



William Shakespeare's

Much Ado About Nothing

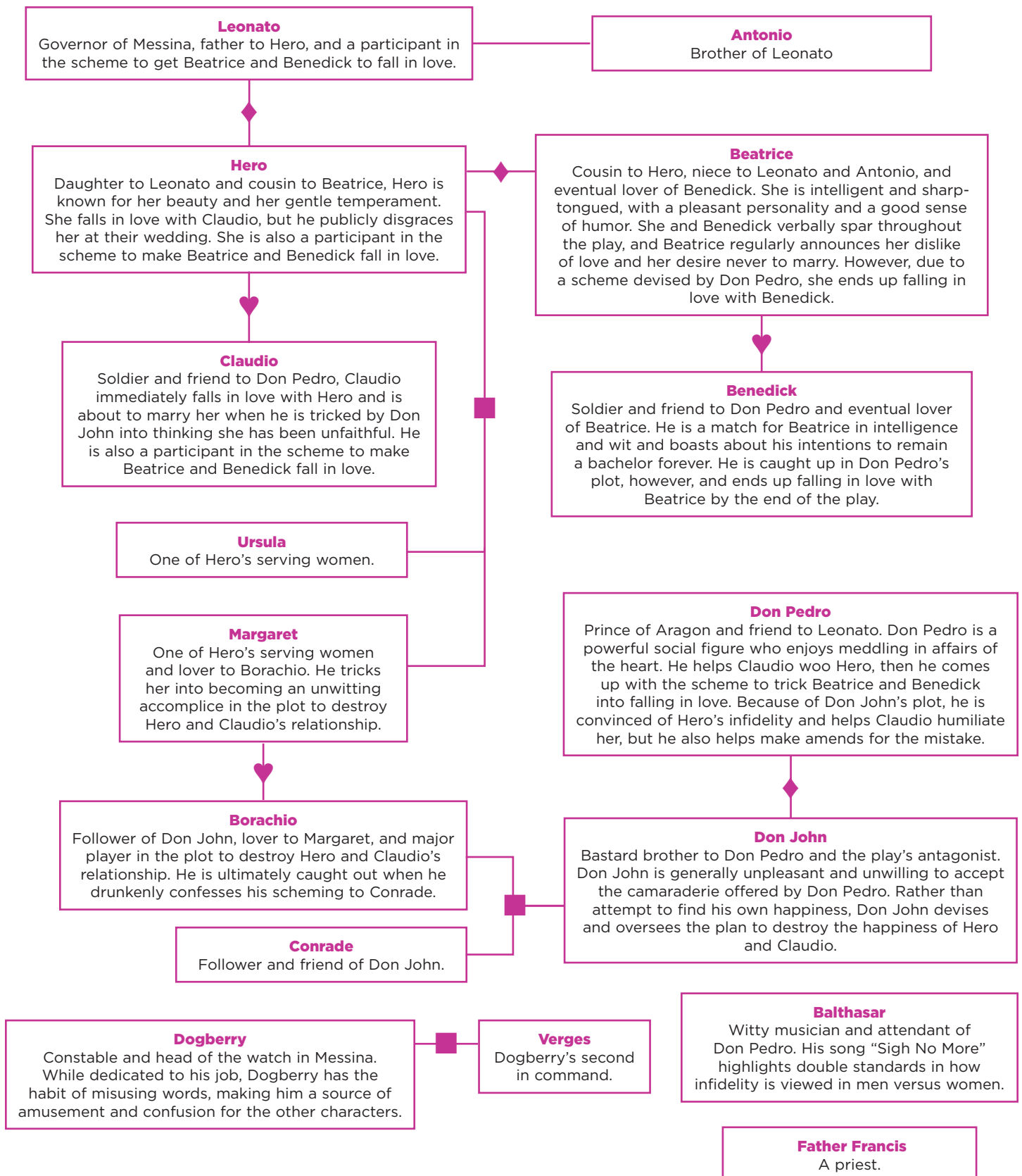
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CHARACTER MAP



SYNOPSIS BY DR. MIRANDA JOHNSON-HADDAD

The play opens at the house of Leonato, Governor of Messina, in Sicily. Don Pedro, the Prince of Aragon, is returning in triumph from the wars, along with Claudio, a young nobleman, and Benedick, an older nobleman and close friend to both. Leonato, with his daughter, Hero, and his quick-witted niece, Beatrice, welcome the men. Beatrice and Benedick resume the “merry war” of clever wordplay that is typical of their dynamic.

Claudio tells Benedick and Don Pedro that he loves Hero, and Don Pedro offers to facilitate the match. Benedick insists that he will never marry; later, Beatrice says the same. At a masked ball, Don Pedro wins Hero as Claudio’s wife, despite the efforts of Don Pedro’s illegitimate and troublemaking brother, Don John, to interfere. Don Pedro, Claudio, and Leonato devise a trick to make Benedick think that Beatrice is secretly in love with him, while Hero and her waiting-women, Margaret and Ursula, trick Beatrice into thinking that Benedick is secretly in love with her.

Don John’s henchmen, Borachio and Conrade, suggest another way that Claudio’s nuptials can be disrupted: Borachio proposes that because he and Margaret are lovers, he can trick her into appearing at Hero’s window to admit him into the bedchamber. Don John contrives to have Don Pedro and Claudio watch from a distance, and they are both deceived. Later, Borachio is overheard by the incompetent local watch, led by the bumbling Constable Dogberry, boasting about the deception. The watch arrest Borachio and Conrade.

Next day, at the wedding, Claudio denounces Hero at the altar as a whore. Hero collapses in anguish, the soldiers depart, and the friar advises the others to spread a rumor that Hero has died, to allow them time to discover the truth. Beatrice and Benedick find themselves alone and confess their love for each other.

