

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

by William Shakespeare

"Much Ado About Nothing" is one of Shakespeare's most admired works, a comedy with dark overtones; a combination of two love stories, involving people of contrasting temperaments; and a solution by the humble of the problems of the mighty. One feature of the play worth noting is that three-quarters of it is in prose.

A key to staging the play may be found in the title. To the English of Shakespeare's day, "nothing" and "noting" sounded very similar. The plot proceeds through a series of misunderstandings, brought about by "noting": everything moves forward by what is overheard, misheard, or meant to be heard by eavesdroppers. Lies and deceptions abound; some innocent, some malevolent. "Nothing" is also a word of female sexual connotation, suggesting much ado in the pursuit of women.

There is a great deal of talk in this play. Beatrice and Benedick go at it with the zest of competitors - which they are, until they fall in love. Their exchanges sparkle with wit and invention, and much of our pleasure comes from hearing them go at it.

Interestingly, there is another person who loves to hear himself talk: Dogberry, the somewhat dim master of the watch, who is never at a loss for words, even when he is just guessing at their meaning.

Here's the story:

A war has ended. The victorious soldiers, led by Don Pedro, head for the town of Messina to visit Leonato, who shares his house with his daughter, Hero, and his niece, Beatrice. Accompanying Don Pedro are his illegitimate brother, Don John, - newly restored to favor - and two young gallants, Benedick and Claudio.

Claudio falls in love with Hero at first sight. Benedick and Beatrice are no strangers to each other and, perhaps, were once in love. Now, they resume "a merry war" of words, professing their mutual disdain.

While Beatrice and Benedick never seem to stop talking, Claudio and Hero are relatively silent. Claudio, at a loss for words, asks Don Pedro to woo Hero for him. Benedick declares that he will never be in love.

Don John, silent and sullen, "not a man of many words," expresses his unhappiness at the joy of others in conference with his henchmen, Borachio and Conrad. He resolves to do what he can to frustrate Claudio's marriage plans.

At a masked ball, Don Pedro dances with Hero and gets her agreement to wed Claudio. However, Don John suggests to Claudio that the prince woos for himself. This misunderstanding is shared by others, but is soon resolved, and plans for the weddings are laid. To pass the time before the wedding, Don Pedro, Claudio, and Leonato plot

to enlist the aid of Hero and others to “bring Signor Benedick and Lady Beatrice into a mountain of affection th'one with th'other.”

But Don John still hopes to thwart the wedding. Borachio tells him of a way to do it. He is having an affair with Hero's lady-in-waiting, Margaret. He will arrange to be seen with her at Hero's window. If Don John can bring Don Pedro and Claudio to witness the encounter, they will think it is Hero and break off the match.

The plot to pair Benedick and Beatrice proceeds. Leonato, Don Pedro, and Claudio arrange to gossip within Benedick's hearing. They speak mournfully of Beatrice, claiming that she is hopelessly in love with Benedick, but unable to tell him for fear he will scorn her. Benedick is convinced and decides he is in love with her. When Beatrice comes to announce that supper is ready, he construes her sharp words as expressions of affection.

Hero and her companions, Ursula and Margaret, then undertake to deceive Beatrice in the same manner, with similar results.

Don John informs Claudio and Don Pedro that Hero is carrying on a secret affair and offers to bring them to her window that night so they may see for themselves.

At this point, we meet the members of the night watch: Dogberry, a self-important, bumbling leader of the group; Verges, a simple, old man; George Seacoal, and others. They take their positions, intending to do more sleeping than watching.

Borachio and Conrad enter, well on their way to being drunk. Borachio tells him how he and his master have deceived Don Pedro and Claudio, who plan to denounce Hero when they meet for their wedding at the church. The members of the watch, not too sure what's going on, but suspecting treachery, arrest the men.

Leonato's house is in an uproar as they prepare for the wedding. Dogberry arrives to tell him that they have arrested two suspicious men. Leonato, distracted, tells him to interrogate the men himself.

