to Benedick and Beatrice. But Shakespeare has constructed *Much Ado* in such a way that without Don John's slander and Hero's subsequent "death," there could be no meeting of the minds and no confession of mutual love for Benedick and Beatrice. The villainy that temporarily separates Claudio and Hero brings Benedick and Beatrice together.

Thus good comes from ill, and Shakespeare once again demonstrates his skill at weaving together multiple plots in such a way that they become inseparable.



Love affairs that are fostered by talk

"And I have also seen a woman fall passionately in love with someone for whom to begin with she felt not the slightest affection, and this only from hearing that many persons believed the two were in love with each other. And this, I think, was because she took what everyone thought as sufficient proof that the man concerned was worthy of her love; and it almost seemed that what was common opinion served to bring from her lover messages that were truer and more credible than his own letters or words, or any go-between, could have communicated.

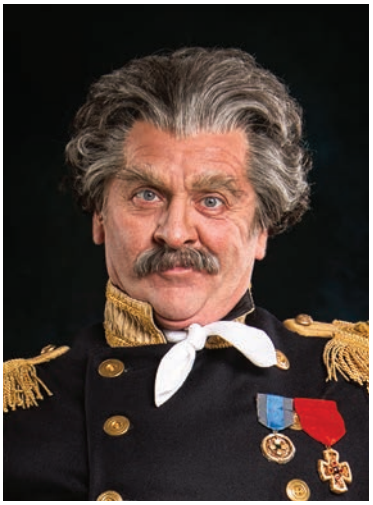
Thus if something is generally known and talked about, far from doing harm, this may prove advantageous."

Baldassare Castiglione,
The Book of the Courtier (1528)

"Shakespeare represents a world … in which only the most accidental of providences can save an innocent woman from the effects of slander and a man from death by combat."

—Claire McEachern

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, recorded 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 4, Scene 2 of *Much Ado About Nothing*—the scene in which the Sexton examines Borachio and Conrade 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 facility to comprehend. For this character Shakespeare created a large number of malapropisms. In other words, Dogberry often mistakenly uses a word that is similar in sound to the word he intends but completely different in meaning. For example, he uses the word "humility" instead of "vanity" and even confuses "damnation" with "salvation." Coming 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 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

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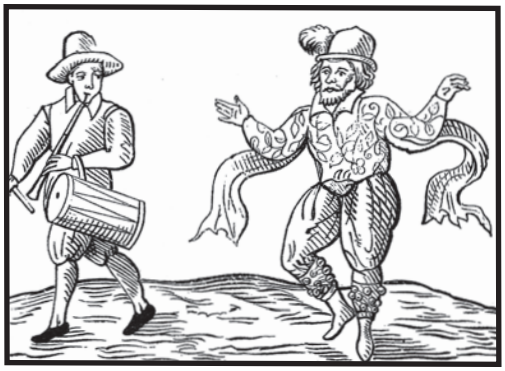
in position and wealth to his partners. However, because he has difficulty comprehending words, he is not easily insulted. When Leonato calls him "tedious," he takes the remark as a compliment. But when Conrade calls Dogberry an "ass"—a term derived from a donkey, or domestic ass, and used in Shakespeare's 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 exposes 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, 3.3.65–72*

"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 titled *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 2, Canto 4) 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*.