



*Much Ado
About Nothing*
by
William Shakespeare

Audience Guide

researched and written by
the Education Department of
The Shakespeare Theatre
of New Jersey





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Shakespeare's Comedies

"A common assumption is that comedies are funny plays with happy endings. But Shakespeare's comedies are not so easily categorized. For one, comical action and characters are hardly exclusive to [Shakespeare's] comedies... A happy ending is also an inadequate measure of the Shakespearean comedy... Shakespeare's comedies generally do offer a happy ending but their conclusions are frequently characterized by only conditional happiness. Rather, these plays generally present life as ongoing, renewed through love, marriage, and the promise of a new generation to come.

Shakespeare explores comic terrain freely and widely. Indeed, for every generalization about Shakespeare's comedies, there is handy exception. For instance, comedies generally steer clear of death and dying. But heartfelt mourning pervades scenes [in several of Shakespeare's comedies.] In fact, dark preoccupations with mortality haunt many Shakespearean comedies.

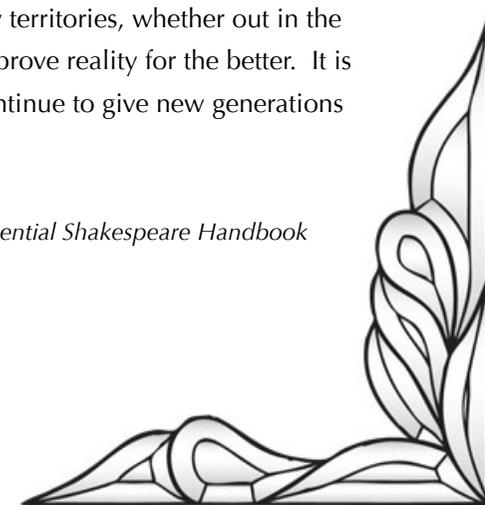
Another classic definition of a comedy is that it presents at least one romantic couple who marry by the end of the play. [Such is the case for two such couples in *Much Ado About Nothing*.] Following the Dionysian principle that the life cycle continues eternally, romantic couples in Shakespeare's comedies reassure audiences that love yields fertility, procreation, and the perpetuation of life beyond the fate of any individual.

If romantic characters are to compel audiences to rejoice in their union and celebrate the continuity of life, they must do more than simply meet, fall in love, and marry or promise to marry. Indeed, a central thread of action in the

comedies explores lovers overcoming tests and gaining awareness, as much of themselves as of their chosen lovers. One device Shakespeare employs frequently to develop romantic characters is disguise or mistaken identity...[a device which is utilized quite often in *Much Ado*.]

As a group, Shakespeare's comedies are in many ways his most complicated plays. Their plots are often convoluted; the multiple identities of many of their characters can be confusing, and the emotions they produce range freely from delight and wonder to anxiety and grief. But the [comedy category] also includes many of Shakespeare's most satisfying, spectacular, and popular plays. At one level, there is the sheer humor: the comedies are rife with extravagant characters given to outrageous behavior. At another, there is romance galore, although love can be unrequited or frustrated. But audiences also accompany characters into fantastic or seemingly ungoverned realms, where personalities can suddenly change, for better or for worse. Characters and audiences alike also discover that intrepid exploration of new territories, whether out in the world or within themselves, can alter and improve reality for the better. It is hardly surprising, then, that the comedies continue to give new generations good cause for celebration. "

Excerpts from *The Essential Shakespeare Handbook*



Much Ado About Nothing

A Synopsis

As the play begins, news is brought to Leonato, Governor of Messina, announcing the arrival of the victorious army of the Prince Don Pedro of Arragon. Leonato is delighted by the news and eager to meet the young Count Claudio who has received much acclaim for his bravery in battle. Leonato's niece, Beatrice, inquires after another member of Don Pedro's party, Benedick, with whom she seems to have an ongoing quarrel of some kind.

Don Pedro and his company receive a warm welcome from Leonato and his household. The camaraderie is quickly peppered by the feisty quibbling between Benedick and Beatrice; each states that they will never fall in love and each make witty jabs at the other. Leonato insists that Don Pedro and company remain in Messina as his guests for at least a month. Don Pedro graciously accepts. Even Don John, Don Pedro's illegitimate half-brother who is newly reconciled after defeat in battle, is invited to stay.

