Much Ado About Nothing

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Shakespeare's father was a glove-maker, and Shakespeare received no more than a grammar school education. He married Anne Hathaway in 1582, but left his family behind around 1590 and moved to London, where he became an actor and playwright. He was an immediate success: Shakespeare soon became the most popular playwright of the day as well as a part-owner of the Globe Theater. His theater troupe was adopted by King James as the King's Men in 1603. Shakespeare retired as a rich and prominent man to Stratford-upon-Avon in 1613, and died three years later.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Much Ado About Nothing likely takes place during the 16th Century Italian Wars (1494-1559), a conflict which involved France, the Holy Roman Empire, the Spanish Kingdom of Aragon, England, Scotland, the Ottomans, the Swiss and various Italian states. For some periods during these wars, Naples and Sicily (where Messina is located) were under the control of Aragon. These wars explain the diverse origins of the characters in the play: Don Pedro and Don John are from Aragon, Benedick is from Padua, and Claudio is from Florence.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Scholars believe that there are two likely sources for part of the action in *Much Ado About Nothing*. The first is Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1532) and the second is an untitled novella by the Italian writer Mateo Bandello (1573), whose works also provided source material for some of Shakespeare's other plays as well. Both of these works contain elements of the Claudio subplot: an unfairly disgraced bride, a father who pretends she has died, and an eventual reunion.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Much Ado About Nothing*
- **When Written:** 1598-1599
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1623
- **Literary Period:** Elizabethan
- **Genre:** Comedy
- **Setting:** Messina, Italy in the 16th Century
- **Climax:** At the altar, Claudio publicly accuses Hero of unfaithfulness, sending her into a swoon.
- **Antagonist:** Don John

EXTRA CREDIT

Masks and Recognition. Masked balls and disguises are common in Shakespeare. During such balls, characters sometimes have trouble recognizing even their closest friends and relatives. Critics who believe in *verisimilitude*—the idea that a fictional story should be believable—have sometimes criticized Shakespeare because of this. The famous Russian writer Leo Tolstoy, for instance, found it completely ridiculous that characters in Shakespeare fail to recognize even each other's voices when in disguise.

Bastards. In the Renaissance, children born out of wedlock were often considered to be naturally evil. Sir John Fortescue wrote that "If a bastard be good, that commeth to him by chance… but if hee bee evill, that commethe to hym by nature." The evil bastard is a common character in Shakespeare and Renaissance Drama in general, and Don John is only one example—Edmund, in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, is another.

PLOT SUMMARY

The household of Leonato, Governor of Messina, awaits the arrival of the victorious soldiers Don Pedro, Claudio and Benedick. Leonato's niece Beatrice makes sarcastic remarks about Benedick. When he and the two others arrive, she and Benedick begin trading insults, each boasting that they are hard-hearted, and immune to the charms of the opposite sex.

Claudio tells Benedick he is in love with Leonato's daughter Hero. Benedick mocks him, and tells Don Pedro all about it as soon as he enters the room. Don Pedro comes up with a plan to disguise himself as Claudio, and woo Hero for him at that evening's masked dance. Meanwhile, Benedick scoffs at love and marriage—but Don Pedro swears that Benedick will fall in love before long.

Leonato's brother Antonio learns that Claudio loves Hero, and informs his brother. At the same time, Don Pedro's bastard brother Don John—defeated enemy in the war before the play—learns from his minion Borachio of Don Pedro and Claudio's plans. They scheme to ruin things at the dance that night.

As they prepare for the dance, Leonato, Beatrice and Hero discuss Hero's marriage and marriage in general. Beatrice explains why she does not want to wed. The party-goers arrive, and Don Pedro—disguised as Claudio—goes off to propose to Hero. Meanwhile, a disguised Benedick is insulted by Beatrice, who pretends not to recognize him, and calls him a "dull fool."

Benedick gets angry, and goes off alone. Elsewhere in the crowd, Don John and Borachio pretend to mistake Claudio for Benedick, and convince him that Don Pedro wants Hero for himself. Claudio is upset until Don Pedro arrives with an announcement: Hero has agreed to marry Claudio. The wedding is set for a week later, and in the meantime, Don Pedro proposes that everyone try to make Benedick and Beatrice fall in love.

Borachio and Don John make a new plan to ruin the announced marriage. They scheme to trick Claudio and Don Pedro into thinking Hero has been unfaithful, by arranging for the two to see Borachio and Margaret—Hero's waiting-gentlewoman—having sex through Hero's window.

Unaware of Borachio and Don John's plan, Don Pedro and his friends enact their own plant to make Benedick fall in love. Benedick, alone in Leonato's garden, runs and hides when he sees Don Pedro, Leonato, Claudio and Balthazar approaching. Knowing Benedick is there, they speak somberly about Beatrice's love for Benedick. Benedick is quickly convinced, and when Beatrice comes to fetch him for dinner, he reads flirtatious double meanings into her words. Later, Hero, Margaret and Ursula lay the same trap for Beatrice, who is as easily convinced.

Soon after, Don John convinces Claudio and Don Pedro that Hero has been unfaithful. They agree to come watch her window for signs of a lover, and plan to shame her at her wedding if the accusations are true.

Dogberry, the head of the town Watch, and Verges, his second-in-command, instruct the members of the night watch. As this is going on, the watchmen overhear Borachio bragging to Conrade about how he made love to Margaret and convinced Don Pedro and Claudio of Hero's unfaithfulness. The Watch arrests arrest both men. Just before the wedding the next morning, Dogberry and Verges try to bring Leonato to interrogate the conspirators. But Dogberry has so much trouble making himself understood that Leonato dismisses the pair, telling them to do the examination themselves.

The wedding proceeds. Just as the Friar is asking if anyone has any objections to the marriage, Claudio and Don Pedro make their accusation, humiliating Hero and causing her to faint from shame. Claudio, Don Pedro and the guests leave, and Leonato is beside himself. The Friar, doubting the accusations, suggests that Leonato pretend Hero is dead. This will give them time to look into the accusations, and perhaps to change Claudio's feelings as well. Leonato agrees, while Benedick and Beatrice swear themselves to secrecy. Outraged by what has happened to her cousin, Beatrice asks Benedick to kill Claudio, saying that she cannot love him if he won't. After some initial hesitance about fighting his best friend, he agrees.

Dogberry and the watch clumsily interrogate Conrade and Borachio. Despite Dogberry's misuse of words and obsession minor matters—such as when Conrade calls him an ass—they extract a confession, and plan to bring the criminals to Leonato's.

A fight almost breaks out between Leonato and Claudio, joined by Antonio and Don Pedro. Benedick arrives, and puts an end to the fight by challenging Claudio to fight him the next day. Don Pedro and Claudio do not take him seriously at first, but eventually decide that his love for Beatrice has driven him to do it. As they discuss Benedick's change and challenge to Don Pedro, Dogberry, Verges and the Watch arrive with Conrade and Borachio, who confesses to the deception. Horrified, Claudio and Don Pedro beg Leonato's forgiveness. Leonato agrees to forgive Claudio if he will hang an epitaph on Hero's grave, clear her reputation, and then marry his niece.

Benedick tells Beatrice that he has agreed to fight Claudio. Ursula, a lady of the household, brings the news that Don John's treachery has been discovered, and that he has fled from Messina.

Don Pedro and Claudio go to Hero's grave to hang an epitaph. Afterward, they proceed to Leonato's for the wedding. There, Claudio is presented with Leonato's niece, who is wearing a mask. To his surprise, when the mask is removed the "niece" turns out to be the still-living Hero. Claudio is overjoyed. Meanwhile, Benedick unmasks Beatrice, whom he has been given permission to marry. Just before they do, they realize that they were tricked into falling in love by the others. They decide to marry anyway, and Benedick calls for dancing before the weddings.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Hero – Leonato's daughter, Beatrice's cousin, and the beloved of Claudio. On the night before her wedding, Hero is unknowingly impersonated by Margaret and framed for being unfaithful to the groom, Claudio. She is publicly shamed at her wedding, and her father Leonato hides her away, pretending she is dead until the slander has been discredited. Hero is one of the characters who participates in the scheme to bring Benedick and Beatrice together.

Claudio – A young Florentine soldier who fights for Don Pedro, and a friend of Benedick. He falls in love with Hero and plans to marry her, but disgraces her publicly after he is tricked by Don John and Borachio into thinking she has been unfaithful. By the end of the play, after her faithfulness has been proven, he marries her. Claudio is one of the characters who participates in the scheme to bring Benedick and Beatrice together.

Benedick – A witty young Lord of Padua and a soldier. He is extraordinarily successful with women, but is fanatically committed to a bachelor's life. He has a "merry war," of wits and insults with Beatrice, whom he hates. By the end of the play,

Claudio, Don Pedro and Leonato have tricked him into falling in love with Beatrice, and he marries her.

Beatrice – Leonato's niece, an extremely witty and strong-willed young woman. Beatrice has a "merry war," of wits and insults with Benedick, whom she hates. Like Benedick, Beatrice never wants to marry. All the same, she is tricked by Hero and Ursula into falling in love with and marrying Benedick by the end of the play.

Don Pedro – The Prince of Aragon. He is always involved in the affairs of the other characters. Don Pedro woos Hero for Claudio. He also comes up with the idea of setting up Beatrice and Benedick. He helps Claudio disgrace Hero at the wedding, and then helps him make up for it. By the end of the play, he is the only one of the three soldier friends to stay single.

