

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING (1598-1600)

William Shakespeare

OVERVIEW

As often, Shakespeare reaches back to the Greeks, to knit his plot: The plot of Don John-Claudio-Hero with the lady's maid caught with her lover, goes back to Greece of the fourth century B.C.E. Ariosto and Spenser both have their investments in the overall tale Shakespeare tells. Any one familiar with the plays and mimes of Menander, or for that matter with Plautus, will feel the basic thrust that was needed to hold an audience in the old days.

CHARACTERS

Benedick, a young lord of Padua, who is hardly more than a Beatrice turned inside out, is a soldier (now ex), a wit—working overtime, and in the end, for all his doubts about marriage, enthusiastic candidate for his marriage to Beatrice. His scorn for women only slowly converts into admiration, as he discovers his passionate objection to the mistreatment of Hero.

Beatrice, niece to Leonato, governor of Messina, is a sharp tongued, wit-filled female version of Benedick, never as happy as when engaged in verbal swordplay with this other she who never fails in repartee. "I had rather hear a man bark at a crow, than a man swear he loves me." Why are we not surprised that in the end Beatrice and Benedick end up married?

Claudio, a young lord of Florence, who has been Benedick's companion in battle, and who comes back to civilized society to find he too is ready for the love game. His attentions fall on Hero, the daughter of Leonato, Governor of Messina. They seem made for each other until a cruel scam, played on Claudio by Don John, brother of Fortunato, deceives Claudio into believing that Hero has been untrue to him.,

STORY

A war has ended, soldiers are returning. The soldiers, in the case of this play, are officer/aristocrats—elite of the society, a point which establishes their extreme assumption of each other's values. (Only the constable, Dogberry, and his assistant, Verges are 'of the people,' and like Shakespeare's 'commoners' both are exaggerated, like the cops in the classic American sitcom, *Sanford and Son*.) A fine wit of a lady, Beatrice, seems to be awaiting the return of Benedick, a witty dude from the upper crust of Padua, and a good part of the play goes into dealing with skirmishes between these two glowing talkers. But not all the play, for the heart of the action is to get these wits married and to marry Hero and Claudio off to one another. One can just imagine the intricacies that Shakespeare is going to set up, as obstacles to this conclusion, and prefaces to ultimate celebration.

Complexities. Yes, one can imagine complexities, and yet this play, which is 'realistic'—contrast, say, to *Twelfth Night* or *The Tempest*—lays its plot development pretty clearly on the line. Getting Beatrice and Benedict together looks like a tough shooting match; these two have so much fun not getting together. In fact, though, what it requires is just what it gets, a staged set up in which both Benedick and Beatrice overhear innuendos to the effect that the other is madly in love with them. (This psychological trick is ancient and works: we cannot resist overhearing that someone is fond of us, especially if the disclosure contradicts our expectations. We are suckers for the surprise.)

Much ado. *Much ado*, therefore, puts one marriage in its pocket, but nearly stumbles over the effort to make the second marriage, that of Claudio and Hero, meaningfully difficult enough to be a clear win for love. Hero is marriage-ready from the start, as the troops return from war, and Claudio is an acceptable, though routine upper class dude, in his view of sex and marriage. (Suspensions about the fidelity of his

fiancée are enough to turn him off her, nay make him humiliate her at the altar.) When the outrageously bad actor of the play, Don John, bastard brother of Don Pedro, engineers a plot, to let Claudio know by hearsay that his fiancée is cheating on him, Claudio has no equipment for analyzing the implications, but falls directly into shock and fury, then punishment, mode. He waits until the altar to declare his fiancée a strumpet, an allegation enough to send Don Pedro, Hero's father, into a coma of rage, and to a point where he himself, at the officiating Friar's suggestion, decides to declare his daughter dead—an allegation which promises to flush miscreants out of the bushes. That in the end Don John's evil plot, and the worms that furthered it, are exposed and excoriated, is effected just in time, for Don Pedro, Claudio, Hero, Beatrice and Benedick to celebrate a double marriage, their own, with all the due hilarity suppressed by contretemps broad enough to fill the play.

THEMES

Noting According to phonetics, *nothing*, in 'Much ado about Nothing,' was pronounced like *noting*, in contemporary English. In fact from the start of the play Beatrice and Benedick are forever *noting* he world around them—he wears his faith but as the fashion of his hat; it ever changes with the next block,' says Beatrice (I, 220), while Benedick soon treats us to 'in faith, hath not the world one man but he will wear his cap with suspicion? (I, 199). What are these emblematic witticisms, which stipple the entire play, except notes on the world, passing angles of vision onto the brief scene we become for an hour—Shakespeare might have said. The whole play is involved with observations on the world, salty instagams of time, carved in language.

Language From the start, the natural tone of Leonato's 'I find here that Don Pedro hath bestowed much honor on a young Florentine named Claudio,' to the concluding notes of Benedick, 'Think not on him til tomorrow. I'll devise thee brave punishments for him. Strike up pipers!' language rolls from its speakers like the meaning in the waves of the ocean, fluid, colloquial, and intact. Even Beatrice and Benedick, arch wits in language, miss no cue in their innuendo and artifice. They make wit seem as natural as Alexander Pope made it seem: 'art is but nature to advantage dressed, what oft was said but ne'er so well expressed.'

