

## *MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING*

### COMMENT

Under the spell of Judi Dench's performance as Beatrice in the 1977 Trevor Nunn production of *Much Ado about Nothing* at the Aldwych Theatre, I discarded any remnants I had left of the notion that Shakespeare's comedies weigh less than his tragedies. Through her Beatrice I felt the heaviness of a world where shallow men have power; a world where the obsession with ownership of a woman's body blinds men to sense and to love; a world where no marriage at all is a better choice for an intelligent woman than marriage to a man—even a bright man—who cannot see through a woman's eyes. By the end of the play, Shakespeare gives us in Beatrice and Benedick two strong individuals made better for being a duo and enlarged rather than diminished by their coming marriage. To clarify what this couple represents, Shakespeare stages their story against the background of traditional young romance: the story of Claudio, a suitor who loves at first sight and says to his beloved, "I give away myself for you and dote upon the exchange" (2.1.290-291), and of Hero, a sweetheart so demure that "she tells him in his ear that he is in her heart" (296-297). The juxtaposition of the young Claudio and Hero, one quick to dote and the other to submit, with Benedick and Beatrice, neither of whom is quick to dote or to submit, produces Shakespeare's sharpest essay on love.

In *Much Ado about Nothing* Claudio and Hero are figures of the conventional romantic notion of "falling," unwilled, in love; while Benedick and Beatrice suggest that love is act of faith, a decision to believe. In exploring these differences, the play works along a double pole—men and women, young and old—and Benedick is its fulcrum. His choice on the one side is career and comradeship as a member of the three musketeers with Don Pedro and Claudio, and on the other side is an intelligent woman angry at the world of men and determined that any man she loves must also be her friend. Benedick's decision means that in choosing to love Beatrice—"I will be horribly in love with her" (2.3.225-226)—he is also choosing to have faith in her, to be "engaged" to what Beatrice "think[s]...in [her] soul." To do that Benedick will more or less sever the other ties in his life, the hard choice that grown-ups make when they marry.

*Much Ado* also argues that manhood means growing up. For the first half of the play, while Benedick is resisting love and marriage, the meaning of manhood grows out of an apposition with womanhood. Benedick virtually equates his manhood with his independence from women:

Because I will not do [women] the wrong to mistrust any, I will do myself the right to trust none; and the fine is (for the which I may go the finer), I will live a bachelor. (1.1.229-32)

And Beatrice most powerfully points at thaman/woman binary after she asks Benedick to kill Claudio—"O God, that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the market place." (304)

Initially, Shakespeare works the idea of boyhood versus manhood around the figure of Claudio, “a young Florentine” and “young start-up,” and especially at his youthfulness when he falls in love—he seems to require Benedick’s approval, he is afraid of being teased, he is too shy to broach the subject himself either to Leonato or Hero, and he is utterly tongue-tied once the marriage to Hero is arranged. Closely linked to our sense of Claudio’s youthfulness is his relationship with the other musketeers. Like schoolboys, they tease one another about their susceptibility to love: “Yet say I he is in love” (3.2.28) ... “If he be not in love with some woman, there is no believing old signs” (37-38)... “Conclude, conclude, he is in love” (57). One of Shakespeare’s funniest stage moments is the trick the men play on Benedick to “make” him fall in love with Beatrice, but that entire practical joke—a kind of adolescent prank—is an odd enterprise for grown men of their position: a Prince, his lieutenant, and their senior host. Their love prank makes these men seem like members of a no-girls-allowed club chanting: “Claudio and Hero sitting in a tree, k-i-s-s-i-n-g!”

Shakespeare shifts the apposition of manhood from gender to age in Act Five, scene one. To do that he fashions a scene in which the two old men in the play confront Claudio and Don Pedro. The scene begins with Leonato’s brother, Antonio (who seems created for the purpose of this scene) advising Leonato to stop bewailing Hero’s humiliation—“therein do men from children nothing differ” [5.1.33])—and instead to “make those that do offend you suffer too” (40). When Don Pedro and Claudio enter, Leonato makes clear his anger about what they did to Hero at her wedding, and the two young men deal condescendingly with their elders. Don Pedro makes that condescension about their age—“Nay, do not quarrel with us, good old man” (50) —a theme that Claudio echoes—“beshrew my hand / if it should give your age such cause of fear” (55-56). Their thinly concealed contempt for age breaks into clear view when Don Pedro, called a villain by Leonato, replies, “You say not right, old man” (73).