The plot unravels when word arrives that Don John has fled Messina. Borachio confesses the scheme to Don Pedro and Claudio, who beg Leonato’s forgiveness. Leonato demands that Claudio marry his brother Antonio’s “daughter.” At the wedding, the women appear masked, and after the ceremony Hero reveals herself to the penitent Claudio. Beatrice and Benedick attempt to deny their love for each other, but when presented with the sonnets that each has written to the other, they confess their love and cheerfully agree to marry, to everyone’s delight. ♦



“Beatrice overhears Hero and Ursula,” 1904, Folger Shakespeare Library, watercolor by John Sutcliffe.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT: **WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE**

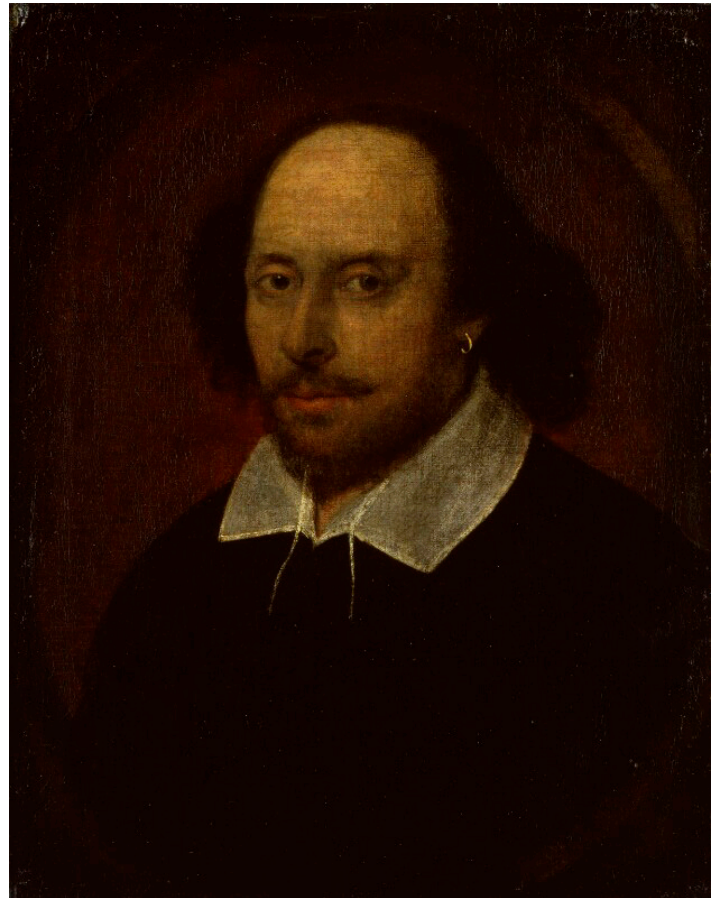
In April 23, 1564, in the English town of Stratford-upon-Avon, poet, playwright, and actor William Shakespeare was born to parents John Shakespeare and Mary Arden. Despite his enduring legacy and despite producing some of the most well-known works in Western literature, very little documentation of Shakespeare's life exists beyond public records of his birth, death, marriage, and financial transactions.

Today, Shakespeare's works are taught in schools around the world, but Shakespeare's own education began at home. He would have grown up hearing fairytales and fables from his parents and would have been taught to read the Bible. Shakespeare's mother was the executor of her father's will, suggesting that she was literate, which was no small feat for a woman of her time. In addition to his home education, Shakespeare most likely attended the King's New School, a grammar school in Stratford, where his studies would have been almost exclusively in Latin.

When Shakespeare was 18, he married Anne Hathaway, who was 26 years old. The two had a rushed marriage because Anne was already pregnant at the time of the wedding. The couple welcomed their first child, Susanna, six months after the ceremony. Anne later gave birth to twins Hamnet and Judith. Tragically, Hamnet died when he was just eleven years of age.

The years 1585-1591 are often referred to as the "lost years," as not much is known about Shakespeare's life during this period. However, it is clear that he moved to London to pursue theatre at some point during these years, likely around 1587. By 1592, Shakespeare had established his reputation as an actor and playwright in London. That year, it is believed that the Lord Strange's Men, a prominent acting company at the time, performed one of Shakespeare's plays—probably *Henry VI, Part I*. Shakespeare later became an original member of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, one of the two theatrical companies legally approved to perform within London city limits at the time. During his time as a member of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, Shakespeare wrote many of his most prolific works.

In 1599, Shakespeare became the chief shareholder in the Globe Theatre, a newly built performance space in London. His plays were regularly performed there until 1613, when a fire began during a



William Shakespeare associated with John Taylor, c. 1600-1610.

production of Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, destroying the theatre. The Globe was rebuilt by 1614 but was closed, along with all other theatres, by the Puritan government in 1642 and subsequently demolished to make way for tenement buildings in 1644.

Over the course of about twenty years, Shakespeare created a staggering body of work, including 154 sonnets, three narrative poems, and 38 plays that are still performed around the world today. Sometime between 1610 and 1612, Shakespeare retired to Stratford-upon-Avon, where he died in 1616 at the age of 52. It is believed that he died on the same day he was born, April 23rd. He is buried in the Church of the Holy Trinity in Stratford-upon-Avon. ♦

TIMELINE OF **WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S** LIFE

- 1564** William Shakespeare is born on April 23 in Stratford-upon-Avon to John Shakespeare and Mary Arden.
- 1582** William Shakespeare marries Anne Hathaway. Their marriage license is issued on November 27th.
- 1583** Shakespeare's first child, Susanna, is born in May, just six months after the wedding of Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway. Susanna is baptized on May 26th.
- 1585** Anne Hathaway gives birth to twins, Hamnet and Judith. They are baptized on February 2nd.

1585-1591

"The Lost Years." No records of Shakespeare's life during this period exist. At some point, he moves to London.

1590-1592

Shakespeare begins to write plays during this time. His earliest works are *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Henry VI, Parts I, II, and III*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *Richard III*. The exact dates these plays were written and first performed is unknown.

- 1592** While it is unclear when Shakespeare left Stratford-upon-Avon, by this time, Shakespeare has established a reputation in London as an actor and a playwright. A plague breaks out in London and theatres are closed.