When the young Claudio reveals that he has fallen for Leonato's daughter Hero, the Prince hatches a plan to disguise himself as Claudio at the evening's festivities to woo Hero on Claudio's behalf. Benedick reassures his companions that he wishes only to remain a steadfast bachelor.

That night, the guests arrive masked for the celebration at Leonato's home. Don Pedro, pretending to be Claudio, begins his pursuit of Hero on his companion's behalf. Don John, a self-proclaimed villain, seizes the opportunity to cause some mischief and tells Claudio that the Prince is actually in love with Hero and plans to woo her for himself. Claudio falls prey to the lie. Beatrice, still firm in her belief that love is for fools, unknowingly dances

with Benedick, whom she refers to as the Prince's jester and a dull fool.

Despite Don John's attempt to foil Don Pedro's surrogate wooing of Hero, Don Pedro is successful in wooing Hero for his friend Claudio, and Leonato promises that they shall marry in a week. Delighted by his successful matchmaking, Don Pedro hatches another plan to bring Benedick and Beatrice together. He says he will need the assistance of his friends for his plan to succeed; they happily agree.

Frustrated that his efforts to upset the romance between Claudio and Hero were so easily thwarted, Don John seeks another way to undo the young Count's nuptials. One of his men, Borachio, proposes a devious plot that will serve Don John's needs. On the night before the wedding, Borachio will lure one of Hero's gentlewomen, Margaret, into Hero's bedchamber. At that exact hour, Don John will make sure that Claudio and the Prince see the two lovers through the window. Claudio and the Prince will believe that they are seeing Hero being untrue to Claudio, and the wedding will be cancelled.

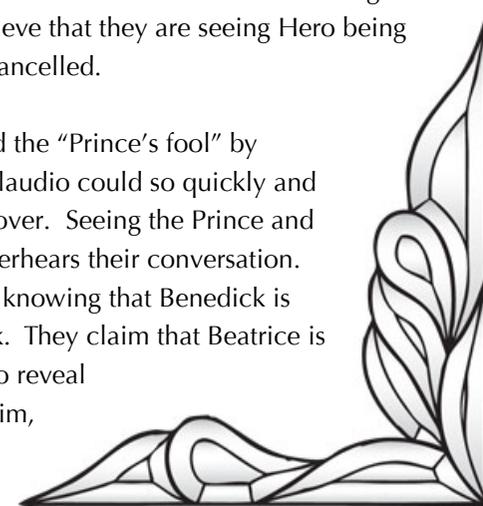
Elsewhere, and still stinging from being called the "Prince's fool" by Beatrice, Benedick wonders how his friend Claudio could so quickly and so completely transform from a warrior to a lover. Seeing the Prince and Claudio approaching, Benedick hides and overhears their conversation. Don Pedro, Claudio, Balthasar, and Leonato, knowing that Benedick is hiding nearby, begin their gulling of Benedick. They claim that Beatrice is deeply in love with Benedick but too proud to reveal her feelings. Her passion is so great, they claim,

THE OLE' YOKE & CLOG

The institution of marriage is often joked about in *Much Ado* with references such as "yoke" and "clog."

A **yoke** is a wooden beam usually used on a pair of farm animals to allow them to pull a great load.

A **clog**, which was a large wooden block tied to the legs or neck of a person, was theorized to prevent escape. Some speculate the terminology of "yoke and clog" to be the modern-day equivalent of the "ball and chain."





that they fear for her life. Benedick is astounded, and vows to return her love. The next day, Hero and Ursula perform a similar gulling trick on Beatrice, who vows to return Benedick's favor.

Don Pedro and Claudio are gleeful that their plan is working; both Beatrice and Benedick have finally admitted to themselves that they are in love with the other. The mood, however, quickly darkens when Don John arrives to set his own plan in motion. He tells the men that Hero has been untrue, and leads them to witness her infidelity. Claudio and Don Pedro witness what they believe is the sight of Hero and a lover embracing at her window. They fall for Don John's trick. Heartbroken, Claudio swears to ruin Hero's reputation at the wedding the next morning.

Following the charade at the window, Borachio is overheard by members of the watch bragging about it to Conrade, another of Don John's men. The watch, not certain of what they have heard, but certain that Borachio and Conrade have done something wrong, arrest them and bring them before Dogberry, the ineffectual constable of the town. Dogberry unsuccessfully attempts to tell Leonato of the treachery he has unearthed; Leonato is too busy preparing for the wedding to pay much attention to the bumbling Dogberry, and so the constable decides to interrogate the men himself.

