



Much Ado About Nothing

William Shakespeare
(1598)

PLOT

First Act. Don Pedro, Prince of Aragon, visits Leonato, Governor of Messina, together with Benedick and Claudio, two young noblemen who have been serving with him in the wars. Between Benedick and Beatrice, Leonato's niece, there have been merry hostilities in the past and during this meeting they renew their antagonism. Meanwhile, Claudio is attracted once again by Leonato's daughter, Hero. Don Pedro offers to woo the lady on Claudio's behalf.

Second Act. Leonato arranges a masquerade in honour of his visitors. At the party Hero is promised to Claudio by her father. Benedick and Beatrice's friends, thinking they are well matched, decide to arise their mutual affections. Benedick is made to overhear that Beatrice loves him.

Third Act. Beatrice is told that Benedick is in love with her and they begin to feel tenderness towards each other. Don John, an evil-minded natural brother of the prince, matures a plan against Hero and Claudio. He brings Don Pedro and Claudio under Hero's window on the night before her wedding, and makes them believe she is having a meeting with a secret lover. The artifice is performed by Borachio, a follower of Don John, and a waiting maid. The deception will be discovered later when some watchmen overhear Borachio telling of the adventure.

Fourth Act. Claudio believes Hero faithless and repudiates her during the wedding ceremony. She faints and, on the advice of a friar, it is given out that she is dead. Beatrice cannot believe her cousin guilty and demands of Benedick to show his devotion by killing his friend Claudio.

Fifth Act. Leonato wants to fight Claudio to avenge his daughter's honour but Benedick challenges Claudio. The testimony of the watchmen finally reveals Don John's plot and Hero's innocence. Leonato forgives Claudio on condition that he marries a niece who is said to be very much like Hero, but whose face he is not allowed to see until the ceremony has been performed. Claudio consents to this. The lady proves to be Hero herself. Also Beatrice and Benedick end their arguments with a kiss.

SETTING

The story is set in the 16th century in **Messina**, Sicily, on and around Governor Leonato's estate. Messina was a busy port city, but it was also agricultural, due to its mild climate. So the men returning from battle with Don Pedro would see it as the ideal place to rest from the battlefield. Messina represents an idyllic setting, away from the war. While most of the play takes place around **Leonato's house**, his garden becomes an important place of action as well. It is there that Benedick and Beatrice overhear the conversations about each other's 'love'. Shakespeare creates the ideal setting for matchmaking and merriment. The soldiers are in a loving mood now that their minds have turned from war, and the people living in Leonato's house are excited about the soldiers' visit. The mood, like the atmosphere, is generally joyous.

CHARACTERS

The characters range from the purely **conventional** to the purely **human**. All of them seem to be impelled by a vigorous spirit of action and adventure. **Don John** is essentially **flat**, a **villain** who does evil for the sake of evil. He is inspired by his sense of social exclusion to destroy natural love and normal sociability. **Claudio** is a young, brave nobleman with an attractive presence and very little judgement or experience. He represents the **romantic lover** who surrenders to the conventions of courtship and speaks in a polished, formal way. **Beatrice** and **Benedick** are indeed the **outstanding figures** of the play. Beatrice is unsentimental, clever and witty. She is also attractive, but never uses her beauty when she deals with men. She dreads marriages of convenience, she does not want to catch a man but to test his intelligence by setting her wits against his. She speaks to men on terms of equality and is often unconscious of the wounds she inflicts. This light-hearted merriment and apparent indifference to suitors is to be found later in the heroines of the Restoration comedy, like Congreve's *Millamant* (→ 3.9, T34). Also Benedick is satiric of conventional behaviour. Like Beatrice, he is proud; he boasts of the way women fall in love with him, but he declares to others that he will die a bachelor. However, love tames him, because when he courts Beatrice, he does it with grace.