- 1593** Shakespeare writes *Venus and Adonis*, a long, narrative poem based on Book 10 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

- 1594** Theatres re-open after the plague. Shakespeare becomes a founding member of The Lord Chamberlain's Men. *The Comedy of Errors* is performed for the first time.



The Original Globe Theatre, artist unknown.

- 1596** Shakespeare's son, Hamnet, dies at age 11.
- 1599** The Globe Theatre opens in London. Shakespeare becomes a shareholder of the theatre.
- 1600-1610** Shakespeare writes several of his most prolific tragedies including *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*.
- 1603** Queen Elizabeth I dies and King James I ascends the throne. He becomes the patron of Shakespeare's theatre company, The Lord Chamberlain's Men, who change the name of their company to The King's Men in honor of King James I.
- 1604** Shakespeare writes *Othello*, which is performed for the first time in court on November 1st by the King's Men. Richard Burbage—the leading actor of the company—originates the role of Othello, presumably wearing blackface makeup to indicate Othello's race.
- 1609** Shakespeare's sonnets are published. Shakespeare is believed to have written the sonnets at some point during the 1590s.
- 1613** The Globe Theatre burns down during the first performance of Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*.
- 1614** The Globe Theatre is rebuilt.
- 1616** Shakespeare dies at the age of 52 in Stratford-upon-Avon. It is believed he died on April 23rd. He is buried in the Church of the Holy Trinity.
- 1623** John Heminges and Henry Condell collect and publish Shakespeare's plays in *Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies*. This publication is also known as The First Folio.



Shakespeare's Birthplace in Stratford-upon-Avon.

SETTING AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT: **ELIZABETHAN SOCIETY**

Much Ado About Nothing is set in France and Italy during the Italian Wars (a period of violent wars involving much of Europe for Italy's control that lasted from 1494- 1559). However, the social structures and hierarchies of the French court and the Italian army both seem to draw upon the social structures and hierarchies of Elizabethan England.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Shakespeare was a prominent playwright during the late Elizabethan Era. This historical era began in 1558 when Queen Elizabeth I became the ruling monarch of England. During this period, the structure of English society was rigid and provided little opportunity for social mobility for members of the lower classes. Opportunities for social advancement for women and people of color were even more limited. In Elizabethan society, a person's birth often determined their social status. During this period, many people believed and operated according to The Great Chain of Being. This concept is rooted in the idea that all things have a proper place in an overarching social hierarchy—from the smallest grain of sand up to the highest angel. The tiers of Elizabethan social structure can be broken down as follows from highest to lowest status:



"Queen Elizabeth I" (The "Darnley Portrait") by an unknown artist, c.1575..

The Queen

The Court—Made up of the English Nobility.

Merchants—Well-off citizens without royal connections. Individuals in this social class often took positions in town councils and local government.

Livery Companies—Institutions that controlled what was bought and sold. Companies specialized in certain products such as wine, cloth, and jewelry.

Apprentices—Young men who paid workers in Livery Companies in exchange for experience learning trades.

The Poor—The lowest status of citizens.



"Civitates Orbis Terrarum" Map of London by Georg Braun, Frans Hogenberg, and Joris Hoefnagel, c. 1600-1623.

ART AND CULTURE

The Elizabethan Era is considered a "golden age" of art and culture in English history. During this time, there were two trends in art and communication that caused significant shifts in the country's cultural landscape—the popularization of printed materials and the popularization of live entertainment. While Johannes Gutenberg, an inventor who was politically exiled from Germany, had invented the Gutenberg Press over one hundred years before the start of Elizabeth's reign in England, printed materials were among the most important commodities actively produced and sold in Elizabethan London. Advances in printing technology made it possible to churn out printed pamphlets, sermons, plays, poems, proclamations, and diatribes at a remarkable rate. The increased popularity and accessibility of printed materials allowed for stories and ideas to circulate among English urban centers faster than ever before. Live entertainment proved to be a cultural staple in Elizabethan society. In fact, despite the disparity that existed among social classes in the era, live entertainment provided members of all social classes the opportunity to gather and experience anything from stories to songs to sports. Theatre proved to be particularly popular with members of all social classes. From the poor, who stood on the ground level of theatres throughout theatrical productions and who were thus called "groundlings," to the nobility who sat in the higher tiers of seats, theatre was accessible to people from all ranks of society.

Edited from:

Picard, Liza. "The Social Structure in Elizabethan England." The British Library, The British Library, 17 Feb. 2016, www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/the-social-structure-in-elizabethanengland. and Rasmussen, Eric, and Ian DeJong. "Shakespeare's London." The British Library, The British Library, 2 Oct. 2015, www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/shakespeares-london.

By 1569, a welfare system was in place in the City of London to help the able poor find food and work.

A WOMAN'S LOT: THE ROLES AND RIGHTS OF WOMEN IN ELIZABETHAN SOCIETY

Queen Elizabeth I made history when she famously decided not to marry, making her the first woman to rule England as a sole monarch. While Elizabeth's radical decision to rule without a husband heralded some degree of hope for progress regarding women's rights, women in Elizabethan England were still far from equal to men.

To begin, women were granted significantly fewer opportunities to receive an education. While some girls, typically girls of higher social status, could attend grammar school, they were not allowed to attend university or work in any professional field. Much of a young woman's education centered on how she might be a proper wife and mother, and many only learned to read so they could properly understand the Bible.

According to the laws of the time, women could not own or inherit property, fundamentally excluding them from achieving any kind of financial independence. A woman's financial status and stability depended entirely on the men in her life. In childhood and adolescence, girls relied on their fathers for financial backing, and in marriage, women depended on their husbands. Any property belonging to a woman's family would be passed down to the family's eldest son, regardless of the eldest son's age—a family could have a 20-year-old daughter and an infant son, and the son would still be the sole inheritor of the family's property. Should a family have no male heirs, the eldest daughter would be allowed to inherit her family's property. This, however, was often deemed socially unacceptable. As a result, families frequently went out of their way to procure male heirs to prevent the eldest daughter from inheriting, even if that meant passing an inheritance to a very distant relation.