As the women prepare for Hero's wedding ceremony, they tease Beatrice about her new-found love for Benedick. At the altar, as the priest prepares to marry Claudio and Hero, Claudio publicly rejects Hero, and in front of all of the guests, accuses her of infidelity. Leonato cannot believe what he is hearing, but Don Pedro confirms the testimony of Claudio. Don Pedro, Claudio, and Don John leave the church as Hero faints, overcome by the horrible accusations. As Hero revives, her father exclaims that it would have been better if she had died rather than bear the shame she has brought upon herself and family. Believing Hero to be innocent, Friar Francis urges caution and proposes a solution. Since Hero had collapsed just before Claudio left the church, Friar Francis conjectures that Claudio will recant his accusations if he believes she is actually dead, mortally wounded by the Count's words.

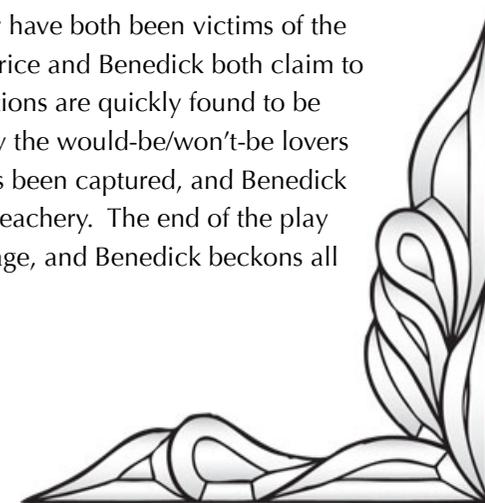
He proposes that Hero be hidden away, and that they pretend she is dead until a resolution can be created.

Beatrice and Benedick have confessed their love for one another, but Beatrice is outraged by the way Hero has been treated and wishes to avenge her. She asks Benedick to challenge Claudio to a duel as a sign of his love for her. When the three men meet, Claudio and Don Pedro tease Benedick for having fallen in love with Beatrice, and Benedick remains true to his promise reluctantly challenging Claudio to a duel to answer for having wronged the innocent Hero.

In the jail, Dogberry and Verges gain confessions from Conrade and Borachio. When they bring the culprits before Don Pedro and Claudio, Borachio confesses that Hero was innocent and that she was a fallen woman only by the virtue of Don John's treachery. It is also discovered that Don John has fled Messina.

Horrified that they had so foolishly believed Don John and that they unknowingly had a hand in the demise of Hero, Don Pedro and Claudio seek penance. Leonato tells Claudio that he must publicly recant his accusations toward "the dead Hero" and wed Hero's identical cousin. Claudio agrees, reads an epitaph proclaiming Hero's purity over her supposed grave, and vows to marry the veiled cousin. At the wedding, Hero reveals herself to the wonder of all in attendance.

Beatrice, who is also veiled, reveals herself to Benedick and a final round of witty sparring ensues as they realize that they have both been victims of the match-making schemes of their friends. Beatrice and Benedick both claim to have never loved the other. These proclamations are quickly found to be false when love poems written to the other by the would-be/won't-be lovers are revealed. Word comes that Don John has been captured, and Benedick vows to devise a proper punishment for his treachery. The end of the play brings about preparations for a double marriage, and Benedick beckons all to dance joyfully.



Much Ado About Nothing

History & Sources

Much Ado About Nothing was most likely written between 1598 and 1600, though no specific performance of the play is noted before May of 1613. It was penned during the peak of Shakespeare's greatest comic writings, just before *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*. These plays all contain richly drawn characters, fast-paced wit, and thrilling romantic intrigue. They also share dark and sinister undertones (an overthrown duke in *As You Like It*, the loss of family in *Twelfth Night*, and a cruel plot to undo a young woman's reputation in *Much Ado*), which Shakespeare masterfully interweaves with the story to create his richest comedies.

There are several literary works from which Shakespeare may have gained inspiration in crafting *Much Ado About Nothing*. There is an Italian novella by Matteo Bandello (mid-1550s) which shares many of the plot points of the Hero and Claudio story. A canto in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1560) does as well. The tale can also be found in Spenser's *Fairie Queene* (1590). It is also likely that Shakespeare read or attended a performance of *Fedele and Fortunio*, which was presented in London around 1584. All of these sources tell the story of a young woman who is wrongly accused of infidelity, cast aside by her would-be groom, and then finally, after many trials, reunited with him.