Don John – The bastard brother of Don Pedro, and the antagonist of the play. When the play begins, Don John has just been defeated by his brother in battle while trying to usurp him. Out of desire for revenge and a general bad attitude, Don John schemes to destroy the marriage of Hero and Claudio. He almost succeeds, but his treachery is confessed by his minions Conrade and Borachio, who have been arrested and interrogated by Dogberry and the watch. By the end of the play, he has been captured while trying to escape from Messina.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Leonato – Governor of Messina and father to Hero. When Hero is publicly disgraced at her wedding, Leonato is outraged, and cannot decide whether or not to believe in his daughter's faithfulness to Claudio. Leonato participates in Don Pedro's scheme to bring Benedick and Beatrice together.

Antonio – Leonato's brother. At the wedding in the final act, he poses as father to Leonato's niece: in reality, this is Hero in disguise.

Balthazar – A servant of Don Pedro's. He flirts with Margaret at the masked dance, and plays music in the garden where Leonato, Don Pedro and Claudio have arranged for Benedick to overhear them. He is witty, and makes puns on the words **nothing** and noting.

Borachio – A minion of Don John's. He is paid for coming up with and carrying out the scheme to ruin Hero and Claudio's marriage. Borachio is arrested by the watch after boasting to Conrade about his villainy.

Conrade – A minion of Don John's. During his interrogation, he calls Dogberry an ass, which obsesses the constable for the rest of the play.

Dogberry – A constable of Messina. Dogberry is not strict with criminals, and cautions the other members of the watch to also leave criminals alone. He misuses language terribly, and his inability to articulate himself is one of the reasons it takes so long for Don John's treachery to be revealed.

Verges – A headborough of Messina. He works with Dogberry, and is insulted by him for being old.

Friar Francis – He conducts the two weddings. When Hero is disgraced, he is the first one to suspect that she might be innocent. It is his idea to pretend that Hero is dead while the matter is investigated.

Margaret – Hero's witty and flirtatious waiting-gentlewoman. Margaret is seduced by Borachio on the night before the first wedding, as part of his scheme to ruin Hero. Don Pedro and Claudio are looking on from outside, and are lead to believe that Margaret is Hero.

Ursula – Another of Hero's waiting gentle-women. Ursula helps Hero make Beatrice fall in love with Benedick.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

LOVE AND MASQUERADE

Love, in *Much Ado About Nothing*, is always involved with tricks, games and disguises. Every step in romance takes place by way of masquerade. Hero is won for Claudio by Don Pedro in disguise. Benedick and Beatrice are brought together through an elaborate prank. Claudio can be reconciled with Hero only after her faked death. Altogether, these things suggest that love—like a play or masquerade—is a game based on appearances, poses and the manipulation of situations.

Love, in *Much Ado*, is like chemistry. If you put people together in a certain way, a certain result occurs. Lovers in the play are like masked dancers: the pose and the situation matter more than who the other dancer really is. The lover is a piece in the game, a mask in the crowd, and everyone—no matter who they are—falls victim in the same way. Don Pedro manipulates Benedick and Beatrice like a scientist conducting an experiment, or a playwright setting a scene. The play suggests that love is not love without its masquerade-like sequence of poses and appearances, even if they must be imagined or faked.

COURTSHIP, WIT, AND WARFARE

Much Ado About Nothing constantly compares the social world—masquerade balls, witty banter, romance and courtship—with the military world. War of wit and love are compared to real wars in a metaphor that extends through every part of the play. The rivalry of Benedick and Beatrice is called a "merry war," and the language

they use with and about each other is almost always military: as when Benedick complains that "[Beatrice] speaks poniards, and every word stabs." Romance, too, is made military. The arrows of Cupid are frequently mentioned, and the schemes which the characters play on each other to accomplish their romantic goals are similar to military operations. Like generals, the characters execute careful strategies and tricks.

Don John and Don Pedro, enemies in the war before the play begins, face off again on the field of social life: one schemes to ruin a marriage, another to create one. Benedick and Beatrice are "ambushed," by their friends into eavesdropping on staged conversations. Borachio stations Margaret as a "decoy," in Hero's window. The "merry war," of *Much Ado About Nothing* ends just like the real war that comes before the beginning of the play: everyone has a happy ending. At the very beginning, Leonato says that "A victory is twice itself when the achiever brings home full numbers"—in this, the end of a good comedy resembles the end of a good war.

LANGUAGE, PERCEPTION AND REALITY

Much Ado About Nothing dwells on the way that language and communication affect our perception of reality. It is important to remember nothing (besides marriage) actually happens in the play—there are no fights, deaths, thefts, journeys, trials, illnesses, sexual encounters, losses or gains of wealth, or anything else material. All that changes is the *perception* that these things have happened, or that they will happen: that Hero is no longer a virgin, or that she has died, or that Claudio and Benedick will fight.

Tricks of language alone repeatedly change the entire situation of the play. Overheard conversations cause Benedick and Beatrice to fall in love, and the sonnets they have written one another stop them from separating once the prank behind their romance has been revealed. The idea that we live in a world of language and appearances, beyond which we cannot see, is common throughout Shakespeare. The famous quote that "All the world's a stage," is another example.

By the end, the false language in *Much Ado About Nothing* has almost overwhelmed the reality. Characters have fallen into the roles given to them in the lies told about them: Benedick and Beatrice have become lovers, and Hero is treated like a whore by her own father. Ironically, the only character with the knowledge to replace this false language with the truth is the completely inarticulate Dogberry.

MARRIAGE, SHAME AND FREEDOM

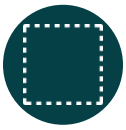
For the characters of *Much Ado About Nothing*, romantic experiences are always connected to issues of freedom and shame. If dignity comes from having a strong and free will, then love, desire and marriage are a threat to it. This is the position taken by most of the characters. Benedick, for example, compares the married man to a tame, humiliated animal. The events of the play confirm this position on love and dignity taken by most of the characters. Benedick and Beatrice begin the play seeming witty, aloof and superior to the others. But by the end, their love has made them somewhat ridiculous. Like puppets, they are manipulated by their friends.

Ironically, *Much Ado About Nothing* suggests that the characters fear of shame in love is more likely to lead to embarrassment than love itself will. Terrified that marrying Hero will dishonor him, Claudio shames her publicly. But when the truth comes out, his outburst seems silly. The same goes for Beatrice and Benedick: their extreme resistance to love and marriage (and the accompanying shame and loss of freedom) makes them look all the more ridiculous when they finally give in. They also lose more of their freedom: while Claudio chooses Hero, Benedick and Beatrice are chosen for each other.

At the same time, *Much Ado* suggests that giving in to our strong feelings for other people is unavoidable. Despite the shame of going back on their principles, despite the knowledge that the whole thing was set up by others, Benedick and Beatrice are happy in love—perhaps this happiness is more important than dignity and freedom. As Benedick puts it, "man is a giddy thing," and the play ends with joyous dancing.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



NOTHING

The title of *Much Ado About Nothing* was originally a double-entendre. Elizabethans pronounced the word "nothing," in the same way as the word "noting." Both of these meanings are important. First, most of the action in the play is based on nothing. The drama is not based on actual events—actual things that have happened—but rather on mistaken perceptions: Hero is never really unfaithful, Hero is never really dead, Benedick and Beatrice do not really love each other (at first), and Don Pedro is not really courting Hero for himself. What really drives the action of the play is that characters are *noting* these nothings. The double-entendre of nothing/noting alludes to one of the major themes of the play, that perceptions, even wrong ones, can change reality. Noting nothing makes it something.

BEARDS

Beards are a complicated symbol of masculinity in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Benedick's beard

symbolizes his rugged bachelorhood, while Claudio's clean-shaven face indicates his "softness," and vulnerability—Benedick at one point calls him "Lord Lack-beard." Beatrice's dislike of beards symbolically stands for her resistance to men in general. *Much Ado* connects beardlessness with falling in love: the first thing Benedick does when he falls in love with Beatrice is to shave. Altogether, the connection between beards, love and masculinity in the play seem to suggest that falling in love, for a man, comes with the risk of losing one's masculinity—as represented by the beard.

EYES

Eyes are a metonym for perception in *Much Ado About Nothing*, which means that the word "eye" is often mentioned by a character who really means by it *any* kind of perception, not just sight. Eyes come up especially often whenever one character's perceptions are being influenced by another character's tricks. Leonato, for instance, says that Benedick and Beatrice have got their "eyes" for each other from other characters; he means that they see each other a certain way (adoringly) because he and the others have tricked them into it. Borachio deceives the eyes of Claudio and Don Pedro when he poses with Margaret at Hero's window. At one point in the play, Claudio asks the rhetorical question "Are our eyes our own?" In *Much Ado About Nothing*, the answer to this question is often no.

THE SAVAGE BULL

Don Pedro teases Benedick that "In time the savage bull doth bear the yoke." This image acts as a symbol for marriage throughout the play. Just as the free and proud bull is broken and tamed by the farmer, the bachelor is tamed by responsibility when he becomes a married man. The bull's horns are another part of the image: the cuckold—or man whose wife is cheating on him—was depicted as having horns sprouting from his head. Altogether, the image of the tamed bull suggests that marriage robs a man of his freedom, turns him into a beast of burden, and comes with a risk of cuckold-like shame. But the meaning of the image changes as the play goes on. In the fifth act, Claudio reassures Benedick that his horns will be "tipped with gold," like those of Jove (Zeus), who transformed himself into a bull to seduce Europa. Just as Benedick's view of marriage becomes more positive, so too does the image of the bull. The bull first symbolizes a humiliated beast of burden, but by the end becomes associated with the mythological sexual adventures of Zeus, King of the Gods.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Simon & Schuster edition of *Much Ado About Nothing* published in 1995.