Since women did not own or inherit property, nearly all women in the Elizabethan Era married. Marriage was an essential aspect of society, and thus many social and legal codes governing marriage practices existed. Before the Elizabethan Era, marriages often functioned solely as alliances between families in order to protect or advance a family's wealth and social status. While marriages still often functioned like this during the Elizabethan Era, a new law was passed in 1604, allowing a man and a woman to marry without the consent of either person's parents. This slight shift in laws and practices allowed for a bit more marital freedom, which appealed to the growing trend of placing affection and love at the core of a marriage.



Left to Right: Unknown woman, formerly known as Mary, Queen of Scots by Unknown artist, c.1570. From the National Portrait Gallery, London.

"Katherine Parr" by Unknown artist, c. late 16th century. From the National Portrait Gallery, London.

WOMEN IN SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

The women in Shakespeare's plays, particularly in Shakespeare's comedies and romances, tend to challenge what it meant to be a proper woman in Elizabethan England. In *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, we see heroines crossdress as a means of reinvention or disguise. When they do so, they adopt an appearance and manner so precise that they trick nearly everyone they encounter. In presenting as men, these comedic heroines contradict the social expectations assigned to them by their gender and social status, if only for a short time.

Other comedic and romantic heroines in Shakespeare's canon use language and wit to defy social expectations. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Beatrice engages Benedick in frequent battles of wit and wordplay, often outshining him while also embodying a fierce sense of independence. Margaret also stands out, using bawdy humor and double entendre to defy expectations of propriety and purity.

Sir Walter Raleigh, a contemporary of Shakespeare and a poet, notes how the women in Shakespeare's plays, particularly comedies and romances, "are almost all practical, impatient of mere words, clear-sighted as to ends and means. They do not accept the premises to deny the conclusion, or decorate the inevitable with imaginative lendings." ♦

Edited from:

McManus, Clare. "Shakespeare and Gender: The 'Woman's Part'." The British Library, The British Library, 10 Feb. 2016, www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/shakespeare-and-gender-the-womans-part.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S COMEDIES

Seven years after Shakespeare's death, John Heminges and Henry Condell compiled the First Folio, the first published collection of Shakespeare's plays. The official title of the First Folio printed on the title page of the collection is "Mr. William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies." This collection was the first time that Shakespeare's works had been grouped by genre. Although these categories are still generally accepted, interpretations of Shakespeare's plays have evolved since the publication of the First Folio. In order to encompass the full breadth of Shakespeare's work, the "romance" and "problem play" categories have since been added. **If you are interested in learning more about the compilation and publication of the First Folio, consider joining A Noise Within later this season for Lauren Gunderson's *The Book of Will*.**

The plots of Shakespeare's comedies are typically not too different from those of his tragedies. In

both his comedies and his tragedies, plots often revolve around ideas of mistaken identity, deception, love, and honor. Comedies and tragedies both contain elements of the other, with the tragedies often enjoying moments of levity and humor (consider Mercutio's Queen Mab monologue in *Romeo and Juliet*) and comedies experiencing moments of grounding solemnity (consider Hero's fake death in *Much Ado About Nothing*). So, if they have so many common elements, how do we go about categorizing something as a comedy?

Shakespearean comedies are typically recognizable for the following:

- Lovers end up together and can usually be expected to marry by the final scene.
- Characters use frequent wordplay, often of the bawdy variety.
- Gender roles are explored whether it be through crossdressing or merely through characterization.
- Hurt is temporary and generally gets resolved by the end of the play.

Despite Don John's rotten attitude, Hero's faked death, and the notes of pessimism in Balthasar's "Sigh No More," there is no doubt that *Much Ado About Nothing* fits firmly into the comedy category. In fact, *Much Ado About Nothing* is one



From Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies or The First Folio, London, 1623.

of Shakespeare's most popular comedies partially because of how perfectly it exemplifies the above specifications.

Although their wedding is initially foiled, Hero and Claudio end up together by the end of the play, as do Beatrice and Benedick. The latter couple is tricked into falling in love, but the ruse only works because at the heart of it all, they really do care for one another. Beatrice and Benedick's frequent verbal sparring illustrates the wordplay typically expected of a comedy, while Dogberry's hilarious misuse of words juxtaposes their wit and highlights Shakespeare's expert grasp on the English language. With her cleverness and her initial desire to remain single, Beatrice subverts gender norms, offering a female character who is powerful, decisive, and a match in intelligence to the men around her. Finally, though many characters experience hurt over the course of the plot, the resolution is a happy one, leaving an audience feeling satisfied and optimistic.

Marjorie Garber, author and Shakespearean scholar, said of *Much Ado About Nothing*:

"This play, with its gaily self-deprecating title, seems virtually to inaugurate a genre. Its urbane pair of lovers, Beatrice and Benedick, anticipate the glib and genteel barbs of the disillusioned pairs who populate stage and screen, waiting, like their Shakespearean forerunners, to be offered a chance to be, for once, unashamedly romantic." ♦

Edited from:

Jamieson, Lee. "4 Ways to Identify a Shakespeare Comedy." *ThoughtCo*, ThoughtCo, 10 Aug. 2019, <https://www.thoughtco.com/how-to-identify-a-shakespeare-comedy-2985155>

WHAT'S IN A NAME: THE MEANING BEHIND THE TITLE "MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING"

When a work of art is as enduring and popular as *Much Ado About Nothing*, it is easy to take the title for granted. In daily life, it is common to hear and repeat a turn of phrase without ever grasping the original connotation. Such is often the case with "much ado about nothing", with people assuming that the phrase does not have meaning outside the context of the Shakespearean title. However, looking at the phrase with a historical and linguistic lens, there is a wealth of meaning that not only informs an audience understanding of the play, but enhances it.

Let's break it down:

- The phrase "much ado" means "a lot of fuss; a big ruckus."
 - ◊ For example, one might say: "After breakfast, the family drove to the airport without much ado."
- "Nothing" in a contemporary context is self-explanatory, meaning "no things."