Though the principal story was no doubt borrowed and modified from existing sources, the most memorable characters of the play are solely Shakespeare's creation. The "merry war" between the feisty Beatrice and the forever-bachelor

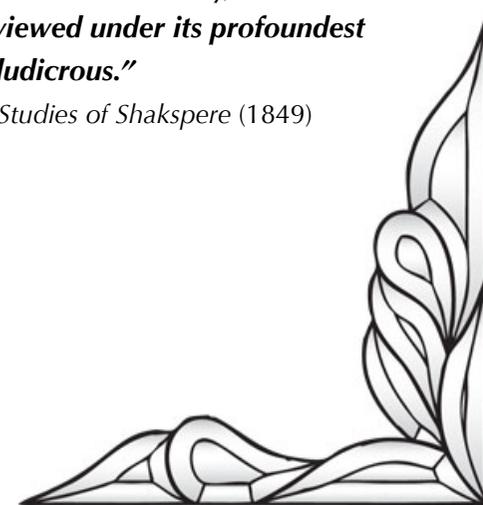
Portrait of
Matteo Bandello
circa 1484



Benedick is technically a subplot of the play, but for many it is the most memorable aspect of the play. In fact, when the play was performed for Princess Elizabeth's wedding celebrations in 1613, it was under the title *Benedicke and Betteris*. The delightfully bumbling characters of Dogberry and Verges are also Shakespeare's creation.

"Ariosto made this story a tale of chivalry, Spenser a lesson of high and solemn morality, Bandello an interesting love-romance; it was for Shakespeare to surround the main incident with those accessories which he could nowhere borrow, and to make of it such a comedy as no other man has made — a comedy, not of manners or of sentiment, but of life viewed under its profoundest aspects, whether of the grave or the ludicrous."

-Charles Knight, *Studies of Shakspeare* (1849)



For Your *Consideration*

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

"We call this play *Much Ado About Nothing*, but it seems clear to me that Shakespeare and his contemporaries called it *Much Ado About Noting*; a pun being intended between 'nothing' and 'noting,' which were then pronounced alike and upon which pun depends by far the more important significance of the title. The play is *Much Ado About Nothing* only in a very vague and general sense, but *Much Ado About Noting* in one especially apt and descriptive; for the much ado is produced entirely by noting. It begins with the noting of the Prince and Claudio, first by Antonio's man, and then by Borachio, who reveals the conference to Don John; it goes on with Benedick noting the Prince, Leonato, and Claudio in the garden, and again with Beatrice noting [Hero] and Ursula in the same place; the incident upon which the action turns is the noting of Borachio's interview with Margaret by the Prince and Claudio; and finally, the incident which unravels the plot is the noting of Borachio and Conrade by the Watch. That this sense, "to observe," "to watch," was one in which "note" was commonly used, it is quite needless to show the reference to the literature and the lexicographers of Shakespeare's day; it is hardly obsolete."

-Richard Grant White,
Introduction to Much Ado (1889)

HARK, A SEQUEL!

Seven years prior to penning *Much Ado*, Shakespeare penned another play which featured a pair of witty won't-be/would-be lovers similar to Beatrice and Benedick. In *Love's Labour's Lost*, the rising love between Rosaline and Berowne is thwarted in part by the sudden departure of Rosaline at the end of the play. Rumors linger in theatre lore of a sequel to this early Shakespeare comedy called *Love's Labour's Won*. There are several references to the play's existence, though no copy of the play has ever been found. Some scholars speculate that *Much Ado* was started as a sequel to *Love's Labour's Lost* before it evolved into a wholly separate work.



