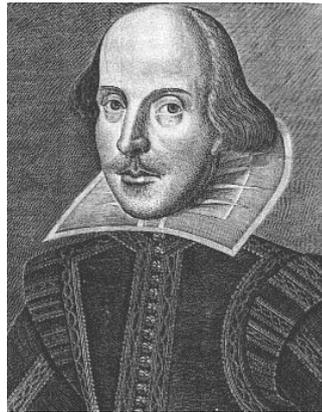


# Much Ado About Nothing

by Roland J. Martin



English Association Shakespeare Bookmarks

No. 3

## Much Ado About Nothing

by

Roland J Martin

Benedick: Come, bid me do anything for thee.

Beatrice: Kill Claudio.

Act IV Scene i

Dogberry: Is our whole dissembly appeared?

Act IV Scene ii

The success of *Much Ado About Nothing* is in part, generic. As a tragic-comedy, Shakespeare can bring his audience the best of both theatrical worlds and in this play, he certainly does so. These quotations demonstrate succinctly the conflict in *Much Ado* between potential disaster and side-splitting humour and also show us the dramatic tradition from which Shakespeare constructs the plot. In *Romeo and Juliet* (1596), we experience the intensity of passion felt by Romeo when he feels duty — bound to avenge Mercutio's death in spite of his newly earned kinship to Tybalt:

This gentleman, the Prince's near ally,  
My very friend, hath got this mortal hurt  
In my behalf; my reputation stained  
With Tybalt's slander. Tybalt that an hour  
Hath been my cousin. O sweet Juliet,  
Thy beauty hath made me effeminate,  
And in my temper softened valour's steel.

In *Much Ado*, a similar dilemma is faced by Benedick though here, the allegiance is not to a beloved friend but to a beloved would-be wife. Will Benedick duel with his friend Claudio — to the death — for the love and honour of a lady with whom he would be wed? Will he really be prepared to 'do anything' for his lady — love even if that means killing a man he has fought alongside in battle? Certainly, his rather 'effeminate' first base — 'Ha! Not for the wide world' — promises very little, but Shakespeare — through the attractive catch that is Beatrice — tests Benedick's mettle and within thirty-something lines of electric dialogue (A C Swinburne suggests that Beatrice's words would have 'fluttered the doves of fashionable drama to some purpose') he, like Romeo before him, is resolved to challenge — and potentially kill — Claudio. Such is the stuff of tragedy. However, the low comedy previously witnessed in Shakespeare's invention of Bottom the weaver in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595) —

Bottom: Thisby, the flowers of odious savours sweet;  
Quince: Odours, odours!

is re-explored in the character of Dogberry; it intervenes in this play to prevent tragedy from happening. Dogberry, like Bottom before him, mispronounces his way through Acts IV and V of this play ('O villain! Thou wilt be condemned to everlasting redemption for this'). I will not be the first to make the comparison between these two; in fact, Thomas Marc Parrott (*Shakespearean Comedy*, 1949) seems to think that Bottom and Dogberry could be 'translated' (or should that be 'related?'):

There is indeed a family likeness between them; one might almost imagine Dogberry a Bottom grown old in office, so old, in fact, that he had changed

for the worse ... Bottom's simple and forthright manner of speech has changed with Dogberry into a sort of official lingo which murders the Queen's English with every utterance.

I might not also be the first to point out that both of them are made 'an ass' of, but it is difficult to resist ... In short, in *Much Ado*, Shakespeare draws on precedents with which his audiences would have been very familiar from his previous work. The magic, however, comes in the blending of these elements of comedy and tragedy: Shakespeare takes his viewers as close to catastrophe as he dare before reassuring them that this 'much ado' will indeed be 'about nothing' in the form of Dogberry and the Watch. *Much Ado about Nothing* might have been the original 'roller-coaster of a movie' four hundred years before either movies or roller-coasters were invented.

It is this happy marriage between tragedy and comedy that won the heart of A C Swinburne as outlined in *A Study on Shakespeare* (1880):

For absolute power of composition, for faultless balance and blameless rectitude of design, there is unquestionably no creation of his hand that will bear comparison with *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Much of the play's success is communicated through its structure and the relentless juxtaposition of low comedy and potentially high tragedy; it would not take much for this play to become *Othello* with its few dead bodies littering up the stage but what it does take is significant: the comic reassurance signified by the presence of Dogberry. However, the success of the play is also dependent on the Messinan society with which Shakespeare presents us: a gossipy and rather unlikeable lot, far more interested in public appearance than in private reality. However, as Mrs Inchbald rather critically suggested in *The British Theatre* (1807) we would not have much of a play were it not for the characters' penchant for eavesdropping:

If Benedick and Beatrice had possessed perfect good manners or just notions of honour and delicacy, so as to have refused to become eaves-droppers, the action of the play must have stood still, or some better method have been contrived – a worse hardly could – to have imposed their mutual credulity. But this willingness to overhear conversations, the reader will find to be the reigning fashion with the *dramatis personae* of this play; for there are nearly as many unwarrantable listeners, as there are characters in it.