Act 1, Scene 1 Quotes

"A victory is twice itself when the achiever brings home full numbers."

Related Characters: Leonato (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.1.8-9

Explanation and Analysis

Leonato, Governor of Messina, speaks this line near the beginning of the play. He and a messenger are discussing a recent battle, saying that Don Pedro, Claudio, and Benedict, all men from different countries, have emerged victorious together with very few lives lost. Leonato comments that a victory is doubly valuable when the winner comes home without losing any men.

This military victory which precedes the play is, in a sense, the only real event in its plot; what unfolds on stage is a series of misunderstandings, disguises, mistaken identities, and "nothings" that lead to the marriages at the end of the play.

These lines also introduce the theme of warfare, which is used as the metaphorical language of courtship during the play. The victory in the military war will be ultimately echoed in the conclusion of the 'war of wits' and the "victories" on the battlefield of love.

"There is a kind of merry war betwixt Signior Benedick and her; they never meet but there's a skirmish of wit between them."

Related Characters: Leonato (speaker), Benedick, Beatrice

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.1.59-62

Explanation and Analysis

Leonato's niece Beatrice asks the messenger about Benedick, one of Don Pedro's officers. She argues with the

messenger and makes fun of Benedick, and in the process displays her ability with language, her wit, and her sharp sense of humor. In the line here, occurring just after Beatrice's interaction with the messenger, Leonato explains the relationship between Beatrice and Benedick in military terms: they are engaged in"a kind of merry war;" there is "a skirmish of wit between them."

Thus Leonato frames courtship (even if Beatrice and Benedick don't yet realize that they are courting) as battle, an idea that is very common in renaissance love poetry, and that will animate the rest of this play. It's worth noting, though, that while here the war of love is described as being "merry," the events of the play will show that like war it can bring victory and joy but also pain, despair, and even death.

"Shall I never see a bachelor of threescore again?"

Related Characters: Benedick (speaker), Claudio

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1.1.195-196

Explanation and Analysis

Don Pedro and his men, including Benedick, have arrived at Leonato's house, Benedick and Beatrice quickly begin their verbal sparring, both saying that they are completely resistant to the charms of the opposite sex. Leonato then invites everyone to stay at his house for a month. Claudio subsequently tells Benedick that he is in love with Leonato's daughter, Hero. Benedick and Claudio then begin a conversation about Hero, love, marriage, and freedom, in which Benedick utters the quote shown here.

Benedick claims to cherish his status of bachelor, suggesting that marriage would constrict his freedom. He says that he isn't attracted to Hero, and he turns all of Claudio's praises into mockeries and insults to women and marriage in general. In this line, he asks, jokingly, if he'll ever see a 60-year-old bachelor again, since most men are so eager to get married. He claims that not enough men are committed to the bachelor life, comparing marriage to wearing a yoke like a beast of burden. Benedick's comment also adds humor and irony to the play, as a significant part of the rest of the play involves other characters trying to trick him into falling in love.

"Well, as time shall try: 'In time the savage bull doth bear the yoke.'"

Related Characters: Don Pedro (speaker), Benedick

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1.1.255-256

Explanation and Analysis

Don Pedro has entered whil Claudio and Benedick are speaking about love.Benedick immediately reveals to Don Pedro that Claudio is in love with Hero. Though Claudio tries at first to deny it, ultimately he admits to his love. With a dramatic statement about being burned at the stake, Benedick claims that Hero is unworthy of Claudio's love. This point causes Don Pedro to accuse Benedick of being a "heretic" of love.

Don Pedro then says these words, a proverb, to suggest that Benedick will eventually fall in love himself. The proverb says that eventually, even the "savage bull" will "bear the yoke," playing on Benedick's own assertion that married men are like beasts of burden.

Note that the proverb is a line of iambic pentameter though the rest of the dialogue is in prose. This small detail helps underscore Don Pedro's prediction, which eventually comes to pass at the end of the play.

Act 1, Scene 3 Quotes

"I cannot be said to be a flattering honest man, it must not be denied but I am a plain-dealing villain."

Related Characters: Don John (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.3.28-30

Explanation and Analysis

This scene begins, like many Shakespearean scenes, with one character asking another why he is so sad. Conrade asks Don John why he is so melancholy, to which Don John first responds with the astrological response that he is born under Saturn and cannot hide what he really is, and then with this quote.

In the quote, Don John states his belief that he cannot hide, much less change, his true interior, and that he is a villain. The quote turns out to be true, as Don John goes on to act

villainously for no good reason through the rest of the play.

Don John would rather be himself and be hated than act falsely and pretend to be happy or kind. Thus he deems himself a "plain-dealing villain" in great contrast to the whimsical, love-struck characters who are constantly pretending and playing tricks. Soon after this proclamation Don John learns about his brother Don Pedro's plan with Claudio to woo Hero in disguise; Don John immediately decides to attempt to mess up his brother's plan and prevent the courtship of Hero. He does this not out of desire to court Hero himself. Instead, he just wants to make everyone else as unhappy as he is.

Act 2, Scene 1 Quotes

"He that hath a beard is more than a youth, and he that 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."

Related Characters: Beatrice (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 2.1.36-39

Explanation and Analysis

This scene opens with Antonio, Leonato, Beatrice, and Hero discussing Don John's attitude and comparing him with Benedick. Beatrice jokes that Don John talks too little and Benedick talks too much, saying that a good husband would be somewhere in the middle. After this joke Leonato tells Beatrice to be careful so that she can find a husband, at which point Beatrice says that she's happy that she doesn't have one, especially because she hates beards.

Thus begins a discussion here about beards, in which Leonato suggests Beatrice marry a beard-less man. Her response, given in the quote, is that someone with a beard is more than a youth, and someone with no beard is less than a man (boyish). She doesn't like bearded men, but beardless men are merely boys who cannot handle her. Beards become more and more important in the play as symbols of manliness.

Note also that this discussion has an extra level of irony because, in Shakespearean times, female parts were played by beard-less youths. When a young actor's beard came in, it was an indication that he could begin to play adult male parts instead of boys and women on stage. The original speaker of this line would have been a young man without a beard dressed as a woman.

"Speak low, if you speak love."

Related Characters: Don Pedro (speaker), Hero

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.1.97

Explanation and Analysis

After Beatrice tells Hero that courtship is like a dance, the partygoers all arrive wearing masks. Don Pedro, pretending to be Claudio, immediately approaches and begins dancing with her. The two exchange some flirtations, before Don Pedro offers this romantic line: "Speak low, if you speak love." After this line, the pair moves aside and begin to whisper.

Don Pedro's words seem to imply that courtship should be secretive and done in whispers, which is ironic since he is pretending to be Claudio – it's a *really* secret courtship, with secrets kept even from Hero. However, while there is a romance to the secrecy of courtship, the play will also show how such secrecy can be destructive and leads to jealousy in general, and men's fear of being cuckolded more specifically, that can be particularly dangerous for women. Even in this scene, Claudio worries that Don Pedro is actually wooing Hero for himself. Later, Don John will make it appear that Hero has secretly been seeing other men, which causes Claudio to abandon Hero. So, just to make it clear: here Claudio is part of a scheme in which another man woos Hero for him, but later he immediately condemns Hero for allegedly seeing other men. The "secrecy" of love therefore seems to create a space not just for romance but also for masculine anxiety about love, and perhaps also misogyny toward women.

"Friendship is constant in all other things
Save in the office and affairs of love:
therefore all hearts in love use their own tongues;
Let every eye negotiate for itself
And trust no agent; for beauty is a witch
Against whose charms faith melteth into blood."

Related Characters: Claudio (speaker), Don Pedro

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 2.1.143-178

Explanation and Analysis

Don John and Borachio have just tricked Claudio into thinking that Don Pedro is in love with Hero and is wooing her for himself. After telling their lie, Borachio and Don John leave Claudio alone on stage; it is then that he offers his response to the false news in the form of a soliloquy.

Claudio says that friendship is constant and can be trusted in all areas except love and courtship. He concludes then that "all hearts in love use their own tongues," meaning he should speak for himself and not send a disguised surrogate to woo for him. He also says "let every eye negotiate for itself / And trust no agent." According to Claudio, love enters through the eyes, which in this play symbolize the senses in general. Thus a lover must trust only his own senses, and never the information and help of others. This notion is slightly ironic, since Claudio comes to this conclusion based on information he got from others who happened to be lying.

Also note how Claudio speaks about beauty as a "witch." There is an implication again that while Claudio loves Hero he is deeply afraid of being in love, and more specifically of being "tricked" into love by feminine beauty.

"Silence is the perfectest herald of joy: I were but little happy, if I could say how much."

Related Characters: Claudio (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.1.300-301

Explanation and Analysis

Convinced by Don John that Don Pedro loves Hero, Claudio appears sad and upset. Don Pedro questions him, but ultimately reveals that the marriage between Claudio and Hero has been arranged and approved. At this point Claudio's hesitations about Don Pedro seem to vanish, but he is speechless. Beatrice even needs to say, "Speak, count, 'tis your cue," a joke that Claudio has missed his cue (which of course would be doubly funny in a performance of the play, as the audience would be reminded of that fact that it is watching a play).

Claudio responds to Beatrice that "Silence is the perfectest herald of joy." Claudio is saying here that true happiness is unexplainable. Note Shakespeare's use of the superlative on perfect, a word which seems to in itself to already connote the superlative. "Perfectest" is excessive, beyond what is just perfect.

Act 2, Scene 3 Quotes

"One woman is fair, yet I am well; another is wise, yet I am well; another virtuous, yet I am well; but till all graces be in one woman, one woman shall not come in my grace."