THEMES

The central part of the action turns on **two main plots**: the Hero-Claudio plot, which is a conventional story belonging to the tragi-comedy type, and the Beatrice-Benedick plot, belonging to the comedy of wit. In this way we are offered different views of the same reality, views that we might call respectively **romantic** and **realistic**, in whose clash and interrelation lies a great part of the substance of the play. Shakespeare explores the nature and the limitations of love, as well as of the accepted code of honour, in a brilliant and dynamic society. In the foreground there are the young, real creatures of mutability with their intense life, their games and jokes, easy enthusiasms and excesses.

STYLE

Beatrice and Benedick stand at a distance from their own words; **language is a sort of mask** behind which they protect their inner feelings and privacy. They talk a witty, articulate prose, whereas the Hero-Claudio plot is mainly written in verse.

Clothes images dominate the play and the most frequent figure of speech is antithesis. Clothes symbolise the difference between appearance and reality, and hypocrisy. There is also a setting of **active outdoor work and sport** characterised by the lively images of dancing, music, song, riding, galloping, hunting, which contribute to the **sparkling, unsentimental atmosphere** of the play.



Key idea

Eavesdropping

The over-all theme of the play is 'the power of report, of the thing overheard, to alter human destiny'. Eavesdropping and misinterpretation, disguise and deceit, sometimes for evil purpose but generally in fun and with a comic end, make up the dramatic pattern of the play.



CURIOSITIES

Much Ado About Nothing was first performed in 1598 and probably printed two years later.

A story by the Italian author Bandello is the source of the plot, read by Shakespeare in the French version by Belleforest in his *Histoires Tragiques*.

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

1 READ the text and answer these questions about the plot.

- 1 Who visits Leonato, Governor of Messina?
- 2 What does Leonato organise to welcome them?
- 3 Whose marriage is arranged on that occasion?
- 4 What relationship is there between Beatrice and Benedick?
- 5 Who is Don John?
- 6 How does he plot against Hero and Claudio?
- 7 What does Claudio do as a reaction?
- 8 What does Beatrice demand of Benedick?
- 9 What condition is required by Leonato to grant his forgiveness to Claudio?
- 10 How does the play end?

2 EXPLAIN in your own words

- 1 why Shakespeare chose Messina as the setting of the play;
- 2 the importance of the garden;
- 3 what kind of character is Don John;
- 4 who Claudio represents;
- 5 what Beatrice is like;
- 6 what Benedick shares with Beatrice;
- 7 the function of the two main plots;
- 8 the kind of society represented by Shakespeare;
- 9 the language and cluster of imagery employed;
- 10 what makes up the dramatic pattern of the play.



A merry war

A masked dance is given by Leonato, the Governor of Messina, in honour of his visitors. The party shows how domestic civility, aggressive wit tempered with good manners, and romantic attachments between the sexes jostle together in a merry and brilliant community. The passage below also provides an interesting insight into the two outstanding characters of the play, Beatrice and Benedick.

William Shakespeare
Much Ado About Nothing
(1598)