Harmony One of the fine harvest of television sitcoms to hit America in the late twenties was Seinfeld. Jerry Seinfeld, 'main character' and also very much Jerry Seinfeld as one might see him at a bookstore in Manhattan, killing a latte, was asked, on the show, what the show was about, and replied that it was about nothing. He was right. Nothing happened. He and Elaine and George sat in a coffee shop and talked about nothing. Shakespeare was a master of hearing the harmonies latent in the 'nothing man' answer to the question of what this or that is about. Nothing was not only—for Seinfeld and Shakespeare—the name of the game, but it was also the tonal oneness of great work, of which no part can be other or elsewhere than where it is.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Benedick

Character Benedick is an aristocratic military man, like Vronsky in *Anna Karenina*, who fights for his Governor or City State. In the present play he has just returned from the wars—Beatrice has just inquired after him—and without boasting feels himself a bit of a conquering hero. He is anxious to be home and enjoy the good life, as he rejoins his prewar comrades and girl friends, without, however getting within a mile of marriage, the very thought of which he abhors. He is the last character of whom we would have expected the rapid marriage conversion that strikes him at the end of the play.

Parallels Vronsky, in *Anna Karenina*, shares with Benedick the pizzazz of the handsome military man, a bit shallow on the inside but full of chest and medals.—though rarely as witty as Benedick himself, who bristles with repartee (the classical image of the *miles gloriosus*, whom we meet in Menander and Plautus and Terence, and who is beautifully replicated in the satirical television comedy, *Gomer Pyle*, in which Gomer's pasteboard and rule-book captain is forever being pulled down by Gomer's rural 'aw gee' gaucheries.

Illustrative moments

Hair splitting. 'I noted her not, but I looked on her,' replies Benedick, to Claudio's question whether his friend had seen Beatrice. In other words, I did not 'pay attention to her,' she was not worth the attention. What is it that Benedick is doing, in this turn of *distinguos*? Is it that he is keeping his mind apart, holding off the commitment of himself in language?

Dubious. 'Hath not the world one man, but he will wear his cap with suspicion?' Benedick explains to Claudio the dangers of trusting, especially of women. This old saw, which is part of the very constitution of Benedick, makes him part of the persona of his time, one dubious about faith, medicine, and exaggerated hopes.

Trusting. 'Knavery cannot, sure, hide himself in such reverence.' Benedick's sober, and down to earth aside (as he trusts in Don Pedro's account that Beatrice is smitten with Benedick.) Benedick, for all his wit and doubt, is a realistic man of this world, like Montaigne.

Mirthful. Surrendering to the marriage which he has so long professed to despise, Benedick wraps thing up, at the end, with a gay (classical sense) and doleful tribute to the topic of cuckoldry, which has hitherto spiced his remarks on the married condition. 'There is no staff more reverend than one tipped with horn.'

Beatrice

Character Beatrice is the niece of Leonato, the Governor of Messina, a young woman born to aristocracy, and no friend of clods or, it seems, military men; although we do notice, from her initial conversation with her uncle, her curiosity about one Benedick, and whether he has returned from battle. Having reacquainted herself with her fellow aristocrat, she finds herself increasingly fascinated by his ability to meet her often contemptuous mockery with slicing repartee of his own. Fascinated, but distant, she lets herself get drawn toward Benedick until flattering words, overheard, induce both Beatrice and Benedick to realize they are in love with one another. They marry!

Parallels There are many sassy shrews in Shakespeare—and in world arts. (Beatrice might be one, but maybe not.) Might one not start with Antigone, skip to the shrew-taming of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, then to the world wide setting of shrew-taming, in which shrew-taming frequently plays the role of 'making the bitch comply,' adopting, in certain fourteenth century Hungarian folktales, themes involves the explicit sexual debasement of the new bride.

Illustrative moments

Misandric. Who else but Beatrice would ask 'Would it not grieve a woman to be overmastered by a piece of valiant dust?' The atmosphere of returning warriors, with their hoopla of medals, their in talk, and their general depreciation of women, is pure trash to this woman.

Harsh. Even after having declared her love for Benedick, Beatrice rejects sweet speech from him: 'Foul words is but foul wind, and foul wind is but foul breath, and foul breath is noisome.' She wants revenge for Hero, and she wants it now.

Self-aware. 'I was born to speak all mirth and no matter,' to Don Pedro, as he attempts to woo her. Beatrice knows herself, even as she speaks with seeming recklessness to those she is involved with.

Susceptible. In the end, having been converted to the idea that Benedick loves her, Beatrice believes for the first time that she could be lovable. She too can become a victim of self-love.

Discussion questions

Is Shakespeare writing this play as a brief for marriage? Or is he only testing out a couple of labyrinthine ways in which harmony can be achieved under adverse circumstances—and thus, perhaps, become a more widespread commodity in our communities. Or is Shakespeare truly a nihilist, in this play, displaying the velleities of human intersections—loves, scorns, marriages—without pressing the stamp of meaningfulness at any particular point.

Do you see any symbolic meaning in the decision of Leonato to bury his seemingly disgraced daughter? Is she in some sense resurrected by the discovery of the scam by which she had been accused? Is Shakespeare playing with religious symbolism?

What about the philosophical implications of this play? Does it highlight the meaninglessness of human life? Or the accidentality by which people are brought together by strange destinies, then welded together so that they seem always to have been together?