Putting those together, the literal meaning we get is "a lot of fuss over nothing." One could argue that this is an apt, if self-deprecating, description of the play itself. It summarizes the plot— that is, a great deal of conversation and drama over what ultimately ends up being manufactured scheming. It also hints at the lighthearted tone of the piece and promises a happy ending. This meaning in and of itself would already make for an appropriate title. However, Shakespeare, ever the wordsmith, ensured that this seemingly innocuous phrase has not one, but two additional hidden meanings.

Firstly, in Elizabethan England, "nothing" was pronounced very similarly to "noting." At the time, "noting" referred to rumors, gossip, and eavesdropping. The word "noting" is used frequently throughout the play and is the subject of many puns and much discussion. The following examples from the text demonstrate the Elizabethan understanding of the word "note".

Act 1, scene i

CLAUDIO

Benedick, didst thou note the daughter of Signior Leonato?

BENEDICK

I noted her not; but I looked on her.

Act II, scene iii

BALTHASAR

Note this before my notes;
There's not a note of mine
that's worth the noting.

DON PEDRO

Why, these are very crotchets
that he speaks;
Note, notes, forsooth, and
nothing.

In this understanding, the title would mean, "a lot of fuss over eavesdropping and rumors". Indeed, a large portion of the plot hinges upon this so called "noting".

Beatrice and Benedick would never have gotten together if it weren't for Don Pedro's eavesdropping plot. If it weren't for rumors and gossip, Hero's good name would never have been slandered, and Dogberry would not have learned most of his information. In this sense, the nothing/noting pun in the title is very fitting, offering further insight into the content of the play.

The final hidden meaning in the title of *Much Ado About Nothing* is a bawdy one. In Elizabethan slang, "nothing" was sometimes used as a euphemism for female genitalia. This meaning of "nothing" can be seen used in other Shakespearean plays and would have served as a cheeky joke among audience members of the time. While mostly functioning as a double entendre, it also alludes to the fact that much of the plot revolves around love and lust.

Though this triple meaning may seem unnecessarily complicated to us now, it would have been obvious to Elizabethan audiences. They would have understood the title as a description, a pun, and a double entendre without needing to study it, much like modern audiences understand punny titles like *The Santa Clause* and *The Bee Movie*. When we use this Elizabethan linguistic lens to interpret the title of *Much Ado About Nothing*, we learn everything we need to know about the play: it is a lighthearted story centering around a big fuss over rumors, eavesdropping, love, and lust, which ultimately ends up working itself out.

What do you think? Which reading of the title do you think is most accurate to the content of the play? ♦

Edited from:

Andrei, Mihai. "Why Shakespeare's 'Much Ado about Nothing' Is a Brilliant Sneaky Innuendo." *ZME Science*, 12 May 2021, <https://www.zmescience.com/science/why-shakespeares-much-ado-about-nothing-is-a-brilliant-sneaky-innuendo/>.

Garber, Megan. "Such Ado: The Fight for Shakespeare's Puns." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 2 Mar. 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/03/loves-labours-found-saving-shakespeares-puns/471786/>.



"Engraving of *Much Ado About Nothing*" from page 49 of *Tales from Shakspeare*, 5th ed., 1831, by Charles and Mary Lamb.

HEY NONNY, NONNY: AN EXPLORATION OF BALTHASAR'S SONG

Many of Shakespeare's plays contain moments of musicality, even full songs. Often when reading the plays, these moments can seem out of place, even a little awkward. When one sees them performed onstage, however, the practical and thematic functions of these musical moments become abundantly clear. Just like the film and television of today, Elizabethan theatre used music to emphasize tone and move the plot forward. A small group of musicians typically resided on or under the stage, adding sound effects and underscoring.

Most of the songs in Shakespeare's plays are sung by minor characters, likely because singing and acting were thought of as completely separate art forms at the time, meaning that most of the talented singers did not have similar talent for acting. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, the play's song "Sigh No More" is sung by Don Pedro's attendant Balthasar.

**Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more,
Men were deceivers ever;
One foot in sea, and one on shore,
To one thing constant never.
Then sigh not so,
But let them go,
And be you blithe and bonny,
Converting all your sounds of woe
Into 'hey nonny, nonny'.**

**Sing no more ditties, sing no more,
Of dumps so dull and heavy;
The fraud of men was ever so,
Since summer first was leavy.
Then sigh not so,
But let them go
And be you blithe and bonny,
Converting all your sounds of woe
Into 'hey nonny, nonny'.**

Balthasar's song acts as a distraction during the eavesdropping scene, ultimately serving the larger plot by helping Beatrice and Benedick fall in love. It follows the tone of the rest of the play, asking the audience not to dwell on upsetting romantic circumstances and instead to understand them for what they are, which is, in his mind, ultimately trivial. "Hey nonny, nonny" was used as a cheerful nonsense lyric in many Elizabethan songs, much like "la dee da" would be understood today. So, when Balthasar tells women to turn their "sounds of woe / into 'hey nonny, nonny,'" he calls on them to switch their doleful songs about heartbreak for upbeat, pleasant ones instead.

Like the tone, the narrative of the song also mirrors the narrative of the play. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, men do deceive and scheme to the detriment of the women around them- just look at how the plotting affects Hero and Margaret- and nonetheless, the women forgive the wrongdoings in the name of love. In this way, the song almost seems to adopt the "boys will be boys" mentality, accusing women of being excessively morose over men who are bound to be unfaithful. This idea is at once, highly critical of both men and women. It casts men as faithless liars whose lustful whims change like the tides, and casts women as overly dramatic victims of circumstance.

This duality lends itself to many interesting interpretations onstage, from the ironic to the supportive to the downright misogynistic. It can also be interpreted as Balthasar's personal commentary on the plot of the play, almost like an Elizabethan equivalent of when a friend gets cheated on by someone you knew was a walking red flag. Balthasar's song is sympathetic to the heartbreak but calls on the subject to keep their chin up and move forward toward happier things. ♦

ACTIVITY: create a playlist that conveys the same message that "Sigh No More" does. Be prepared to defend why you think your choices achieve Balthasar's tone.