Act II, Scene I

- LEONATO Was not Count John here at supper?
ANTONIO I saw him not.
BEATRICE How tartly that gentleman looks¹! I never can see him but I am heart-burn'd an hour after.
5 HERO He is of a very melancholy disposition.
BEATRICE He were an excellent man that were made just in the midway between him and Benedick: the one is too like an image and says nothing, and the other too like my lady's eldest son², evermore **tattling**.
LEONATO Then half Signor Benedick's tongue in Count John's mouth, and half Count
10 John's melancholy in Signor Benedick's face –
BEATRICE With a good leg and a good foot, uncle, and money enough in his purse, such a man would win any woman in the world, if 'a could get her good-will.
LEONATO By my troth³, niece, thou wilt never get thee a husband, if thou be so shrewd⁴ of thy tongue.
15 ANTONIO In faith, she's too curst⁵.
BEATRICE Too curst is more than curst: I shall **lessen** God's sending⁶ that way; for it is said, 'God sends a curst cow short horns'⁷, but to a cow too curst he sends none.
LEONATO So, by being too curst, God will send you no horns.
BEATRICE Just, if he send me no husband; for the which blessing I am at him upon
20 my knees every morning and evening. Lord, I could not **endure** a husband with a beard on his face! I had rather lie in the woollen⁸.
LEONATO You may light⁹ on a husband that hath no beard.
BEATRICE What should I do with him? Dress him in my **apparel** and make him my waiting-gentlewoman¹⁰? He that hath a beard is more than a youth, and he that
25 hath no beard is less than a man: and he that is more than a youth is not for me, and he that is less than a man, I am not for him: therefore, I will even take sixpence in earnest of the bear-ward, and lead his apes into hell¹¹.
LEONATO Well, then, go you into hell?
BEATRICE No, but¹² to the gate; and there will the devil meet me, like an old cuckold¹³,
30 with horns on his head, and say 'Get you to heaven, Beatrice, get you to heaven; here's no place for you maids'. So deliver I up my apes, and away to Saint Peter for the heavens; he shows me where the **bachelors** sit, and there live we as merry as the day is long.
ANTONIO [to HERO] Well, niece, I trust you will be ruled by your father.
35 BEATRICE Yes, faith; it is my cousin's duty to make curtsy¹⁴ and say 'Father, as it please you'. But yet for all that, cousin, let him be a handsome fellow, or else make another curtsy and say 'Father, as it please me'.
LEONATO Well, niece, I hope to see you one day **fitted** with a husband.
BEATRICE Not till God make men of some other metal than earth. Would it not
40 grieve¹⁵ a woman to be overmastered¹⁶ with a pierce of valiant dust¹⁷? To make an account of her life to a clod of wayward marl¹⁸? No, uncle, I'll none: Adam's sons are my brethren¹⁹, and, truly, I hold it a sin to match in my kindred²⁰.
LEONATO Daughter, remember what I told you. If the Prince do solicit you in that kind, you know your answer.
45 BEATRICE The fault will be in the music, cousin, if you be not **wooed** in good time. If the Prince be too important, tell him there is measure in every thing and so dance

- 1 How tartly ... looks. Che aspetto acido.
- 2 too like my ... son. Troppo simile a un damerino.
- 3 By my troth. Parola d'onore.
- 4 shrewd. Pungente.
- 5 curst. Scorbutica.
- 6 sending. Doni.
- 7 horns. Corna.
- 8 I had ... woollen. Preferisco dormire senza lenzuola.
- 9 You may light. Potreste imbattervi.
- 10 waiting-gentlewoman. Cameriera.
- 11 therefore ... hell. Il discorso arguto di Beatrice si basa su un proverbio inglese secondo il quale una donna che muore zitella è condannata a portare delle scimmie all'inferno e custodirvele.
- 12 but. Solamente.
- 13 cuckold. Cornuto.
- 14 curtsy. Inchino.
- 15 Would it not grieve. Non sarebbe doloroso per.
- 16 overmastered. Comandata.
- 17 a pierce of valiant dust. Un pugno di valorosa polvere.
- 18 a clod of wayward marl. Una zolla di capricciosa creta.
- 19 brethren. Fratelli.
- 20 to match in my kindred. Sposare un parente.



out the answer. For hear me, Hero: wooing, wedding, and repenting, is as a Scotch jig²¹, a measure, and a cinquepace²²; the first suit²³ is hot and hasty, like a Scotch jig, and full as fantastical; the wedding, mannerly-modest, as a measure, full of state and ancients²⁴; and then comes repentance and, with his bad legs, falls into the cinquepace faster and faster, till he sink into his grave. [...]

Will you not tell me who told you so?

BENEDICK No, you shall pardon me.

BEATRICE Nor will you not tell me who you are?

BENEDICK Not now.

BEATRICE That I was disdainful²⁵, and that I had my good wit out of the 'Hundred Merry Tales²⁶ – well, this was Signor Benedick that said so.

BENEDICK What's he?

BEATRICE I am sure you know him well enough.