Related Characters: Benedick (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.3.27-30

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene Benedick soliloquizes in Leonato's garden. Benedick is frustrated that Claudio, whom he considered to be a perennial bachelor like himself, has become a lover and is getting married. Like Beatrice's response to Hero's engagement, in which the former starts to entertain the idea of marriage, Benedick begins to wonder if he will ever change his mind and get married. But like Beatrice, he constructs for himself a scenario in which he'll never find a suitable bride.

Here, he lists different desirable traits in potential wives: "fair," "wise," and"virtuous." Benedick then concludes that until *all* of these graces is combined in one perfect woman, he will not get married. Whereas earlier he refused to even consider marriage, now, given the social pressure of Claudio getting married, he can consider getting married, but still protects himself by deciding that he could only ever marry an idealized woman. Recall that he even criticized Hero, the woman who inspired Claudio's "perfectest" joy.

"Note this before my notes; There's not a note of mine that's worth the noting."

Related Characters: Balthazar (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 2.3.56-57

Explanation and Analysis

Don Pedro, Leonato, Claudio, and Balthazar have entered, causing Benedick (who was soliloquizing about marriage moments earlier) to hide behind some trees. The group notices him hiding, but they pretend not to.

Don Pedro asks Balthazar to play music, and he agrees, but not before punning on *nothing, noting,* and musical *notes.* This pun recurs throughout the play and even in its title: chaos is caused because characters keep noting (noticing) nothings (lies and tricks). Balthazar says, essentially, notice this before my musical notes, there's not (another note pun) a musical note of mine that's worth listening to (noting) / worth anything (nothing).

Act 3, Scene 1 Quotes

"...of this matter
Is little Cupid's crafty arrow made,
That only wounds by hearsay."

Related Characters: Hero (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.1.23-24

Explanation and Analysis

Most of the characters are now conspiring to get Beatrice and Benedick to fall in love. Here, Hero sends Margaret to get Beatrice and to say that she has overheard Hero and Ursula gossiping. Hero then tells Ursula that they must get Beatrice to overhear them talking about how Benedick "is suck in love with Beatrice." By overhearing this, they hope, Beatrice will then fall in love with Benedick. Hero claims that it is moments of gossip like this one that comprise Cupid's arrows, which "only [wound] by hearsay."

Hero's theory of how love works seems to be generally upheld by the events of the play, as Benedick and Beatrice *do* end up falling in love, but the theory also applies more generally to information and the way that characters view the world, in this play and in most Shakespearean comedies. Errors, misunderstandings, mistaken identities, gossip, and lies become the substance of reality for comedic characters; confusion abounds until the play concludes and the thick layers of mistakes and untruths are unwoven.

Act 3, Scene 2 Quotes

"Well, every one can master a grief but he that has it."

Related Characters: Benedick (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3.2.27-28

Explanation and Analysis

This scene begins with the discussion of Claudio's upcoming marriage, and with Don Pedro saying that after the wedding he will spend time with Benedick, who is always merry and impervious to cupid's arrows. To this assertion, Benedick says "I am not as I have been," indicating he has changed and fallen in love. Leonato and Don Pedro think that Benedick is sad or just needs money, but Claudio correctly asserts that he is in love. Benedick says that he has a toothache, and when the other men suggest that his sadness seems inappropriate for only a toothache, Benedick delivers the quoted line.

He essentially says that it is easy to give suggestions on how to get over sadness, but difficult to get over it yourself. This line also speaks to the way that romance and emotions are crossed between characters. Don Pedro courts Hero for Claudio, and a whole group is conspiring to make Beatrice and Benedick fall in love. It is easy for them all to intervene in each other's love lives, but many of the characters face difficulties when dealing with their own situations.

Note also that Benedick's appearance and reality are changed at once. He is not as he has been, emotionally, but he has also shaved his beard, changed his attire, and put on perfume. His appearance as a man changes with his inner shift towards love.

"Even she: Leonato's Hero, your Hero, every man's Hero."

Related Characters: Don John (speaker), Claudio

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3.2.99-100

Explanation and Analysis

Having failed to stop the courtship and engagement between Claudio and Hero, Don John now seeks to stop their impending marriage. To do so, he plans to put together a fake scene of Hero and a lover in the window to convince

Claudio that his fiancee is being unfaithful. When Don John says that she has been disloyal, Claudio clarifies with, "who, Hero?" to which Don John responds with the quote, "Even she."

The end of the sentence is devastatingly simple: "Leonato's Hero, your Hero, every man's Hero." By mentioning Leonato, Don John makes the claim specific to Hero herself, by mentioning Claudio he makes the claim personal to Claudio, and with "every man's Hero" he delivers the harsh accusation that many men have been with her. Claudio and Don Pedro remain unconvinced, but decide to shame Hero together if they find out that the claims are true.

The simplicity of Don John's speech is well aligned with his tactics. While other characters (like Hero herself) stage false conversations to be overheard, Don John stages a false image to be seen. His deception relies on the eyes instead of ears; he insists that they witness visually. This insistence might be loosely related to Othello's demand for "ocular proof" when he believes his wife is unfaithful in *Othello*. Perhaps love can be generated by one sense alone, either sight or hearing (or overhearing exactly what someone wants to you hear), but infidelity and heartbreak need to be verified with proof – the senses must be checked against one another.

Meanwhile, note how quickly Don Pedro and Claudio decide to shame Hero if they think she has been unfaithful. Love in the play turns quickly to misogynistic rage, again suggesting just how anxious men are with the idea of love, language, and fear of their wive's possible infidelity.

It is also worth noting that the word "Nothing" was also used in Shakespearean times to refer to a woman's sexual parts. And so the title of the play refers to the fact that the plot of the play involves much ado about sex, about virginity, and about all the misunderstandings ("nothings") about such "nothings."

Act 3, Scene 3 Quotes

"I think they that touch pitch will be defiled."

Related Characters: Dogberry (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.3.55-56

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene the constable Dogberry and the night watch are introduced. The quote is Dogberry's (ridiculous) reasoning for leaving criminals alone: touching something dirty makes you dirty, so it's safer to let criminals do what they want. Yet the fact that Dogberry's logic is so obviously ridiculous only highlights the incredible fact that this line also relates to the way that characters in the play view shame. Claudio is willing to publicly shame Hero to distance himself from her, since by appearing with her and marrying her when she is ashamed, he would become tainted ("defiled") and become shamed as well.

Throughout this scene Dogberry shows his incompetence and hilarious lack of intelligence, as he constantly misuses words, misunderstands situations, and advises his men to allow criminal behavior. Dogberry's position allows for a humorous dramatic irony and for the plot of the play to be extended. Later in the scene, Dogberry and his men will learn about Don John's plans, but the incompetence of the nights watch will prevent them from making this discovery known until the very end of the play.

"Seest thou not, I say, what a deformed thief this fashion is? how giddily he turns about all the hot bloods between fourteen and five-and-thirty?"

Related Characters: Borachio (speaker), Conrade

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.3.130-132

Explanation and Analysis

Conrade and Borachio (two henchman of Don John) are talking about Don John's plan, all the while being overheard by the watchmen. After saying that he received money from Don John for his part in the plan, Borachio begins talking about fashion. In the quote, he describes fashion as a "deformed thief," commenting on how true identities and forms are obscured by the fickle, changing appearances of fashion.

This line of thinking relates to the themes of perception, masquerade, and disguise, which are all explored in the play, but here it functions primarily as a source of comedy. Humorously, a night watchman misunderstands Borachio and believes he is talking about a person, a third thief named Deformed. Because of this misunderstanding, the watchmen arrest Borachio and Conrade who are actually guilty of framing Hero.

Act 4, Scene 1 Quotes

"Oh what men dare do! what men may do! what men daily do, not knowing what they do!"

Related Characters: Claudio (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.1.19-20

Explanation and Analysis

Hero and Claudio are about to be married, but Claudio has been tricked by Don John into thinking that Hero has been unfaithful, and he plans to break off the wedding. It is with this line that he first indicates to the Friar, Leonato, and Hero, as well as all in attendance at the wedding, that something is not right. When the Friar asks Claudio if he knows any reasons the pair should not marry, Leonato says "I dare make his answer, none." To this line Claudio responds with dramatic flair: "Oh what men dare do!" and so on. His over the top exclamation points to his own doubt and confusion, and to the confusion that accompanies disguise, trickery, and altered perception: no one knows what they are doing. The quote is also an outburst against the men he believes have slept with Hero.

"There is not chastity enough in language
Without offence to utter them."

Related Characters: Don John (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.1.102-103

Explanation and Analysis

Don John and Don Pedro are supporting Claudio's claims, since they all witnessed the evidence of Hero's infidelity together (though of course this was by Don John's design). When Don Pedro begins recounting what they saw and heard, Don John interrupts and tells him not to speak of it, since there "is not chastity enough in language" to say out loud what he knows.

By saying this, Don John at once suggests that Hero's crimes are too horrible to be uttered, and prevents Don Pedro from revealing the fabricated details which might be easily shot down by Hero or her family. As we know, Don John's tactics are more rooted in theatricality, performance, and sight than in language. Part of his act is what he *doesn't* say, and what he prevents others from saying. We also know from watching (or reading) the play that language is not chaste, since it is constantly being used for puns, innuendos, and misdirection, even in the play's title.