See the "Additional Resources: Articles" for a more in-depth analysis of "Sigh No More"

THEMES

WIT AND LANGUAGE

“Pardon me: I was born to speak
all mirth and no matter.” —Beatrice Act II, scene i

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, wit and language are not only the building blocks of the script, but also thematically intrinsic to the story itself. The characters are often defined by their particular use of language and the frequent use of double entendre serves to solidify the play’s lighthearted tone, even in darker moments. Every interaction between Beatrice and Benedick is so packed with witticisms that it is nearly impossible to catch them all on a first reading, especially if one is more used to modern speech patterns. Their verbal sparring is the foundation upon which their relationship is built, with their scathing remarks about each other masking true admiration and affection.

Serving as a juxtaposition to Beatrice and Benedick’s cutting intelligence is the bumbling constable Dogberry. Dogberry is unique in that he obfuscates the plot not by deliberate deception, but by his almost militant misuse of language. Shakespeare employs malapropisms (defined by Oxford Languages as: the mistaken use of a word in place of a similar sounding one, often with unintentionally amusing effect) to emphasize the good-natured idiocy of watch and its constable. For example, in Act III, scene v, when Dogberry says to Leonato, “Our watch, sir, have indeed comprehended two aspicious persons,” he means that they have *apprehended* two *suspicious* persons. The sheer number of malapropisms is so great that it begs repeat exposure to the show, as they are so artfully crafted to the constable’s character as to seem natural. It is only when listening further that one realizes how little sense he is truly making.

Like many other characters in the play, Dogberry speaks in prose, but he is singular in how his speeches ramble. He tries to match the structure and wit of those around him, but utterly fails to do so. Beatrice and Benedick also speak mainly in prose, which lends itself better to their specific kind of cutting banter. Claudio and Hero, on the other hand, speak mostly in verse, especially when talking about love or each other, which serves to highlight their romantic idealism. Whether the audience actively recognizes the difference between verse and prose is immaterial— they will *feel* the difference intrinsically. Characters speaking in verse will naturally sound loftier, more romantic, and perhaps, more artificial. In contrast, characters speaking in

prose will sound more naturalistic and honest.

This is part of why it so behooves audiences to see this play staged. Reading Shakespeare can often feel like a daunting task because if one is unused to the language, parsing out the wit and meaning behind the words can be difficult. But one doesn’t need a background in Shakespeare to enjoy seeing his plays staged. When an actor says their lines aloud and in context, an audience member will understand the meaning, even if they may not know the definition of every word. So, if you find yourself discouraged by the unfamiliar witticisms while reading through *Much Ado About Nothing*, remember: Shakespeare didn’t write his plays to be read, he wrote them to be seen and heard aloud. And that is where the wit and language of this play truly shines.

GOSSIP AND DECEIT

“Will it serve for any model to build mischief on?

What is he for a fool that betroths himself to
unquietness?” —Don John Act I, scene iii

Deceit and gossip are ingrained in the plot *Much Ado About Nothing* from the moment the curtain rises. Even the title itself hints at the fact that every significant plot point happens as a result of rumors and deception. Don Pedro orchestrates the plot for Beatrice and Benedick to overhear that the other has feelings for them. Without the well-meaning deception by Don Pedro and his accomplices, the two would never have stopped their bickering enough to admit that they are in love. Depending on how one contextualizes the initial interactions between Beatrice and Benedick, the impact of Don Pedro’s scheme takes on different meanings. If the two genuinely dislike each other, then being tricked into a relationship is upsetting and destined for failure. If, however, they were indeed in love the whole time, this scheme is not only morally acceptable, but ultimately necessary.

Don Pedro is far from the only character to employ deception and gossip as a means to an end. Don John’s plan to ruin Hero’s reputation succeeds due in large part to his usage of trickery and eavesdropping to mislead Don Pedro and Claudio. Within this larger deception, Margaret is deceived by Borachio, completely unaware of the part she plays in Hero’s demise. After Hero’s reputation has been wrongfully destroyed, Leonato spearheads the scheme to fake Hero’s death, a move which,

THEMES CONTINUED...

while short-lived, is undoubtably deceptive. Even Dogberry schemes in his own way, compiling gossip and rumors into what ultimately ends up being compelling evidence against Borachio and Don John. As a result of his keen eavesdropping, the scheme against Hero is revealed and the antagonists are condemned for their wrongdoings.

One typically expects this level of deception from villains, but in *Much Ado About Nothing*, deceit comes from the protagonists as well. Don Pedro deceives people just as much if not more than Don John, and often using similar strategies. The parallel tactics used by Don John and Don Pedro highlight just how much intention factors into an audience's perception of what is morally acceptable. Because he wants the best for his friends, Don Pedro's tricks are excused as a means to a justified end. Conversely, because Don John seeks only to ruin the general merriment for his own selfish reasons, his methods are decried, and he is labeled the play's main antagonist. This binary view of good and evil may not be entirely true to life, but it does make for satisfying storytelling, with the likeable heroes rewarded and the unpleasant villains scorned.

LOVE AND MARRIAGE

"I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow
than a man swear he loves me." —Beatrice Act I,
scene i

The theme of love and marriage is as inherent to the plot of *Much Ado About Nothing* as its main characters. Every action in the play is taken to either foster or destroy love. When Claudio indicates an interest in Hero, Don Pedro is quick to devise a plot for his friend to win Hero's affections and the blessing of her father. After witnessing the underlying flirtation in Beatrice and Benedick's argumentative banter, their friends work tirelessly to get the two together. Beatrice and Benedick are far too headstrong to listen to their friends' advice, so the eavesdropping plots are concocted so the two believe the

The fact that both Beatrice and Benedick scorn

love at the beginning of the play only strengthens the presence of love as a theme. They protest so vehemently against romantic connection that it not difficult to see the desire underneath. This is not to say that there are not very legitimate reasons not to want marriage. Especially for Beatrice, a woman in Elizabethan society who would be entirely controlled by any man she marries. Her money, her possessions, her body would all be owned by her husband. It makes sense that the fiercely independent Beatrice would not want to give up her freedom in that way. As the play goes on, however, it becomes clear that Benedick does not wish to stifle Beatrice, and that in fact, he admires her because of her autonomous spirit, not in spite of it. After all their arguing, bantering, and teasing, when the two get married at the end it feels like a triumph.

