



UNDERSTANDING
SHAKESPEARE

**Much Ado
about Nothing**

Robert A. Albano

UNDERSTANDING

SHAKESPEARE:

MUCH

ADO

ABOUT

NOTHING

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MERCURY PRESS

Los Angeles

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Much Ado about Nothing

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NOTE: All act and scene divisions and lines numbers referred to in this text are consistent with those found in *The Norton Shakespeare* (Stephen Greenblatt, editor).

Introduction

William Shakespeare often followed the dramatic conventions of his day, but he also often broke those conventions in order to bring to the stage a new and refreshing dramatic production. In fact, Shakespeare usually gave his audiences the unexpected. In the tragedy of *Othello*, for example, Shakespeare devoted the key speeches or soliloquies to the villain of the drama, Iago, rather than to the hero of the play. In *Hamlet* Shakespeare created a revenge tragedy in which the hero unconventionally hesitates about getting revenge. And in *Julius Caesar* Shakespeare kills off the title character before the play is even half-way over. To be it bluntly, audiences never knew quite what to expect when they went to see a play penned by Shakespeare; and that element of surprise contributed to making Shakespeare's plays all the more fascinating and enjoyable to watch.

Likewise, Shakespeare also broke the conventions of drama in his comedies. For example, in one of his earliest comedies, *Love's Labour's Lost*, the playwright unexpectedly ends the play without a wedding and without the lovers being united. Although critics often commend Shakespeare for the excellence of his poetry and for his remarkable characterization, readers and audiences should not overlook the ingenuity and creativity that the playwright put into organizing and developing the plots of his plays.

The comedy ***Much Ado about Nothing*** also breaks a familiar dramatic convention of the Renaissance. Typically, a writer would direct the central focus of a comedy on the young lovers of the play, and the best lines and most pleasing poetry of the work would be spoken by those characters. In *Much Ado*, however, the young lovers of the play, Claudio and Hero, are rather bland and uninteresting. Claudio, in fact, is even tongue-tied and requires the assistance of his prince, Don Pedro, to speak on his behalf when it comes to matters of love. The two young lovers of the play, then, move into the background of the play and become merely plot devices to contrast with the two truly delightful characters of the comedy, namely Beatrice and Benedick.

Both **Beatrice** and **Benedick** are witty, clever, and insightful -- but to a point. Slightly older than Claudio and Hero, the two stars of Shakespeare's comedy have had several experiences with love in the past; and those experiences have made them cynical and wary about love and the happiness that it may bring. In fact, both Benedick and Beatrice have become "tyrants" to the opposite sex. Benedick declares that the woman who has all of the necessary virtues to make him happy does not exist. Similarly, Beatrice says the same about men. And, so, both Benedick and Beatrice vow never to allow themselves to become victims to love. Both of them vow never to get married.

Yet, underneath the witty exteriors of these two splendid characters lie romantic interiors. Both Beatrice and Benedick yearn for love and romance, yet they themselves are unaware of this yearning. Despite their cynicism and protestations against love, these two witty characters desire that which Hero and Claudio have found in each other, a companion and lover and lifelong friend. They feel empty without it.

The charm of *Much Ado about Nothing* lies in the verbal assaults and witty exchanges that occur between Beatrice and Benedick. Shakespeare enjoyed playing with language and manipulating it for comic results; and, with the couple of Beatrice and Benedick, Shakespeare created the perfect characters to display his love of language and wit. Critics and theater historians often see in Beatrice and Benedick the prototypes of the witty lovers that so commonly frequented the stages of **Restoration Comedy** during the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Yet nowhere in the Restoration comedies are any characters that equal the brilliance and charm of Shakespeare's Beatrice and Benedick.

The brilliant and witty language, the delightful and enjoyable comic characters of Beatrice and Benedick, and (as suggested above) the clever and thoughtful arrangement of plot all contribute to make *Much Ado about Nothing* one of Shakespeare's greatest comedies. Although Shakespeare was often influenced and inspired by the plots of earlier works, he would often turn those plots upside-down or

inside-out or mix them with seemingly incompatible elements or subplots to create an entirely new and unique work of literature. In the earlier comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595-96), for example, Shakespeare blended elements of Greek mythology, Italian tragedy, medieval folklore, and English homespun humor to create a truly delightful and appealing play. A couple of years later Shakespeare once again experimented with mixing dissimilar elements to create an entirely new and engaging comedy.

Much Ado about Nothing (1598) contains a mixture of six separate stories: (1) first, there is a tragic-comedy involving the two young lovers, Hero and Claudio. (2) Next there is the witty battle between Beatrice and Benedick. (3) Third, there is a plot by the prince, Don Pedro, who becomes a matchmaker in his attempt to bring Beatrice and Benedick together. (4) There is also a villain in the comedy, Don John, the prince's half-brother, who attempts to spoil the happiness and celebration of others by framing Hero so that Claudio believes she is unfaithful. (5) Fifth, there are the bumbling and incompetent constables, Dogberry and Verges, who capture and interrogate the accomplices of Don John. And (6) finally, there is a plot involving Hero's father, Leonato, who attempts to get revenge against Don Pedro and Claudio when they accuse Hero of infidelity and licentiousness. All of this may sound confusing when listed here, but Shakespeare

brilliantly weaves all of these pieces together into one seamless masterpiece.

For many decades critics have labeled *Much Ado about Nothing* (along with *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*) as one of Shakespeare's "**three joyous comedies.**" In *Much Ado*, as well as in the other two works, the playwright creates a joyous atmosphere that is fast-paced and hectic, witty and clever and fun, and often full of sheer but brilliant madness. Enjoyable to read, the comedy is even more joyous when it is presented live on stage in a well-directed and finely-acted performance. Shakespeare has breathed joyous life into his two major characters; and, in a solidly-performed production of this play, that joy cannot fail to delight and enchant audiences of any place or time.

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