"But mine , and mine I lov'd , and mine I prais'd,
And mine that I was proud on, mine so much
That I myself was to myself not mine,
Valuing of her; why, she— O! she is fallen Into a pit of ink…"

Related Characters: Leonato (speaker), Hero

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.1.144-148

Explanation and Analysis

Hero has fainted at Claudio's accusation of her infidelity, and after briefly being unconscious as been revived. Leonato seems to be upset that she's still alive, supposing that she had died of shame at the accusations. Here Leonato laments the shame brought to him by his own child. He begins with the fact that she is his with "mine" and slowly builds, repeating mine and adding new modifiers with increasing length: "mine I lov'd, and mine I prais'd, and mine that I was proud on." He concludes the crescendoing list with the stunning assertion that she was so much his daughter that "I myself was to myself not mine," suggesting that he completely lost himself in his role as her father. When he finishes by saying that this daughter, inextricably tied to him, has "fallen into a pit of ink," he is saying that she is tainted, and recalling Dogberry's line "they that touch pitch will be defiled," that now he is tainted and shamed as well.

Note again how quickly, and with how little evidence, men – this time Hero's father – believe that a woman has been unfaithful. Throughout the play there is a current of just how mistrustful men are of women, just how much men fear and believe that women are always on the verge of betraying them sexually (and of course the sense that men have that they should naturally have control over women's sexuality). It really is remarkable that in a play so focused on love, there is this constant sense of men's mistrust and misogyny toward women.

"O! that I were a man for his sake, or that I had any friend would be a man for my sake! But manhood is melted into courtesies, valour into compliment, and men are only turned into tongue, and trim ones too: he is now as valiant as Hercules, that only tells a lie and swears it. I cannot be a man with wishing, therefore I will die a woman with grieving."

Related Characters: Beatrice (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.1.331-338

Explanation and Analysis

The Friar has concocted a plan in which Hero will pretend to be dead while Leonato gets to the bottom of her accusation, the hope being that it will make Claudio even more thrilled to marry her when he finds out she is actually alive (though modern audiences might object that Hero might not want to marry Claudio after he mistrusted and then shamed her). Now, Beatrice and Benedick are alone on stage; the pair has just admitted they are in love with each other, and Beatrice is upset by what has happened to Hero. Beatrice asks Benedick to kill Claudio for her.

When Benedick refuses, Beatrice speaks the lines quoted. She wishes that she were a man so that she could kill Claudio herself, or that Benedick would be a man and do it. But, she laments, classical manliness has faded, and devolved into only language. Valor, she says, has become nothing more than lying and false oaths. Since she cannot be a man simply because of her wish to become one, she concludes that she'll die as a woman because of her grief. Beatrice's criticism of manliness and the prevalence of language over action speaks to the theme of the play, in which nothing really happens but talk and falsity. It also inspires Benedick to agree to kill Claudio.

Act 4, Scene 2 Quotes

"O that he were here to write me down an ass! but, masters, remember that I am an ass; though it be not written down, yet forget not that I am an ass."

Related Characters: Dogberry (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.2.77-80

Explanation and Analysis

This scene is comic relief from the intense emotions around the false accusal and shaming of Hero.

Dogberry and his men are failing miserably at interrogating Borachio and Conrade, with Dogberry himself constantly misusing words, confusing things, and focusing on minor details. After Don John's plot to fake Hero's infidelity has been revealed, Conrade calls Dogberry an ass. At this insult Dogberry launches into a tirade, from which the quote is excerpted. Here he obsesses over the idea of one of his men writing down that he is an ass. He repeats the line over and over again, constantly reminding his men not to write it down, but all the while making himself seem more and more like an ass with his continual denials and repetitions.

There is an echo in Dogberry's concern about his reputation of Claudio and even Leonato's concern about their reputations after they have come (with little evidence) to believe that Hero was unfaithful. And once again, Dogberry's ridiculousness implies that these men, so concerned with their own reputations above all, are ridiculous too.

Act 5, Scene 1 Quotes

"Charm ache with air and agony with words."

Related Characters: Leonato (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5.1.28

Explanation and Analysis

This profound line is offered in a long speech made by Leonato, in which he responds to his brother Antonio's attempts at consoling him. In the dramatic speech, Leonato says that those who aren't suffering can't possibly understand or help those who are. These people who aren't suffering think they can "charm ache with air and agony with words," but Leonato insists they can't. Thus, while he is focusing on grief, his speech is also about the limitations to the power of language. Language can cause people to fall in love and can deceive people, but according to Leonato language alone is insufficient to heal a deep wound or to cure suffering.

"For there was never yet philosopher
That could endure the toothache patiently,
However they have writ the style of gods
And made a push at chance and sufferance."

Related Characters: Leonato (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5.1.37-40

Explanation and Analysis

After the long speech, Antonio calls his brother childish, to which Leonato responds with the lines in the quote. He claims to be only "flesh and blood," saying that he is only human. He says that there has never been a philosopher who could "endure the toothache patiently," no matter how well he wrote and philosophized about fate, chance, and human suffering. Again, he is arguing that language and reason are insufficient to alleviate mortal suffering and pain.

Recall also how Benedick complained in Act 3, Scene 2 of a toothache when he had fallen in love. This echo links love and suffering, and asserts that both are deeper than language, that they belong to the body in the way that a toothache does, beyond language.

After this point, Antonio responds by suggesting that Leonato seek revenge on Claudio, Don Pedro, and Don John. Leonato agrees, since he has come to believe that someone is lying about Hero's supposed infidelity.

Act 5, Scene 2 Quotes

"I was not born under a rhyming planet."

Related Characters: Benedick (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5.2.40-41

Explanation and Analysis

Benedick speaks this line in a soliloquy after he has sent Margaret to get Beatrice. He sings a little song, attempting to find a way to communicate his feelings to Beatrice, and laments his poor singing ability. Because he wasn't "born under a rhyming planet," meaning he doesn't have any natural ability rhyme or write poetry, he says he can only come up with bad rhymes.

First, Benedick's reference to the planet under which he was born echoes Don John's assertion earlier in the play that he is evil because he was born under the planet Saturn. In each case, these men argue that their natures are determined by the stars; that they couldn't change or learn even if they wanted to. They proclaim, therefore, that their true natures are set no matter the perception of them.

Meanwhile, Benedick's struggle with writing poetry speaks to the limitations of language brought up by the play, the way that it frustrates and confuses.(Benedick's struggle with rhyming is also ironic, since it is written by Shakespeare, a master poet.) At the same time, Benedick has been engaging in a war of wit and language play with Beatrice for much of the play, so it's not clear that he actually does have limitations with language. Perhaps, instead, he is making excuses for finding it difficult to express his love through language, which would then be another indication that love, like a toothache, is more profound, more of the body, than language can evoke.

Act 5, Scene 4 Quotes

"...get thee a wife, get thee a wife: there is no staff more reverent than one tipped with horn."

Related Characters: Benedick (speaker), Beatrice

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 5.4.126-128

Explanation and Analysis

The drama of the play has been resolved, with all plots and confusions rectified. Hero's innocence has been established, and she and Claudio have married.Beatrice and Benedick learn that they have been tricked and set up by their friends, but nonetheless agree that they are truly in love and agree they too will wed.Benedick's views on marriage have changed: he excitedly insists on music and dancing, and even advises Don Pedro to get married. Benedick tells Don Pedro that he seems sad, and repeats the idea that he should get a wife.

It seems, then, that the play has resolved completely in favor of marriage. Yet Benedick's line that"there is no staff more reverent than one tipped with a horn" complicates things. A man who had horns was the standard description of a cuckold – a man who's wife has been unfaithful. What exactly Benedick is saying here is not clear. He may be implying that all women will eventually be unfaithful, and so all married men are essentially cuckolds. He may be suggesting that married men, because they are vulnerable to being cuckolded if their wives are unfaithful, love their wives (are "more reverent") more than they would otherwise. And he may just be joking about the idea that women are likely to make men cuckolds. Nonetheless, even

as the play ends happily, with a marriage complete and another to come, it continues to complicate the very idea of love and marriage with male anxiety about female infidelity and the associated shame.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1, SCENE 1

A messenger arrives at the house of Leonato, Governor of Messina, to inform him that the Spanish Prince Don Pedro, the Florentine Claudio, and the Paduan Benedick have returned victorious from a recent battle. They have lost almost no men, and Leonato is pleased, saying that "a victory is twice itself when the achiever brings home full numbers." (1.1.8-9)

Messina was involved in the "Italian Wars," of the 16th Century. This conflict involved many kingdoms, the Papal States, and the city states of Italy. Don Pedro, Claudio and Benedick are all from different places, but have been brought together by war. The happy ending of the real war, celebrated by Leonato, also hints at the happy ending of the "war of wits," in the comedy of the play.

Beatrice, Leonato's niece, asks the messenger about Benedick, a Lord of Padua. She makes sarcastic remarks about him, punning on the messenger's praise. She calls him a "stuff'd man" (1.1.58-59) and implies that he is no match for her in a battle of wits. When she hears that he is good friends with Claudio, she scoffs that he changes friends as quickly as he changes the fashion of his hat. She compares Benedick to a disease, from which the sufferer "runs mad." Leonato explains to the messenger that there is a "merry war of wits," (1.1.62-63) between Benedick and Beatrice.

Beatrice's punning argument with the messenger gives us a taste of her sharp wit before the arrival of Benedick. The statements she makes set up a powerful irony: it is she herself who ends up "running mad" with love from the Benedick disease she jokes about, and it is her own *feelings about others which end up changing as quickly as the fashion of hats. Leonato's phrase "merry war" sets up a metaphorical parallel between wars of weaponry and wars of wit and love that lasts throughout the play.*


Don Pedro, Don John, Balthazar, Claudio and Benedick arrive at the house. Don Pedro apologetically jokes that Leonato is "come to meet [his] trouble," (1.1.96-97) meaning that he will have to go to the effort of housing and entertaining his new guests. Soon after, Benedick and Beatrice begin trading insults and sarcastic remarks. Benedick calls Beatrice a "parrot teacher," (1.1.138) and both boast of their complete resistance to the charms of the opposite sex.