Similarly, when Hero and Claudio get married after overcoming the many plots and missteps plaguing their engagement, the audience is left with a sense of resolution. Literally speaking, Don John's efforts fail because he places his trust in people prone to drinking and gossip. But thematically speaking, his efforts fail because he is working against love and in a Shakespearean comedy, love is an essential good. If audiences accept the premise of love as the ideal outcome of a Shakespearean comedy, they understand that working *for* love is considered a noble cause and working *against* love is considered wicked. The characters who plot in the name of love are rewarded, and those who scheme against love are found out and punished accordingly.

Even the setting is indicative of the play's romantic themes. In the collective imagination of Elizabethan audiences, southern Italy was seen as a place for carefree romanticism and whirlwind dalliances. This assumption has not changed in minds of modern western audiences. After all, how many stories of whirlwind romances do we see set in southern Italy today? By placing the plot in Messina, Shakespeare appeals to an audience's innate understanding of the interplay between setting and tone. In doing so, Shakespeare ensures that the theme of love is intrinsic not only to the plot and characters, but also to the structure and mood of the play.

THEMES CONTINUED...

HONOR AND SHAME

“O Fate! take not away thy heavy hand.

Death is the fairest cover for her shame

That may be wish’d for.” —Leonato Act IV, scene i

Themes of honor and shame appear frequently in Elizabethan tales because of their prominent role in society at the time. Virginity had been idealized in western culture for so long that it was accepted as a requirement for unmarried women. What’s more, women were expected to be chaste and modest in behavior and attitude as well. This can be seen when comparing how Hero acts to how Beatrice acts. Beatrice has no desire to marry so she does not concern herself with acting like a maid. She is brash and bold and does not shrink from conflict or double entendre. Hero, on the other hand, speaks carefully and with kindness. She behaves exactly the way women were supposed to- a paragon of virtue and beauty. That is, until a man accuses her otherwise.

One accusation from Claudio and flimsy circumstantial evidence is all it takes to destroy a woman’s life. Furthermore, this supposed loss of virtue stains Hero’s family enough that even her father would rather her dead and forgotten than alive and unchaste. This, of course, would not be the case if a man was unfaithful, but that double

standard is not unique to *Much Ado About Nothing*. What is unique is that Shakespeare acknowledges, and perhaps even condemns, these contrasting principles. Balthasar’s song foreshadows and highlights the double standard long before it occurs in the plot and the play itself challenges the men for how quickly they draw their sordid conclusions.

The only person who remains absolutely convinced of Hero’s innocence is Beatrice. However, since Beatrice is a woman, her word does not count on Hero’s behalf. In act IV, scene i, Beatrice says, “O God, that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the market-place,” mourning the fact that she cannot even avenge her cousin because dueling is for gentlemen. Unable to confront Claudio herself, Beatrice calls upon Benedick to duel him on her behalf. Claudio’s accusations have shamed Hero’s whole family and since Beatrice is Hero’s cousin and Benedick loves Beatrice, he is honor-bound to protect her virtue.

This delicate societal structure of honor, with all of its unspoken rules and intricacies, only persists because it is enforced by the threat of great shame. In this way, honor and shame work in tandem to power the framework of Elizabethan society and by extension, the plot of Shakespeare’s plays. Especially in his comedies where the threat of death is low, shame is truly the ultimate consequence. ♦

IMITATION IS THE SINCEREST FORM OF FLATTERY: ADAPTATIONS OF *MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING*

Many of Shakespeare's plays are inspired, directly or indirectly, from other famous works of literature. He was a master adaptor, finding plots that interested him and reimagining them for a common audience. In Elizabethan times, stories of infidelity and honor were common, and Italy was both an excellent source of and setting for these dramatic romances. Though it is difficult to say exactly which work was Shakespeare's direct inspiration for *Much Ado About Nothing*, he likely borrowed the Hero and

Claudio plot from Matteo Bandello's *Novelle* and/or from Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, both of which were themselves heavily influenced by Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*.

All of this is to say that since Shakespeare himself frequently adapted other literature to serve audiences of his time, it is worth looking at how people have adapted Shakespeare's work to serve audiences of today.

Adaptations of *Much Ado About Nothing*



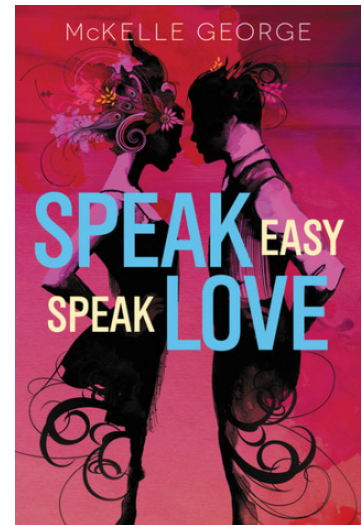
Cover from *Much Ado About Nothing*, 1993, dir. Kenneth Branagh.

Kenneth Branagh's 1993 *Much Ado About Nothing* film is a faithful stage to screen adaptation. It uses Shakespeare's original text and tone while embracing the romantic and dreamy elements of the story whenever possible.



Cover image from *Much Ado About Nothing*, 2013, dir. Joss Whedon.

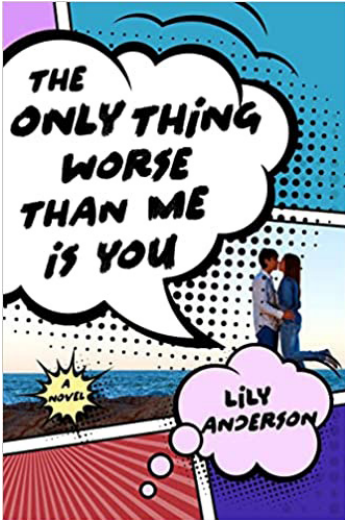
Joss Whedon's 2013 *Much Ado About Nothing* film is a decidedly American take on the story, keeping the original text, but staging the film in black and white and leaning into the lust and mystery of the tale.