Who's Who in *Much Ado*

DON PEDRO'S MEN:

DON PEDRO: Prince of Arragon, recently victorious in battle against his half-brother Don John

CLAUDIO: A young count from Florence; he falls in love with Leonato's daughter, Hero

BENEDICK: A lord of Padua; he initially claims he will never fall in love or marry; he later falls for Leonato's niece, Beatrice

BALTHASAR: Attendant to Don Pedro

LEONATO'S HOUSEHOLD:

LEONATO: Governor of Messina

BEATRICE: Niece to Leonato; she is quick-witted; she maintains a "merry war" of wits with Benedick

HERO: Daughter to Leonato; she is wrongly accused by Claudio of infidelity

ANTONIO: Brother to Leonato

MARGARET: A gentlewoman attending on Hero; she unwittingly aids in the plot that leads to the wrongful accusations against Hero

URSULA: A gentlewoman attending on Hero; she helps to trick Beatrice into admitting her love for Benedick

DON JOHN'S MEN:

DON JOHN: The illegitimate half-brother of Don Pedro; a self-proclaimed "plain dealing villain," he is jealous of Claudio and schemes against him

BORACHIO: A follower of Don John; he devises the plot that brings about the wrongful accusations against Hero, and later confesses to his involvement

CONRADE: A follower of Don John; he and Borachio are arrested by the watch and forced to confess their involvement in Hero's downfall



Candida Nichol's costume research for winter military dress and women's evening dresses for the 2014 production of *Much Ado About Nothing* at The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey.

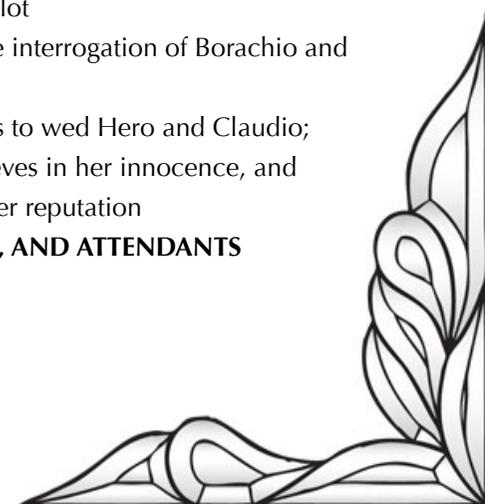
OTHER PLAYERS:

DOGERRY: The ineffectual and bumbling local constable; he manages to unwittingly uncover Don John's dastardly plot

VERGES: Assistant to Dogberry; he aids in the interrogation of Borachio and Conrade

FRIAR FRANCIS: A religious man who arrives to wed Hero and Claudio; when Hero is accused of infidelity, he believes in her innocence, and presents a plan that he hopes will restore her reputation

MESSENGERS, WATCH, LORD, MUSICIANS, AND ATTENDANTS



Glossary of Words and Phrases

ACT I

Mountanto – a fencing term; a montant is an upright cut or thrust
birdbolt – a blunt-headed arrow used to shoot birds
trencherman – eater (also, insultingly, “parasitical dependent”)
jade’s trick – an unfair or foolish conclusion
flouting jack – mocking fellow
canker – a sore; also a prickly wild rose

ACT II

bearherd – keeper of a performing bear
lead his apes in hell – Proverbial, meaning that women who do not marry are punished in the afterlife
cinquepace – a galliard; a popular, lively dance
Ate – Greek goddess of discord (pronounced “Ah-tay”)
Antipodes – the region on the opposite side of the globe; a reference to something unachievable
civil as an orange – i.e., like a Seville orange, described as “between sweet and sour”
cozened – tricked or cheated
stale – low-class harlot or prostitute
tabor – small drum used with a tabor-pipe to accompany dancing
turned Orthography – become a fancy speaker (Orthography is, literally, the study of proper spelling)
crotchets – peculiar ideas, also quarter notes in music
had as life – would just as gladly
daffled – put aside
dumbshow – a theatrical scene acted without speech
daw – a jackdaw; a small kind of crow

ACT III

pleachéd – bordered with intertwined boughs
couchéd – hidden

haggards – wild female hawks
limed – trapped like a bird in birdlime
truant – rogue; one who does not obey rules
slops – wide baggy breeches or hose
civet – perfume
hobby-horses – jesters or buffoons
vagrom – vagrant, vagabond
reechy – smoky, dirty
do not wrest – i.e., does not distort or twist the meaning of
carduus benedictus – the herb “blessed thistle,” which was claimed to be “a salve for every sore”

ACT IV

mired – soiled
rack the value – strain its worth to the limit
sirrah – a term of address to a male social inferior
flat burglary – out-and-out treachery
coxcomb – fool

ACT V

wag – depart
beshrew – mild word for curse
fleer – jeer, mock
fashion-monging – foppish
scruple – a minute amount; literally, the twenty-fourth part of an ounce (a unit of apothecary weight)
cog – cheat; or, flatter, wheedle
anticly – grotesquely dressed
pluck up – take courage
beliest – tell lies about
I give thee the bucklers – i.e., I give up (in this wit combat); bucklers are small shields used in swordfighting
quondam – bygone, former
guerdon – recompense
halting – lame, limping
wit-crackers – those who make sarcastic remarks

Man of Many Words

Shakespeare used over 20,000 different words in his plays and poems. Of these, 8.5% (1,700 words) had never been seen in print before Shakespeare used them.