The old men respond to this contempt for age with the “B-word”—Claudio and Don Pedro are not men, but “boys”:

*Leonato:* If thou kill’st me, boy, thou shalt kill a man. (79)

*Antonio:* Come, sir boy, come follow me. (83)

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Boys, apes, braggarts, Jacks, milksops! (91)

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I know them, yea,  
and what they weigh, even to the utmost scruple,  
scambling, outfacing, fashion-monging boys,  
that lie and cog and flout, deprave and slander ... (92-95)

Then Benedick enters. He challenges Claudio, and, when Don Pedro and Claudio try to banter and tease in the usual way with their friend, Benedick picks up the “B-word” refrain when he says to Claudio: “Fare you well, boy; you know my mind” (181). In taking his leave of Don Pedro, he says:

You have among you killed  
 a sweet and innocent lady. For my Lord Lackbeard there, he and I  
 shall meet; and til then peace be with him. (186-189)

Benedick has reversed the terms of manliness. Literally, Benedick, who has just shaved for the love of Beatrice is a “lackbeard,” but in applying the word to Claudio, who has renounced his love of Hero, he hits not only at Claudio’s age but at his maturity. Being a man in *Much Ado about Nothing* means leaving the “boys” and attaching yourself to a woman.

What Benedick and the audience learn about love and marriage makes the ending of this play uncomfortable. Knowing what we know about Claudio, how can we be happy about his eventual marriage to Hero? How can we accept the apparent reconciliation of Benedick and Beatrice with this “fashion-monging boy”? Shakespeare may have answered that earlier in writing *The Taming of the Shrew*, where Petruchio and Kate, their private world assured, can deal with society without anger, by being a part of society but apart from it—“If she and I be pleas’d, what’s that to you?” (2.1.297). That may be one of the best rewards of marriage.

## PLOYS

### A. Explore Dogberry’s Malapropisms

**Scripts:** *MAAN* 3.3, 3.5, 4.2, 5.1

**Homework:** (optional) 10 “bonaprops”

**In class:** full class

In my comments on the play I have slighted the comic subplot, which features Dogberry, the “malappropriate” constable, who in fact saves the day and lets the play have a “happy ending.”

Shakespeare certainly means for the audience to laugh at Dogberry’s misuse of language, but he just as clearly puts the audience on Dogberry’s side, when, at the end of the play, we are all hoping that Leonato and the others in authority will have the sense to understand his malapropisms and listen to him. As Borachio says, what educated and powerful Messinans “could not discover, these shallow fools have brought to light” (5.1.224-226).

Dogberry’s use of language is the reverse of the establishment’s: while everyone else in the play says the things he or she doesn’t mean, Dogberry means the thing he doesn’t say. But Dogberry’s malaprops (1) manage to convey his intended meaning and (2) make literal sense in another way. In other words, Shakespeare has made Dogberry’s malaprops appropriate.<sup>30</sup> For example, during the examination of Conrade and Borachio, Dogberry says, “come, let them be opinioned” (4.2.66). An audience knows that what he means to say is “let them be pinioned,” but what makes the mistake funny is that forming an “opinion” of the defendant is precisely what interrogation should do.

Let your students go on an a “bonaprop” hunt by (1) searching for Dogberry’s misused words, (2) deciding what he meant to say, and (3) suggesting how the word he uses

<sup>30</sup> Sheridan’s Mrs. Malaprop in *The Rivals* (1775) is the character who gave her name to ludicrous misuses, but her mistakes are funny only for being wrong, not, like Dogberry’s, for also being right in some surprising way. You might use her malaprops to contrast to Dogberry’s.

is somehow apt. If you do this assignment in class, you can have them look for a single example; if you have them do it out of class, you may want them to compile a list of up to ten “aprops.” If you want to add some creativity to the assignment, challenge your students to make up an “aprop” of their own and put it in a sentence—for example, “I found the teacher’s assignment too muzzling.”