Cover art from *Speak Easy, Speak Love*, 2017, by McKelle George.

Much Ado About Nothing meets *The Great Gatsby* in McKelle George's young adult novel, *Speak Easy, Speak Love*. The novel adapts the romantic twists and turns of Shakespeare's original into something befitting the lavish backdrop of the American 1920s.

IMITATION IS THE SINCEREST FORM OF FLATTERY: ADAPTATIONS OF *MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING* CONTINUED...



Cover art from *The Only Thing Worse Than Me Is You*, 2016, by Lily Anderson

Lily Anderson also adapts for a young adult audience in her novel *The Only Thing Worse Than Me Is You*. This version finds our heroes in high school, struggling to navigate the challenges of academics, fandom, and teenage love.



Catherine Tate and David Tennant in *Much Ado About Nothing* at Wyndham's theatre, 2011. Photograph: Robbie Jack/Corbis.

In 2011, West End's Wyndham's Theatre staged *Much Ado About Nothing* starring Catherine Tate as Beatrice and David Tennant as Benedick. The play was extremely well-received as a result of its unique staging and electric banter between the two leads. It was so beloved that a filmed version is still available for purchase online.



Image from video "Nothing Much To Do Credits | The Candle Wasters," 2016, dir. Sally Bollinger.

Nothing Much To Do is a partially scripted webseries adaptation created by The Candle Wasters production team which imagines the characters as high school aged New Zealanders. Over the course of 76 episodes, each a few minutes long, *Nothing Much To Do* stays faithful to each beat of the original plot, using YouTube as a modern means of gossip and adapting Shakespeare's humor for a modern ear.



Cover image for album "Sigh No More" by Mumford and Sons.

Mumford and Sons' 2009 song "Sigh no More" from their eponymous album is not so much an adaptation as it is a loving tribute. The lyrics reference specific lines from the play and the themes of the song itself follow the themes of the play.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: Why do we love to adapt? What is revealed by placing a story like *Much Ado About Nothing* in a new context?

THE “MERRY WAR” BETWEEN THE SEXES IN SHAKESPEARE’S *MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING*

By Dr. Miranda Johnson-Haddad

William Shakespeare’s comedy *Much Ado About Nothing* (ca. 1598) is derived – as are so many of Shakespeare’s comedies – from Italian sources. The subplot involving Beatrice and Benedick and their ongoing battle of wits, however, was Shakespeare’s own invention. Moreover, Beatrice and Benedick are by no means the first of Shakespeare’s couples who bond over their clever wordplay and eventually come to realize that they are made for each other. We see their early prototypes in several other Shakespearean couples, notably Rosaline and Berowne in *Love’s Labor’s Lost* (1594) and Katherine and Petruchio in *The Taming of the Shrew* (1595).

In *Much Ado*, Shakespeare seems to be suggesting that something quite profound is going on behind the witty banter. Beatrice and Benedick may need to be playfully tricked into realizing what everyone else has already figured out—that they belong together—but they also know each other far better when they finally acknowledge their love than Hero and Claudio do. Scholar David Bevington has noted that “Because Claudio knows so little about Hero and is content with superficial expectations, he is vulnerable to a far uglier sort of deception.” Shakespeare implies that Claudio’s romantic idealization of Hero, which does not take into account that she is an individual with her own separate identity, renders Claudio far too susceptible to baseless jealousy, leading to his displays of what today we might call toxic masculinity. Benedick, on the other hand, may pretend to be critical of marriage, but he also knows very well that Beatrice is a perfect match for him in every way. Significantly, he never doubts her honesty, and his love for her (once he admits it to himself) is so strong that he believes without question her assertions of Hero’s innocence, immediately resolving to challenge his friend Claudio to a duel, simply because Beatrice has asked him to.

There is something truly timeless about the mature and intelligent way that Beatrice and Benedick understand each other, and in their



Hero, *Much Ado About Nothing*, 1849, illustrated by John William Wright

evident enjoyment of the quick-witted exchanges they engage in. We recognize the same dynamic portrayed repeatedly down the centuries, from the Restoration comedies to the Nick and Nora films of Hollywood’s Golden Age, and from 1990’s rom-coms like “When Harry Met Sally” to relationships such as that depicted between *Hamilton*’s Angelica Schuyler and Alexander Hamilton. All of these relationships, beginning with that of Shakespeare’s Beatrice and Benedick, suggest that as long as the playing fields are truly equal, a “merry war” between the sexes may actually serve to promote understanding, growth, and even enduring love. ♦

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ABOUT A NOISE WITHIN

A NOISE WITHIN A Noise Within produces classic theatre as an essential means to enrich our community by embracing universal human experiences, expanding personal awareness, and challenging individual perspectives. Our company of resident and guest artists immerses student and general audiences in timeless, epic stories in an intimate setting.

Our most successful art asks our community to question beliefs, focus on relationships, and develop self-awareness. Southern California audiences of all ages and backgrounds build community together while engaging with this most visceral and primal of storytelling techniques. ANW's production of classic theatre includes all plays we believe will be part of our cultural legacy. We interpret these stories through the work of a professional resident company—a group of artists whose work is critical to their community—based on the belief that trust among artists and between artists and audience can only be built through an honest and continuing dialogue.

In its 30-year history, A Noise Within has garnered over 500 awards and commendations, including the Los Angeles Drama Critics' Circle's revered Polly Warfield Award for Excellence and the coveted Margaret Hartford Award for Sustained Excellence.

More than 45,000 individuals attend productions at a Noise Within annually. In addition, the theatre draws over 18,000 student participants to its Education Program. Students benefit from in-classroom workshops, conservatory training, subsidized tickets to matinee and evening performances, post-performance discussions with artists, and free standards-based study guides.

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