Don Pedro's apology is ironic because the "trouble" he innocently jokes about causing ends up becoming very real later in the play: along with Claudio, he will humiliate Hero at her wedding. When Benedick calls Beatrice a "parrot-teacher," he is accusing her of copying him in their argument. As it turns out, they are both imitators. Each will later fall in love with the other after hearing that the other has fallen in love with them.



Leonato invites the new arrivals to stay at his home for a month, and Don Pedro accepts on behalf of everyone. Privately, Claudio tells Benedick that he has fallen for Leonato's daughter Hero, and asks him what he thinks. Benedick replies that he "looked on her," but "noted her not." (1.1.164) He finds her unattractive, and replies to each of Claudio's expressions of praise with mockery or disinterest. He changes the meaning of Claudio's metaphors: when Claudio asks "Can the world buy such a jewel [as Hero]?" Benedick replies "Yea, and a case to put it into." (1.1.181-182) He complains that there are not enough men committed to the bachelor's life, and compares marriage to wearing a yoke, like a beast of burden in the field. He also claims that Beatrice, despite her bad personality, is more beautiful than Hero.

Benedick's use of "noting," is the first instance of the games played with this word in the play: here, he uses it to make a distinction between looking at and noticing, i.e. just seeing something and finding something to be meaningful. The pun of the play is that many things that are "nothing," (i.e. events which have not really happened) are nonetheless "noted" by the characters. Just as he did previously with Beatrice, Benedick makes Claudio's language mean something other than what he intended. Claudio uses jewel to mean "rare, unique beauty," but Benedick uses it to mean something easily bought and ornamental. This is an example of how much reality is defined by language in the play: Benedick resists love and marriage mostly by using clever words.Benedick's casual mention of Beatrice's beauty hints at their future relationship.

Don Pedro enters the room where Benedick and Claudio are speaking, and asks what they are being so secretive about. Benedick instantly tells him about Claudio's love for Hero. Claudio attempts to deny it, but Benedick's teasing and Don Pedro's sympathetic interest bring it out of him. Benedick says that he would rather burn at the stake than admit Hero is worthy of being loved by Claudio. Accusing him of being a heretic in matters of love and beauty, Don Pedro swears that Benedick will someday fall in love himself, quoting the proverb that "In time the savage **bull** doth bear the yoke." (1.1.260-261) Benedick wittily denies it, promising that if he ever gets married, they might as well hang him like a blind cupid over a brothel, or paint him like a **horned** animal on a ridiculous sign reading "Here you may see Benedick the married man." (1.1.267-268) The good-natured argument ends, and Don Pedro sends Benedick to tell Leonato they will all be coming to supper soon.

Spilled secrets and other kinds of hearsay are the most common plot device in the play: almost everything happens because the secret of someone's love (real or pretended) has got out among the other characters. Love is often compared to religion in this play. Benedick imagines himself as a heretic, burned at the stake for his resistance to love, which everyone else believes in. Don Pedro's proverb means that even the most proud independent people eventually end up tangled in relationships like marriage. The image of the bull suggests the wildness of the bachelor, while the yoke represents the loss of freedom that comes with settling down. The horns and ridiculous sign which Benedick mentions suggest the possible shame involved in love and marriage—the cuckold, a man whose wife has cheated on him, is traditionally represented with horns.

Now that Benedick is gone, Claudio speaks with Don Pedro more honestly about his love. He explains that before he left for war, he looked at Hero with "a soldier's **eye**," (1.1.297-298) but now has more delicate feelings for her. To help Claudio win Hero's heart and hand in marriage, Don Pedro proposes a plan. He plans to disguise himself as Claudio during the evening's masked dance, and to woo Hero for him, "tak[ing] her hearing prisoner with the force / And strong encounter of my amorous tale." (1.1.323-324) Claudio agrees.

Here, Claudio introduces the comparison of love and war that comes up many times in the play. Claudio contrasts them: war is rough and has no place for love, which is soft and delicate. Don Pedro, however, speaks of love as though it is *war, suggesting that they are more similar than Claudio thinks. His plan is like a military strategy, and he even talks about taking Hero's hearing "prisoner," as soldiers might take prisoners on the battlefield.*

ACT 1, SCENE 2

Leonato's brother Antonio meets him in the garden, and tells him that one of his men has overheard something interesting: that Don Pedro is in love with Hero, and intends to propose that night at the dance. Leonato is suspicious of the news, and decides not to take it too seriously before it happens. Still, he instructs Antonio to let Hero know, so that she's better prepared for the proposal if it comes. Leonato's relatives walk up and down the garden, making preparations for the feast.

The preparations made by Antonio and Leonato suggest the theatrical nature of love. Like an actress, Hero is going to be coached on the situation before it happens, in parallel to Claudio and Don Pedro's schemes. Suggestively, these preparations are made right beside the food preparation for the feast—love can be stage-managed like a party.

ACT 1, SCENE 3

The melancholy Don John has a conversation with his follower, Conrade. Conrade asks why Don John is acting so gloomy, and advises him to be more patient with his mood. Don John responds that he was "born under Saturn," (1.3.11) and is unable to hide his feelings. Conrade cautions him to at least have a better attitude toward his brother Don Pedro, who is just beginning to accept him back into his good graces. But Don John refuses, saying that he would rather be himself, and hated by everyone, than falsely friendly. Because of this honesty in his behavior, he calls himself a "plain-dealing villain." (1.3.32)

It was once believed that people born under the planet Saturn were naturally gloomy and slow to change their moods. Don Pedro's "saturnine" personality contrasts with those of almost every other character in the play. Where he is melancholy and unchanging, they are lively and experience huge changes over the course of the story. His "plain-dealing," villainy is the opposite of the good natured tricks played by the other characters, who have the best intentions in mind.

Another of Don John's followers, Borachio, arrives to give him some news. While eavesdropping from behind an arras (a kind of tapestry), Borachio learned of Don Pedro's intention to disguise himself and woo Hero for Claudio. Don John complains that Claudio "has all the glory of [his] overthrow," (1.3.67) in battle, and wants to get even with him by destroying the marriage proposal. He imagines that Don Pedro and the others are enjoying themselves even more because of his own unhappiness. Along with Conrade and Borachio, Don John heads out to supper at Leonato's, hoping that he might be able to screw something up either there, or at the masked dance after.

Eavesdropping is the dominant plot device in the play. Almost everything happens because an eavesdropper heard about it. This is common throughout Shakespeare: Hamlet kills Polonius, for instance, after finding him eavesdropping behind an arras. The reason for Don John's unhappiness is revealed: he was defeated in battle by his brother Don Pedro, whom he was trying to overthrow. Since Claudio has been celebrated for his role in the victory, he's an excellent victim for Don John's evil tricks.

ACT 2, SCENE 1

Antonio, Leonato, Beatrice and Hero discuss Don John's bad attitude, comparing him with Benedick. Beatrice says that Don John talks too little, while Benedick talks too much. Beatrice jokes that a man somewhere in between would make a good husband. Leonato cautions Beatrice about her wit, warning that a man will never marry her if she speaks too bitingly. Beatrice says she is thankful to God she has no husband, in some part because she hates **beards**. When Leonato advises her to find a **beardless** husband, she suggests that such a husband would not be manly enough to deal with her. Further, Beatrice jokes that all men are sons of Adam and thus her brothers—incest would be a sin. When the conversation turns to Hero and the expected proposal from Claudio, Beatrice advises her to "dance out the answer," (1.1.72) and not to give in too quickly. She compares love to a dance: it begins quickly and excitingly, slows down with marriage, and ends with exhaustion and sinking into the grave. The conversation ends when the partygoers arrive.

Beatrice defends herself against the idea of marriage by disqualifying every option Leonato gives her. Beards become more important as the play goes on. Here, beards are used as a symbol of masculinity: Beatrice divides men into bearded men, who wouldn't put up with her, and beardless men, who wouldn't be able to handle her. Beatrice also compares love to a dance, and divides it into three stages. Both she and the action of the play itself present love as a sequence of steps or poses, rather than as a unique bond.

The dance begins. Don Pedro, masked and assumed to be Claudio, goes off to propose to Hero. She wants to see his face, but he charmingly deflects her request. Benedick, also masked, speaks with Beatrice. Pretending not to know who he is, she asks if it's true that Signior Benedick says she gets all her witty jokes from a book. When the disguised Benedick asks who this Benedick is, she says he is "the prince's jester: a very dull fool." (2.1.137) She says he must be somewhere in the "fleet," (party) and regrets that he hasn't "boarded [her]," (come to argue with her). (2.1.143) Benedick leaves. Meanwhile, Don John and Borachio, attempting to cause mischief, approach Claudio and pretend to mistake him for Benedick. They convince him that Don Pedro is in love with Hero, and wooing her for himself. Claudio feels jealous and betrayed.