In a rather quaint way, Mrs Inchbald does make good sense, even if a modern audience might delight in the 'gulling' scenes rather more than she obviously did. By the third scene of the play, a careful reader will spot that Claudio's 'confidential' conversation with Don Pedro in which he confessed his love for Hero was not only overheard by 'a man of' Antonio's but also by Borachio 'while [he] was smoking a musty room'. Having not spotted a room 'seemingly' filled with people – some even carrying conspicuous fumigation equipment ('was smoking') – before embarking on this classified discourse, it is a wonder that the pair and their finely-honed reconnaissance skills made it back from 'the wars' at all! Or were we supposed to shout 'They're behind you?' Well, in many respects, that is the essence of this drama, and yes we were: *Much Ado*, ultimately, is a bit of a pantomime.

Shakespeare introduces into his panto. the idea of semblance that we see elsewhere in his work:

Hero:                   And seemed I ever otherwise to you?  
Claudio:               Out on thee, seeming, I will write against it!  
                              You seemed to me as Dian in her orb

Although it is not until here in Act IV Scene i that this issue of 'seeming' is raised, the play's characters have been judging *only* with their eyes and not their minds, *only* with hearsay rather than facts, from the outset. As the play progresses, Claudio is conned by Don John (of all people, and rather rapidly, too) into thinking that Don Pedro has wooed Hero for himself ('Farewell, therefore, Hero!') and sulks accordingly:

Beatrice:           The count is neither sad, nor sick, nor merry  
                          nor well; but civil count, civil as an orange and  
                          something of that jealous complexion.

Given how readily Count Claudio is prepared to relinquish Hero at the Masked Ball, it is surprising that he creates so much ado later in the play about her. Then, the misogynist, Benedick — in spite of the best intentions of Don Pedro, Claudio and Leonato, so it would seem, to be as unconvincing as possible ('What effects, my lord? She will sit you – you heard my daughter tell you how') — is gulled into thinking that Beatrice is in love with him. To top it all, Beatrice — in similarly ludicrous fashion, Mrs Inchbrook may have a point! — is persuaded in overhearing a deep and meaningful conversation between her cousin and two servants that Benedick is in love with her ('What fire is in my ears? Can this be true?').

Benedick and Beatrice are not only prone to listening rudely in on others' conversations but also guilty of stupidity — like virtually everyone else in the play — in believing what 'seems' without questioning it. In Branagh's 1993 film of the play, the rather frivolous splashing around in a fountain and swinging à la Fragonard seems perfectly in keeping with the mood at this moment in the play; even Shakespeare may have had his tongue firmly planted in his cheek at what he had just expected his audience to believe. However, like the Messinans, we believe what we see – and are quite taken in by it, too.

By the time Claudio and Don Pedro are convinced that — from a distance, late at night — they actually saw Hero (on the night before her wedding day!) in *flagrante delicto* with Borachio (having spent a hard day fumigating Leonato's many rooms?), Shakespeare has made the point: an audience is being expected to judge characters in spite of the pantomime situations in which they appear before it. We feel all the more willing to condemn Don Pedro and Claudio for their treatment of Hero because of the ridiculous lengths to which they must go to believe the worst of her. Surely, even if Hero was having an affair, she might refrain on the eve of her wedding? And with Borachio? Please ... As if these errors of judgement from two supposedly noble men are not enough, we must remember that the Prince and the Count know Don John of old; even within the brief timescale of the play, he has already smeared egg on Claudio's face at the Ball but the 'boy' is still keen on seconds. Then, there is the long-standing rivalry between Don Pedro and his bastard brother ('... being reconciled to the prince your brother, I owe you all duty') and the general impressions that Don John has on others ('I never can see him but I am heart-burned an hour after'). Philip Wayne commented that 'There is nothing profound in Don John except his ugly gloom' which does not help any defence of Don Pedro and Claudio: it is not even as though Don John is a very *competent* villain! Had he been Iago (*Othello*) or Edmund (*King Lear*) we might have expected the whole of Messina to be deceived, but careful scrutiny of the play will suggest that Big Bad (Don) John is little other than a plagiarist who takes Borachio's semi-villainous ideas ('Yea, my lord; but I can cross it ...') and runs with them (in fact, Borachio seems very much to be the brains of the outfit whenever cunning plans are on the agenda — which may not say much!). We may question why — given the circumstances of Hero's 'discovery' — Claudio did not decide to speak with her about her whereabouts before the wedding just as we may question why on earth either Hero or Beatrice did not provide their alibi at the time of accusation (something commented on by Lewis Carroll in a letter to Ellen Terry). As for Leonato, he probably comes out of this part of the play — to this critic at least — as badly as any of them. Rather than believe that his only daughter is as honourable as he would expect her to be (although note that he is pretty realistic in what he does expect, from a

modern perspective, at least: 'Dear my lord, if you, in your own proof/Have vanquish'd the resistance of her youth/And made defeat of her virginity') he joins the public shaming of Hero and then — just like a man? — monologues about his own misfortune:

Griev'd I, I had but one?  
Chid I for that at frugal nature's frame?  
O! one too much by thee. Why had I one?  
Why ever wast thou lovely in mine eyes?

By the time Leonato suggests that we should believe Don John (the answer to 'Would the two Princes lie?' would obviously be 'O yes they would' for one of them, at least) we feel like ringing the poor old man's neck and putting him out of his misery! But such is the stuff of Shakespearean fathers (remember Capulet? Lear? Brabantio?) who never were much cop in the daughter department and who always struggle to 'see better'.

Another essential ingredient of this pantomime is the 'will they – won't they?' element of the Beatrice-Benedick relationship: the stuff of soap operas and reality TV. Just as we feel like condemning Don Pedro et al for believing the improbable circumstances and pointing a shaky finger at Hero, we feel like rooting for any union between Beatrice and Benedick owing to the improbable events that have brought them together. Is Shakespeare trading on the British love of an underdog in having us champion what to all intents and purposes seems to be a doomed relationship from Beatrice's very first words — a jibe at Benedick — 'Signor Mountanto'? Certainly, they get what they deserve. Both make early declarations against the prospect of marriage (Beatrice: I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swears he love me; Benedick: I will live a bachelor) and both deserve to be hoist by their own considerable petards. The play's conclusion — which brings something of a nemesis to their earlier hubristic bravado — is deeply satisfying, as suggested by Philip Wayne in his introduction to the *New Clarendon* edition of the text (1954):

All the world loves a lover, because his hope involves a vital longing common to us all. The more intelligent the lovers, the more important is their hope and their fate; and if we risk greater fall from a height, then love between specially spirited souls is the more perilous, and so the more dramatic

The intellect of these two lovers might not mean that they 'woo peaceably' but they certainly woo dramatically and an audience would certainly feel hope for the future of Beatrice and Benedick, where they may feel that the union between Hero and Claudio is only — as Swinburne suggested — 'doubtfully desirable'. We may not think that Hero ultimately deserves Claudio — she may well deserve much better — but we could certainly consent that Beatrice and Benedick do get their just deserts, ending up with each other.

Messina is a funny place. In it, Spanish Dons, Italian noblemen and English bumpkins pass the time of day as though it were perfectly natural for them so to do. Like *Twelfth Night's* Illyria, it is a 'land of dreams' rather than a geographical place and hence lends itself to this strange juxtaposition of motley and noble crews. Perhaps the flaw of the play is that there is too much believing of hearsay and too much 'seeming': That said, it speaks much about the play's contemporary and current popularity that audiences are so willing to go along with what they see on the stage, perhaps because they see a reflection of their own kind in the characters before them. The general optimism that can be found at the end of this pantomime — in spite of our own boos and hisses as Don John is paraded before us at the last moment — demonstrates that 'Man is' indeed 'a giddy thing' but in spite of his giddiness, man *does* possess the capacity for ensuring that harmony *can* be restored to seeming disorder. Maybe, in fact, the play presents 'much ado' about 'quite a lot' ...?

**Further Reading:**

*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, William Shakespeare

*Romeo and Juliet*, William Shakespeare

*Othello*, William Shakespeare

*A Study of Shakespeare*, A C Swinburne (available online from Project Gutenberg)

*Shakespearean Comedy*, Thomas Marc Parrott (Published by Russell and Russell, 1977)

*Remarks for the British Theatre 1806 — 1809*, Elizabeth Inchbald (Scholars Facsimiles and Reprints, 1990)

*The Selected Letters of Lewis Carroll* (Pantheon Books, 1982)

*Much Ado About Nothing* by Roland J. Martin is Number 3 in the Shakespeare Bookmark series, published by

The English Association  
University of Leicester  
University Road  
Leicester LE1 7RH  
UK

Tel: 0116 252 3982  
Fax: 0116 252 2301  
Email: [engassoc@le.ac.uk](mailto:engassoc@le.ac.uk)

Potential authors are invited to contact the following at the address above:

Series Editor  
Victor Hext

Shakespeare Bookmarks  
Kerri Corcoran-Martin

Primary Bookmarks  
Louise Ellis-Barrett

Secondary Bookmarks  
Ian Brinton