BENEDICK Not I, believe me.

BEATRICE Did he never make you laugh?

BENEDICK I pray you, what is he?

BEATRICE Why, he is the Prince's jester²⁷, a very dull fool; only his gift is in devising impossible slanders²⁸. None but libertines delight in him, and the commendation is not in his wit, but in his villany; for he both pleases men and angers them, and then they laugh at him and beat him. I am sure he is in the fleet; I would he had boarded me²⁹.

BENEDICK When I know the gentleman, I'll tell him what you say.

BEATRICE Do, do; he'll but break a comparison or two on me, which, peradventure not marked or not laughed at³⁰, strikes him into melancholy, and then there's a partridge wing saved³¹, for the fool will eat no supper that night.

[*Music for the dance.*]

We must follow the leaders.

BENEDICK In every good thing.

BEATRICE Nay, if they lead to any ill, I will leave them at the next turning³². [...]

DON PEDRO The Lady Beatrice hath a quarrel to you³³; the gentleman that danced with her told her she is much wronged by you.

BENEDICK O, she misused me past the endurance of a block³⁴! An oak³⁵ but with one green leaf on it would have answered her; my very visor³⁶ began to assume life and scold with her³⁷. She told me, not thinking I had been myself, that I was the Prince's jester, that I was duller than a great thaw³⁸; huddling jest upon jest³⁹ with such impossible conveyance⁴⁰ upon me that I stood like a man at a mark⁴¹, with a whole army shooting at me. She speaks poniards⁴², and every word stabs. If her breath were as terrible as her terminations⁴³, there were no living near her, she would infect to the north star. I would not marry her, though she were endowed⁴⁴ with all that Adam bad left him before he transgressed. She would have made Hercules have turned spit⁴⁵, yea, and have cleft his club⁴⁶ to make the fire too. Come, talk not of her; you shall find her the infernal Ate in good apparel⁴⁷. I would to God some scholar would conjure her⁴⁸; for certainly, while she is here, a man may live as quiet in hell as in a sanctuary, and people sin upon purpose⁴⁹, because they would go thither⁵⁰; so, indeed, all disquiet, horror and perturbation follows her.

21 Scotch jig. Giga scozzese, la danza attesa dal pubblico dei teatri londinesi come conclusione di ogni spettacolo.

22 a measure, and a cinquepace. Un passo lento e un cinque passi.

23 suit. Corteggiamento.

24 state and ancients. Pompa e antichità.

25 disdainful. Sprezzante.

26 I had ... Tales. Ho preso tutto il mio spirito dal centonovelle.

27 jester. Buffone.

28 only his gift ... slanders. È solo bravo a inventare incredibili calunnie.

29 I would ... me. Come vorrei che mi avesse abbordata.

30 peradventure ... at. Nel caso in cui nessuno gli dia retta o rida.

31 a partridge wing saved. Un'ala di pernice risparmiata.

32 turning. Giro, svolta.

33 hath a quarrel to you. Ce l'ha con te.

34 past ... block. Più di quanto un palo possa sopportare.

35 oak. Quercia.

36 visor. Maschera.

37 scold with her. Sgridarla.

38 thaw. Disgelo.

39 huddling ... jest. Ammucchiando burla su burla.

40 conveyance. Foga.

41 mark. Bersaglio.

42 poniards. Pugnali.

43 terminations. Frasi finite.

44 though ... endowed. Nemmeno se possedesse.

45 She ... spit. Avrebbe ridotto Ercole a girare lo spiedo.

46 cleft his club. Spaccato il suo bastone.

47 the infernal Ate in good apparel. La Zizzania infernale vestita da signora. Ate è la personificazione femminile dell'errore e della passione che acceca. Ingannò anche Zeus, che si vendicò cacciandola dall'Olimpo e facendola precipitare tra gli uomini.

48 some ... her. Che qualche mago la facesse sparire per magia.

49 upon purpose. Di proposito.

50 thither. Là.