Prince Don Pedro's wooing of Hero in disguise is the one trick that is not uncovered by the end of the play. By calling him a fool, Beatrice suggests that the other characters are laughing at *Benedick, not because of his sarcastic wit. Beatrice uses a situation from naval warfare to ask why Benedick has not come to match wits with her. The "merry war," of wits is compared to real war in a metaphor that extends throughout the play.*

Claudio concludes that in love, you cannot even trust your friends. Delivering a monologue, he observes that lovers should trust only their own senses, and never the information or help of others: "Let every **eye** negotiate for itself / And trust no agent." (2.1.177-178) When Benedick arrives to tell him that Don Pedro has wooed Hero for *him*, he refuses to believe it, and mopes away. Alone, Benedick complains about Beatrice's insults, swearing that he isn't as she says and promising revenge. Don Pedro arrives, looking to give Claudio the good news. He also tells Benedick that Beatrice has been offended by him. Hearing this, Benedick erupts with frustration about Beatrice's insults. He complains that he feels like a man "with a whole army shooting at me," (2.1.247) and that "every word stabs." (2.1.248-249)

Ironically, Claudio's decision not to trust anyone is based on his trust in the lie Borachio has just told him. Claudio's distrust of hearsay and the help of others in love would be a good warning for every character in this play. That Benedick is hurt by Beatrice's insults serves to show that he cares what she thinks—a hint that he will later fall in love with her. Speaking of their battle of wits, he again uses military metaphors.

Just as Benedick is speaking of her, Beatrice arrives, along with Claudio, Leonato and Hero. Benedick and Beatrice begin arguing bitterly. A remark Beatrice makes seems to imply that she once had a romance with Benedick, which ended badly. Angry, Benedick departs. Don Pedro announces the good news: Claudio and Hero are going to get married. Claudio is overjoyed to the point of speechlessness. When Beatrice complains that everyone is getting married but her, Don Pedro promises to find her a husband. Beatrice flirts with Don Pedro, and then leaves in a good mood, happy about her cousin Hero's engagement. Don Pedro, Leonato, and Claudio set the wedding day for the next Monday. In the meantime, Don Pedro proposes a plan to bring Benedick and Beatrice together. He boasts that if they can do it, they will prove themselves better love-gods than Cupid.

The hint that Beatrice and Benedick may once have been lovers serves to explain their fighting, and set up their later romance. As Claudio's shaming of Hero will later demonstrate, love and hate are not so far apart. Claudio's surprise at his good fortune here is parallel to his surprise in the final scene of the play, when he finds out that Hero is still alive. It is surprising that Beatrice— who claimed she never wanted to marry at the beginning of this scene—now seems to want to. In Much Ado, love often comes through imitation: Beatrice is inspired by Hero's engagement, just as she will late be inspired by Benedick's supposed love for her.

ACT 2, SCENE 2

Don John has heard that Claudio and Hero are going to be married. Borachio proposes a plan to ruin it. Since he is a lover of Margaret, Hero's chambermaid, he explains how he will arrange what looks like a meeting between Hero and a secret lover. First, he plans to have Don John warn Claudio and Don Pedro that Hero is a promiscuous young woman, and that it would be shameful for Claudio to marry her. After, he plans to lure them into witnessing a meeting at Hero's window, where he and Margaret will appear, seeming to be Hero and another man. Don John agrees to the plan, and offers Borachio a thousand ducats to carry it out.

Don John decides on a scheme to ruin a marriage just one scene after Don Pedro decides on a scheme to create one. The rival schemes of the two brothers are parallel to their rivalry in war before the play begins. While the other tricks in the play are based on hearsay, Borachio's plan is based on a misleading image. As Claudio says in the previous scene, people tend to trust their eyes.

ACT 2, SCENE 3

Alone in Leonato's garden, Benedick complains that Claudio, who he had considered a bachelor and a military man at heart, has become a lover and is planning to be married. He contrasts the accessories of war with the accessories of love: Claudio has traded the "drum and fife," of war for the "tabor and pipe," (2.3.13-15) of romance. Benedick wonders if he will ever change his mind about love and marriage, and concludes that it is more likely that he will turn into an oyster. Listing every good quality that a woman might possess, he decides that he could never be with any woman who did not possess all of them.

Benedick's annoyance with Claudio's engagement suggests that he might be feeling the pressure to do the same—just as Hero's engagement seemed to briefly change Beatrice's mind about marriage. With his talk of instruments, Benedick continues the comparison and contrast between war and courtship in the play. Oysters were considered aphrodisiacs and symbols of love. Like Beatrice in the first scene of this act, Benedick avoids the idea of marriage by constructing an impossible partner—the perfect woman—as the only person he could be with.

Don Pedro, Leonato, Claudio and Balthazar enter the garden. Benedick hides behind some trees, and though they see him they pretend not to notice him. At Don Pedro's urging, Balthazar plays some music. Before beginning to play, Balthazar says: "**Note** this before my **notes**; There's not a **note** of mine that's worth the **noting**." (2.3.55) Benedick, listening from his hiding place, finds the music beautiful but wonders if Balthazar's terrible voice might be an evil omen. Don Pedro sends Balthasar away, asking him to make sure there is music for "the Lady Hero's chamber-window," (2.3.86-87) the next night.

Balthazar's punning on noting and nothing gets at the heart of the play and its title. Much ado (a lot of fuss) is made because characters keep noting (noticing, believing) nothings (lies and tricks based on hearsay). Balthazar's bad singing suggests to Benedick that there is something "off," about the whole meeting that follows; which, of course, there is. Don Pedro's innocent mention of Lady Hero's chamber-window is meant to be ominous for the audience, which knows about Don John's trick.

Don Pedro, Leonato and Claudio talk somberly about Beatrice's supposed love for Benedick. Aware that Benedick is listening from the trees, Leonato swears that Beatrice's passion is "past the infinite of thought," (2.3.101) and expresses sympathy for her situation. They claim that she writes Benedick letters every night, and has sworn to die rather than reveal her love for him, or even to stop acting hostile. They worry that even if she did reveal her love, Benedick would likely mock her. Each expresses his admiration for Beatrice, and decides that Benedick is unworthy of her. Benedick, listening in, concludes that it must be true—someone as old and **bearded** as Leonato, the Governor of Messina, would never participate in a childish trick. Benedick quickly realizes that he must return Beatrice's love, saying that "When I said I would die a bachelor, I did not think I should live till I were married." (2.3.243-244)

Characters in Much Ado About Nothing trust and are influenced by what they overhear more than what they are directly told. Though Claudio and Don Pedro have told Benedick to give love a chance before, it is only when he overhears *them that this changes anything. To make it seem plausible that Beatrice loves Benedick, Don Pedro, Leonato and Claudio come up with explanations for her bad attitude—she does it to hide her love. And, in a play full of people falling for other people's lies, Benedick believes the lie that Beatrice's hate for him is itself a lie.*

Beatrice comes to invite Benedick in for dinner. Uncharacteristically, he treats her with gallantry and friendliness. Thinking he is simply afraid to banter with her as usual, Beatrice accuses him of having "no stomach," (2.3.256) and departs. Despite her rudeness, Benedick interprets everything she has said as having double meanings that betray her love for him.

What he has overheard has such an influence on his perception of reality that Benedick believes Beatrice loves him—and this in spite of the clear evidence to the contrary which is right before his eyes. Once again, language—not sight—is the determining factor in a character's perception of reality.

ACT 3, SCENE 1

The female characters prepare a similar ambush. Hero sends Margaret to fetch Beatrice, instructing her to say that she has overheard Hero and Ursula gossiping about her. Hero remarks that "Cupid's crafty arrow… only wounds by hearsay." (3.1.22-23) As soon as they notice Beatrice sneak up on them, Hero and Ursula begin an argument about Benedick's supposed love for Beatrice—should he tell her about it? Hero argues that he should keep it to himself, because Beatrice's wit, pride, and fault-finding make her incapable of love. Hero especially criticizes Beatrice's tendency to ignore every man's good qualities by "spell[ing] him backward." (3.1.63) She also worries that Beatrice would mock him to death: "[to] die with mocks… is as bad as die with tickling." (3.1.79-80) Ursula suggests that it would show bad judgment on Beatrice's part to reject Benedick, the best man in Italy. Like Benedick, Beatrice falls for the trap. When the two other women have left, she decides that she must marry Benedick after all.

Hero's saying about hearsay applies not only to the loves in the play, but to everything else as well. Each character's view of the situation is influenced more by what they have heard from others than what they have experienced for themselves. This allows for a great amount of irony, in the sense that the audience always knows something that a certain character does not. Hero compares Beatrice's disdainful perspective on men to spelling backward. This direct comparison of judgment to writing emphasizes the importance of language to the perception of reality in the play. Hero's worry that Beatrice will mock Benedick to death echoes one of the play's central themes—love comes with a great risk of shame—and actually predicts her own future, as the shaming she receives from Claudio on her wedding day causes her own "death."

ACT 3, SCENE 2

Benedick arrives in the middle of a conversation between Don Pedro, Leonato and Claudio. He is pale, melancholy, and complains of a toothache. Realizing what has happened, Don Pedro and Claudio begin to tease him for having fallen in love. They point out that he has shaved his **beard**, rubbed himself with civet (a form of musk or perfume), and has begun to dress differently. Claudio says that his spirit has "crept into a lute-string and [is] now governed by stops." (3.2.59-60) They hint that some woman might also be in love with Benedick, and Claudio puns that she "dies" (3.2.67) of passion for him. Annoyed, Benedick asks to speak with Leonato in private. Don Pedro and Claudio rejoice at the success of their scheme, concluding that he must be going to ask for Beatrice's hand.

Benedick's sudden change in appearance goes along with the idea of love as masquerade: being in love results in a certain pose and attitude. The shaving of Benedick's beard symbolizes the beginning of his domestication by love. We remember that Beatrice does not like men with beards. Claudio's comparison of Benedick to a lute continues the play's extended metaphor connecting love to music. Here, it suggests that Benedick is "played on," like an instrument by his passion, without having any say in it. There is an innuendo in Claudio's joke: "dies," can also mean "has an orgasm."