To give you a sense of just how extraordinary this is, consider that the *King James Bible* uses only 8,000 different words.

Commentary & Criticism

“*Much Ado About Nothing* is among the pleasantest of Shakespeare’s plays. It was written about 1599 as the first of a cluster of three comedies, written in the space of a year or so, that represent Shakespeare’s comic genius at its height.”

Isaac Asimov, *Asimov’s Guide to Shakespeare*

“How then does one answer the question: What is the definition of love in *Much Ado About Nothing*? The prime answer is there in the title: Love is much ado about nothing. What binds and will hold Beatrice and Benedick together is their mutual knowledge and acceptance of this benign nihilism. Doubtless the title has some reference also to the vexed transition of Hero and Claudio from noncourtship to a pragmatic marriage of mutual advantage. Tiresome and empty as Claudio is, he has a certain aplomb in his cheerful approach to his second betrothal to the supposedly dead Hero: “I’ll hold my mind were she an Ethiopie” and “Which is the lady I must seize upon?” This splendid unconcern is the prelude to the highest comedy in the play.”

Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*

“In *Much Ado About Nothing*, two plots are carefully interwoven to form a volcanic fourth act, where the apparent destruction of one marriage (of Claudio and Hero) helps to bring about another (that of Benedick and Beatrice).

Shakespeare is especially careful to balance serious and light layers of action, preventing the false death of Hero and the rage of her father Leonato from turning the comedy into a more disturbing kind of play.”

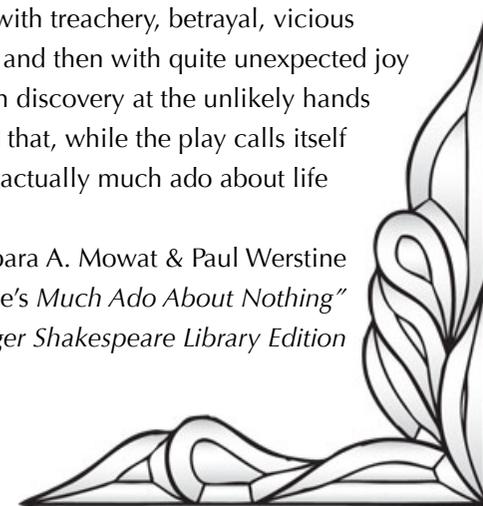
Leslie Dunton-Downer and Alan Riding
Essential Shakespeare Handbook

“The fascination of Beatrice is founded upon her extraordinary blend of merriment and bitterness, in contrast to the simpler Kate the Shrew. Beatrice has more affinity to the dark Rosaline of *Love’s Labours Lost*, though Rosaline’s merriment is not very innocent. Shakespearean foregrounding rather subtly allows some clues for Beatrice’s nature, and perhaps for her negative obsession with Benedick, who is at once the only threat to her freedom and the inevitable path out of her incessant toughness of spirit.”

Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*

“It is...the conjunction of the Beatrice and Benedick story with the story of Hero and Claudio that makes *Much Ado* so rich and rewarding a play. Beatrice and Benedick, faced with humiliating descriptions of what they had considered their most prized character traits, learn to ‘suffer love’ and to ‘eat their meat without grudging’; simultaneously, Claudio and Hero are forced into an experience that acquaints them first with life’s darkness (with treachery, betrayal, vicious jealousy, public shaming, and abandonment) and then with quite unexpected joy (with the recovery of the irrevocably lost, with discovery at the unlikely hands of the plays ‘shallow fools’). It can be argued that, while the play calls itself *Much Ado About Not Nothing*, its stories are actually much ado about life at its most important.”

Barbara A. Mowat & Paul Werstine
“Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*”
Much Ado About Nothing: Folger Shakespeare Library Edition



In This Production

Right: Set design for *Much Ado About Nothing* by Michael Ganio.

Below Left: Full Scale War Bond Poster used in the production.