The wedding party arrives at the church. There, Claudio denounces Hero for what he supposes is her licentiousness. Hero, stunned by this accusation, faints. Leonato protests, but Don Pedro and Don John tell him that they have seen her with their own eyes, at her window, in the arms of another man. They leave amid general consternation.

When Hero revives and protests her innocence, the Friar suggests that they tell people she died in shock, to see if that will not soften Claudio's heart; yet another deception. But, like Friar Lawrence, the priest thinks good will come of it:

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 become 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.

All agree to the deception. Beatrice and Benedick, left alone, finally express their love for each other. Beatrice asks Benedick to prove his love by killing his friend, Claudio. He reluctantly agrees.

In the meantime, Dogberry brings Conrad and Borachio before the Sexton. Members of the watch tell what they overheard: how Don John and his followers had deceived Claudio and Don Pedro. The Sexton hurries off to inform Don Pedro.

Leonato and his brother Antonio bitterly upbraid Claudio for his behavior. After they leave, Benedick challenges Claudio to a duel. Then the Sexton enters with Borachio who confesses his villainy. Claudio is grief-stricken. He believes he has caused Hero's death through his gullibility. Don Pedro also learns that his guilty brother has fled the scene.

When Leonato learns the truth, he confronts Claudio, who is devastated. He tells Claudio that he can gain forgiveness only by making public atonement at the family monument and then by marrying Antonio's daughter, sight unseen. Claudio agrees at once.

Don Pedro and Claudio visit what they suppose to be Hero's tomb, where Claudio hangs an epitaph on the tomb and has a tribute sung. Don Pedro dismisses his followers with the most beautiful lines in the play:

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.

Everyone gathers at the church for the wedding. To Claudio's delight, his new bride is revealed to be Hero. Beatrice and Benedick learn that they have been tricked into love, yet each has written of that love and their writing is offered as proof that

their love is real. The play ends with two happy couples and an admonition to Don Pedro, "get thee a wife."

Comments

Shakespeare's play is a variation on an old Sicilian story. The original source dealt with the story of Hero and Claudio, a love temporarily thwarted by the evil Don John, and later repaired. Ariosto tells a version of the plot in *Orlando Furioso* which was translated into English by Sir John Harrington in 1591. There is another Italian source: Matteo Bandello's *Novelle*, which was cast in English prose by George Whetstone ("The Rock of Regard") in 1576, and in verse by Edmund Spenser in *The Fairie Queene* (1590).

While Shakespeare undoubtedly drew on one or more of these sources, much of the play is his own invention, in particular the sparkling battle of wits and subsequent marriage of Beatrice and Benedick.

Technically, they are subsidiary characters, but their love story dominates the play.

A third Shakespearean invention is the comic sub-plot of Dogberry and the Watch. These characters have nothing to do with Sicily, but are taken straight from Shakespeare's ironic observations of English village life.

In her book, "Shakespeare After all," Marjorie Garber makes some interesting observations about names in the play. Beatrice means "one who blesses," Benedick means "one who is blessed," and Borchio means "the drunken one." She also draws interesting comparisons to *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Othello*, and *A Winter's Tale*.

She considers *Much Ado* "the forerunner of Restoration comedy, of the 18th and 19th Century 'comedy of manners,' and of what has come to be called 'screwball comedy,' the bantering, witty, sophisticated romantic plots that emerged in the films of the 1930s and 1940s."

Other commentators:

George Steiner: "The function of contrast is beautifully shown in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Nearly the entire play is written in prose. The few passages of verse are only a kind of shorthand to quicken matters.

. . . Beatrice and Benedick . . . are lovers in the middle range of passion, enamored neither of the flesh nor altogether of the heart, but caught in the enchantment of each other's wit."

Thomas Marc Parrot: "*Much Ado About Nothing* is a play of action spring from character, but it is also a play of vivacious and amusing dialogue. In fact, a great part of the fun of this play comes from the spoken word; often, indeed, the action halts while we listen to a rippling stream of speech."