### B. Q&A with Margaret

<p><b>Prep:</b> ballots, cards (one marked with X)  <b>In class:</b> 30 minutes  <b>Players:</b> 3</p>
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Margaret is simply described as a “waiting gentlewoman attending on Hero,” but she is much more of a puzzle. Borachio uses his “friendship” with Margaret to persuade her to pose as Hero on

Hero’s balcony and to call Borachio “Claudio.” Margaret’s complicity causes Claudio to break his engagement to Hero by humiliating her at the wedding. Yet at the end of the play, Leonato dismisses her part in this nasty trick with, “Margaret was in some fault for this, / although against her will, as it appears...” (5.4.4-5). I want to know more about Margaret and so will your students.

Have three volunteer students in front of the class to answer questions as Margaret posed to them by their classmates. The idea is for each of your Margarets to try to persuade the class that she or he is the “real” Margaret. Have your class asks such questions as

- What is your relationship with Hero?
- What is your relationship with Borachio?
- Did you know that Claudio was watching?
- What kind of pressure were you under?
- Did you like Hero? Beatrice? Benedick,? Borachio?
- When you heard what happened, why didn’t you try to clear Hero?

After your three Margarets have dealt with these and other questions—your class will have some, too—ask the class to vote with secret ballots for the “real” Margaret. Count the ballots yourself, mark one of three cards with an X, and hand a card to each of your volunteers (make certain that the “real” Margaret has the card with the X). Then you can use the line from the old quiz show: “Will the ‘real’ Margaret please stand up?” Finally, open class for discussion with “why did you vote for your particular Margaret?”

## SCENES FOR ALTERNATIVE READINGS

**A. Dressing for the Wedding.** Act Three, scene four, 6 (“Troth, I think”) to 87 (“a false gallop”). Three speaking parts.

This scene is one of Shakespeare’s impressionist paintings, where he uses a few strokes of dialogue to make us feel we know these characters. Because this scene is short and has three parts, it lends itself easily to three versions differentiated by the objectives each actor chooses..

*The first version:* Hero's objective is simply to get dressed; she's worried about the time; and she's vaguely annoyed with the other two women for not helping her get ready. Margaret's objective is to tease the two sentimental women who believe in love; she doesn't believe in love and wants them to know it. Beatrice's objective is to find some sympathy for her new state of lovesickness.

*The second version:* Hero's objective is to get some information about men and sex from the worldly Margaret; she wants to be one of the girls; she wants to know how to be sassy like her two friends. Margaret's objective in this version is to make it up to the other two—and especially Hero—for the prank she played last night; she wants to make sure they still like her. Beatrice's objective is to pretend that she hasn't been crying all night over Benedick; she's trying to act as normal as possible.

*The third version:* Hero's objective is to show she's grown up enough to be married; she's trying now to make it clearer that she's the lady and Margaret is her maid. Margaret's objective is to get Hero and then Beatrice to know themselves better, to help them “get in touch with their feelings.” Beatrice's objective in this version is simply to help her cousin get ready. She just wants to pay attention to Hero without losing her temper with Margaret.

*In the fourth version “mix and match”:* have your students choose from the three versions the acting objective they like best for each of the characters. Have the actors do it one last time, and discuss what you learned about the scene and the play from that *fourth version*.

**B. The “Kill Claudio” Scene.** Act Four, scene one, 254 (“Lady Beatrice, have you”) to 333 (end of the scene). Two speaking parts.

I believe that the “Kill Claudio” scene between Benedick and Beatrice is theatre’s most meaningful love scene. By the end of this scene the two lovers, confronted with a world of trouble, understand that saying “I love you” is a responsibility. The depth of the play depends on the choices the actors make in this one scene.

What makes the interpretation of this business so crucial is the question of the relationship between Beatrice’s claim that she loves Benedick and her request that he kill Claudio. Some productions play “Kill Claudio” for laughs (fair enough in a comedy) by making it seem that all Beatrice’s talk of love is just a matter of setting a trap for Benedick; “Kill Claudio” is the trap springing shut. Other productions try to separate one issue from the other with a Beatrice who is just confused: on the one hand she loves Benedick; on the other she wants someone—anyone—to kill Claudio.