Below Right: Costume inspiration board for Beatrice by Candida Nichols.



Food for Thought

What's In A Name?

A central couple of the play, Beatrice—who's name means "she who makes happy"—and Benedick—who's name means "blessed"—are united at the end of the play. It seems fitting, in spite of all of the quibbling that, Beatrice will make Benedick happy and he will be blessed in her. (from *Asimov's Guide to Shakespeare*)

Our Fate is in Our Stars

Astrologically speaking, each person is born under the influence of a particular planet, which governs his/her personality based on the properties of that influencing planet. When Conrade attempts to cheer up Don John, Don John responds with "I wonder that thou being (as thou say'st thou art) born under Saturn, goest about to apply a moral medicine..." The idea is that Conrade, being born under Saturn, innately has the characteristics of being "saturnine," or grave, gloomy and slow. Don John is stating that his "saturnine" companion is ill-equipped from birth to cheer him.

Don Pedro says that "to be merry best becomes" Beatrice. Beatrice claims that she was born under a dancing star, which is why she is so prone to merriment.

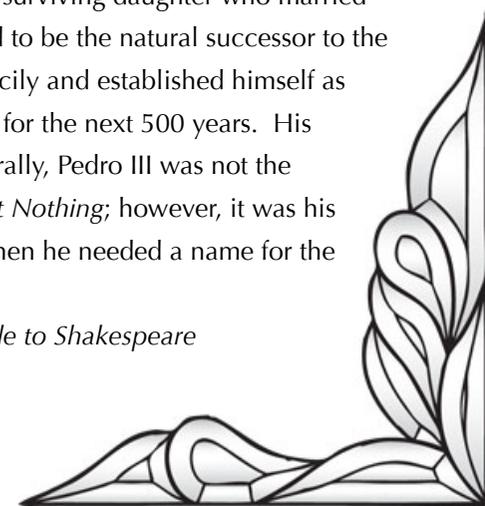
Boy, Oh Boy!

In Shakespeare's England, it was considered lewd and vulgar for women to appear on a public stage. It was in fact against the law. For this reason, the female roles in plays were always performed by males, usually teenage boys who were of slighter stature than the other actors, had higher voices and no beards. (Shakespeare jokes about this in *Midsummer*, when Flute tries to be excused from playing Thisbe on the grounds that his beard has begun to come in). Beatrice, Hero, Margaret, and Ursula were originally played by boys or young men. When reading or watching the play, consider how the tone of the performance might be different with a boy playing Beatrice, Hero, or any of the other women in the play. Consider the numerous references to gender in the play, as when Beatrice wishes for a man to venge her cousin's wrong, and how differently those words play coming from a woman's mouth and not a young man playing a woman.

Exchange of Power: Prince of Arragon in Sicily?

In the middle ages, Sicily was governed by German emperors until 1266 when it fell into the hands of the French dynasty of Anjou. The last German ruler of Sicily, prior to the Angevin takeover, had one surviving daughter who married the King of Arragon, who Sicilians considered to be the natural successor to the crown. In 1285, this king made his way to Sicily and established himself as the ruler and began a dynasty that would last for the next 500 years. His name was Pedro III or Pedro the Great. Naturally, Pedro III was not the Don Pedro in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*; however, it was his name that floated into Shakespeare's mind when he needed a name for the prince.

-from *Asimov's Guide to Shakespeare*

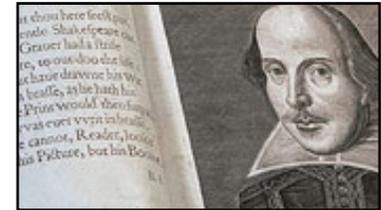
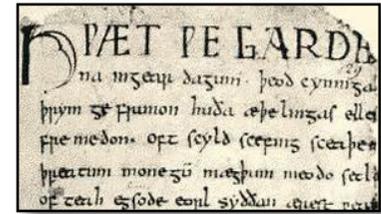


Explore Online

A link to some YouTube videos where you can hear the difference between Olde English and Middle English
<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL071DC49FD027E2A2>

A link to the Folger Shakespeare Library's *Much Ado* page
<http://www.folger.edu/Content/Discover-Shakespeare/Shakespeares-Works/The-Plays/Much-Ado-About-Nothing.cfm>

A link to the Shakespeare's Birthplace Trust website
<http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/home.html>



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