**LITERARY COMPETENCE****> VOCABULARY****1 READ the text and match the highlighted words with their meaning.**

- | | | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|----|--------------------|
| 1 | unmarried men | 6 | gossiping |
| 2 | stand, bear | 7 | wounds |
| 3 | sought with a view of marriage | 8 | clothes |
| 4 | regret for a wrong action | 9 | settled down |
| 5 | lack of calm or peace | 10 | reduce |

> COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT**2 READ the text again and do the following activities.**

1 Read lines 1-51 and say whether the following statements are true or false. Correct the false ones.

- | | | |
|---|---|------------|
| 1 | Beatrice finds Count John attractive. | T F |
| 2 | Beatrice thinks the ideal man should be quite reserved, handsome and rich. | T F |
| 3 | Leonato advises Beatrice to be less shy. | T F |
| 4 | Beatrice looks forward to finding a husband. | T F |
| 5 | Beatrice recommends that her cousin should accept the suitor proposed by her father only if she likes him. | T F |
| 6 | Beatrice thinks that courtship and marriage are like a dance. | T F |

2 Read lines 52-74 and say

- 1 whether the two characters are aware of each other's identity;
- 2 what rumours Beatrice has just reported to Benedick about her;
- 3 what Beatrice's opinion of Benedick is;
- 4 what Benedick promises to do;
- 5 what Benedick's reaction will be, according to Beatrice.

3 Read the rest of the text and do the following activities.

- 1 What does Don Pedro report to Benedick?
- 2 Benedick explains that Beatrice
- 3 He admits that he felt like
- 4 He swears that he would not even if she
- 5 What is the world like for Benedick when Beatrice is present?

> COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT**3 FOCUS on Beatrice.**

1 Write down what the following characters think about her.

- | | | | | | |
|---|----------------|---|----------------|---|-----------------|
| 1 | Leonato: | 2 | Antonio: | 3 | Benedick: |
|---|----------------|---|----------------|---|-----------------|

2 How does Beatrice contrast with Hero?

3 Are her ideas conventional?

4 CIRCLE the expressions referring to Benedick.

1 What is his reaction to Beatrice's words? Tick as appropriate.

- ☐ He feels wounded but controls himself.
- ☐ He does not care.
- ☐ He answers back to assert his superiority.

2 What does he have in common with Beatrice?

**5 DISCUSS** with the rest of the class.

- 1 Beatrice's and Benedick's wit is
 - A a natural mode of expression.
 - B a special manner adopted unconsciously.
 - C a protective mask to cover their true feelings.
- 2 What is their aim in this battle of wit?
 - A To convey information.
 - B To impress or neutralise the person they are speaking to.
 - C To express their feelings more directly.

6 SUM up the information you have gathered about the two characters by ticking the adjectives in the table below.

	Beatrice	Benedick
Sincere		
Romantic		
Unsentimental		
Witty		
Proud		
Outspoken		
Shy		
Submissive		
Self-sufficient		
Dull		
Conventional		

7 READ again the dialogues of this scene, which are full of vivid images. Analyse some examples.

- 1 Focus on lines 39-42 and explain how Beatrice refers to men.
- 2 What does she compare the marriage ceremony to later in the text?
- 3 What semantic area does she draw upon in lines 63-65?

8 UNDERLINE some examples of personification in Benedick's last speech and discuss their effect.**9 FIND** evidence of the fact that the action of the play takes the form of a series of misunderstandings, usually springing from an overhearing of one kind or another.**10 LOOK** up the meaning of the term 'Ado' in your dictionary and write it down. How does this word apply to the scene you have just read?**> COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS WITH THE LITERARY CONTEXT OF THE AGE****11 COMPARE** *Much Ado About Nothing* with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Find similarities and differences.

	<i>Much Ado About Nothing</i>	<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>
Setting			
The lovers			
The masque			
The theme of love			

12 COMPARE Beatrice with Congreve's Millamant (→ T34).