*The first version:* Benedick is macho stupid and says his opening line in actual surprise—“Lady Beatrice, have you wept all this while?” He is embarrassed at being in love, and his tone is generally boastful. Beatrice is playing on his male vanity and is goading him with lines such as “it’s a man’s office, but not yours.” She pounces with her “kill Claudio” line, and when Benedick resists, she plays unashamedly on his male ego by questioning his courage. Benedick accepts the “engagement” to prove he is tough.

*The second version:* Benedick is horrified by what he saw Claudio do, and his question “have you wept all this while?” indicates his concern for both Beatrice and Hero. His next few lines are attempts at showing, rather than saying, how he feels about Beatrice. Beatrice in this version is also in love, and her reticence in admitting it—“but believe me not; and yet I lie not”—is her fear of betrayal if the man she loves will not avenge her cousin. Her intention in this version is to shield Benedick from the responsibility of being loved by her. She is earnest when she says, “I protest I love thee.” Her “kill Claudio” is not a trap springing shut; it is her statement of her love requires. Benedick’s initial refusal of her request “kills” Beatrice because he is the man in the world she wants most to understand Claudio’s perfidy. And, above all, Benedick’s question, “think you in your soul the Count Claudio hath wronged Hero?” is the result of his decision that loving Beatrice means thinking with her soul.

For me, the second reading explains the play, but you will probably find that your students prefer reading number one because of the comedy. Your job is not to sell them number two—as I have tried to sell you—but to raise questions about the effect of each version on the rest of the play.

### ON SCREEN

-  ★★ The **1973** made-for-TV production of *Much Ado about Nothing*, directed by A. J. Antoon, sets the play in the United States after the Spanish-American war. Don Pedro, Claudio, and Benedick (played engagingly by Sam Waterston) are Rough Riders returned to a Belle Epoch world, and Dogberry and company are Keystone Kops. Antoon should get some credit for realizing that the small screen with a headshot of an actor speaking the lines can be hospitable to Shakespeare. That said, the production is a bit stagey and earnest—better TV than most of the BBC series, but finally somewhat somber.
-  ★★ Stuart Burge directed the **1984** BBC production of *Much Ado about Nothing*, an above average entry in that series. Robert Lindsay and Cheri Lunghi do well enough in the lead parts; and the production tells the story in a straightforward way and provides some worthwhile clips for contrast with the Branagh version.
-  ★★★1/2 Kenneth Branagh's **1993** film version of *Much Ado about Nothing* is a good film and a big-hearted embrace of the fun of Shakespeare. The brilliant first six minutes break down all the barriers of “ShakesFear” by suggesting that what is coming is going to be some combination of a Renoir picnic and *The Magnificent Seven*, and the rest of the film delivers—mostly on the picnic—with a superb performance by Kenneth Branagh as Benedick and an even better one by Emma Thompson (then his wife) as Beatrice. My main objection to the film is that Branagh, despite his frequent assertion that Shakespeare is accessible, mistrusts the linguistic comedy of the Dogberry scenes and has Michael Keaton default to his *Beetlejuice*

persona. The result is that none of that linguistic comedy comes through.<sup>31</sup> That said, a student who watches this film straight through is more likely than not to believe that Shakespeare is good stuff.



✪✪ Josh Whedon's 2012 black and white film of *Much Ado about Nothing* is a fascinating and worthwhile failure to marry a modern LA sensibility to Shakespeare's Elizabethan comedy of manners. The first job of such arrangement is to get past the ideas of chastity that dominate the play, and Whedon (of Avenger fame) does that first job first when he shows us Benedick (Alexis Denisof) and Beatrice (Amy Acker) getting out of bed the morning after a one-night stand. From then on the movie swerves from hits, when Shakespeare's words seem to fit the setting and the thoughts of the actors, to misses, when they do not. Finally, the production seems finally such a good idea for a house party for Whedon and his friends, that you wish it had lasted long enough for them to have made it into a good movie as well.

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<sup>31</sup> Branagh also fell into the trap of staging the encounter of Margaret (as Hero) and Borachio on the balcony, and as a result English teachers will ask me why an ASC production of the play "left out" that crucial scene. Shakespeare is the one who "left it out." Staging undercuts the point of the idea that loving people means having faith in them. Claudio shouldn't be swayed by such ocular evidence, and we shouldn't be bothered to watch it. .