Don John comes to tell Claudio and Don Pedro that Hero has been disloyal and is, in fact, "Every man's Hero." (3.2.106) Refusing to say anything further, he promises that if they come with him to her window that evening, they will see her meet with one of her lovers. Horrified, Don Pedro and Claudio agree to come and witness the affair. Should it be true, Don Pedro promises to join Claudio in publicly shaming Hero at the wedding for her unfaithfulness.

The other characters use hearsay and staged conversations to accomplish their tricks. Don John, who is a man of few words, sets up a false image*: Hero and her "lover," in the window.*

ACT 3, SCENE 3

Dogberry, the magistrate of Messina, meets with Verges and the members of the night watch to appoint a new constable. He appoints a man who is literate. It is implied by his constant misuse of words that he himself is not. Dogberry begins to give the new constable and watchmen advice. In a comic and roundabout way, he suggests that they leave the criminals alone, reasoning that "they that touch pitch will be defiled." (3.3.56-57) Verges remarks that Dogberry is a merciful magistrate, and Dogberry admits that he could not even bear to hang a dog. As he continues giving advice, Dogberry repeatedly misunderstands the meaning of words and the law. Finishing, he instructs the members of the watch to keep an eye on Leonato's door—the big wedding is happening on the next day.

Dogberry's malapropisms (misuses of words) and general lack of intelligence set up a major irony in the play: Dogberry, who has the information to stop (later, to uncover) Don John's deception, is too incompetent and inarticulate to do so. This ties in with the play's theme of language and the perception of reality. Dogberry's inability to use language causes the other characters to misperceive reality. Dogberry's comment about touching pitch is a good summary of how most characters in the play view shame: you can be tainted by even being close to someone who experiences it. Don Pedro's fear of this is what lead him to agree to Don John's scheme in the previous scene.

The members of the watch overhear Conrade and Borachio speaking as they shelter under a roof from the rain. Borachio brags that Don John has given him a thousand ducats for convincing Claudio and Don Pedro of Hero's betrayal. For reasons which are unclear to Conrade, Borachio begins speaking about fashion, comparing it to a "deformed thief," (3.3.131) which steals the true forms of young people, replacing them with fashionable dress, poses, and behavior. A night watchman misunderstands him, thinking he might be talking about a thief named "Deformed." He and the other members of the night watch spring forth from the bushes and arrest the two conspirators for their "dangerous piece of lechery." (3.3.167)

Because they are standing under a dripping roof, the members of the watch are literally "eaves-dropping." The word originally meant to stand under the eaves extending outside a house, and listen to the conversation within. Borachio's discussion of fashion relates to the theme of love and masquerade in the play—he is pointing out how important and deceptive appearances can be. The constable of the watch says "lechery," but means to say "treachery." Ironically, lechery (sexual lust) is what Borachio has caused Hero to be accused of.

ACT 3, SCENE 4

Margaret helps dress Hero for her wedding, complimenting her on her fashion and teasing her about soon being the "heavier for a husband." (3.4.35) Beatrice enters, claiming to have a cold, and Margaret teases her as well. Accusing her of being in love, Margaret offers her the medicinal herb "Carduus Benedictus," as a cure. Ursula arrives to fetch Hero to her wedding.

Margaret probably means to suggest that Hero will become pregnant, but what happens at the wedding makes her joke an ominous double-entendre: Hero will indeed be heavier (i.e. sadder) after her wedding.In the Renaissance, passionate love was often compared to, or even considered to be, a disease. Margaret's offer of the medicinal herb "Carduus Benedictus," is also a sly reference to Benedick's name.

ACT 3, SCENE 5

Dogberry and Verges arrive at Leonato's house on the day of the wedding, intending to warn him about the treachery of Don John and Borachio. Dogberry wastes time trying to make himself look better in front of Leonato. He tries to look clever and aristocratic by using fancy words, often incorrectly, and by insulting Verges for being old and dull-witted. Because of this, he never gets around to mentioning the deception he has uncovered. Leonato, in a rush to prepare for the wedding, loses his patience. He sends Dogberry and Verges off with glasses of wine, instructing them to examine the criminals themselves.

Dogberry is trying to impress his superior Leonato, who is the Governor of Messina. Ironically, this prevents him from doing Leonato a real favor: saving his daughter from slander and humiliation. Dogberry mocks Verges for being old. Leonato will later be mocked for the same reason—the old come to seem ridiculous in a play as focused on youth and love as Much Ado About Nothing.

ACT 4, SCENE 1

Claudio is about to be married to Hero in the church. When asked by the Friar if anyone has any objections, he stops the proceedings. Dramatically, he gives Hero back to her father Leonato, claiming he has been tricked by her deceptive, maidenly appearances. He compares her to animals "that rage in savage sensuality," (4.1.61) and tells everyone how he saw her with a lover on the previous night. Leonato is so shocked that he asks aloud if these accusations could possibly be true, and if he might be dreaming. Claudio replies with the rhetorical question "are our eyes our own?" (4.1.71) meaning that everything he's said is obviously true. Don John and Don Pedro speak up in support of Claudio. Finally, Claudio accuses Hero directly. When he refuses to believe in her denial, she faints from horror. Leonato asks if anyone has a dagger for him to kill himself with. Having done what they came to do, DonPedro, DonJohn and Claudio depart.

Claudio's decision to leave Hero at the altar so dramatically underscores the theatrical nature of love in the play. Claudio compares Hero to an animal, highlighting the connection made between love and the loss of self-control. Claudio's rhetorical question might seem like a way of saying "Obviously," but the question he asks can also be taken seriously. The "eyes," of the characters in Much Ado are often not *their own at all: they see what other characters have tricked them into seeing. The dignity of Leonato's old age disappears in this scene: his threat of suicide seems over-the-top, better suited to the passion of one of the younger characters.*

Hero revives. Leonato seems upset she is still alive, crying out that she should have died of shame. Outraged, he shouts that "she is fallen / Into a pit of ink," (4.1.140) and that her shame has infected him. Benedick cautions him to be patient, while Beatrice is immediately certain that Hero has been slandered. Interrupting Leonato's ranting despair, the Friar says that he believes that what has been said about Hero cannot be true. Having looked for a long time at her face, he believes that her blushing indicates innocence, not guilt. Hero herself denies what has been said about her, and Benedick suggests that Don John might have something to do with what has happened.

Leonato's "pit of ink," comment reminds us of Dogberry's remark that "they that touch pitch shall be defiled." The fear of shame leads Claudio to end the wedding (for fear of becoming a cuckold), and also to Leonato's overreaction in this scene. Fathers overreacting over their daughters are common in Shakespeare's comedies and tragedies. In Much Ado About Nothing, very little can be taken on the basis of appearances. But the friar's confidence that Hero is innocent suggests otherwise, that one can see the truth in others by looking deeply at them.

The Friar comes up with a plan: Leonato will pretend that Hero has died, and meanwhile investigate the truth of Claudio's accusations. If they are true, he will send her to a convent. If they are false, the marriage will be revived: the Friar guesses that Claudio will be filled with regret when he learns that his accusation killed Hero, and all the more ready to love her again when she reappears. Benedick expresses support, and Leonato agrees to the plan. Everyone leaves but Benedick and Beatrice.

In the Renaissance, women who disgraced themselves or never married were often sent to convents to become nuns. The friar's insight that Claudio will love Hero more after her "return from the dead," suggests that love increases from overcoming obstacles. This is one of the central themes of the play.

Benedick comforts Beatrice, who is weeping over what has happened to her cousin. In the course of their conversation, they confess their love for one another. When Benedick says he would do anything for her, she asks him to kill Claudio for what he has done to Hero. When Benedick refuses, she claims she will be unable to love him unless he does. She claims that, were she a man, she would do it herself, and complains that manhood no longer exists, and has been replaced with the posture of manhood. Goaded by these bitter words and his love for her, Benedick agrees to kill Claudio.

Beatrice's request marks the moment in the play when the misleading appearances start threatening to have permanent consequences on the world. Benedick's love and Claudio's actions are both based on tricks (one created by Don Pedro, the other by Don Jon), but here begin to threaten a real and permanent result—Claudio's or Benedick's death. Beatrice's complaint about the posture of manhood also ties into this theme: appearances must be proved by actions.

ACT 4, SCENE 2

Dogberry, Verges, the night watch, and the Sexton clumsily interrogate Conrade and Borachio. Instead of focusing on the important matter in the case—that Claudio and Don Pedro have been tricked into doubting Hero's faithfulness—Dogberry becomes obsessed with minor matters. Throughout the interrogation, Dogberry comically misuses language: meaning to say that Borachio has called Don John a villain (which he does not think is true), he instructs the constable to "Write down Prince John a villain." (4.2.42) When Conrade insults him, he asks "Dost thou not suspect my place?" (4.2.74) meaning to say "respect" instead of "suspect." The Sexton and members of the watch get around to finishing the interrogation and reveal the prisoner's guilt in faking Hero's lack of faithfulness. Dogberry becomes offended when Conrade calls him an ass, repeats the insult several times, and imagines how horrible it would be if that comment had been written down. Finally, they all head to Leonato's to deliver their report.

"Comic relief," characters like Dogberry are usually placed by Shakespeare in his tragedies, to relieve tension. Much Ado is already a comedy, but Dogberry makes his appearance just as the play seems about to take a tragic turn. Dogberry's misuse of similarly-sounding words is there for its comedy. But his "accidents," often convey something truer than what he means for them to say: Don John is in fact a villain, and Dogberry's incompetence does make his position suspect. Dogberry is so offended at being called an ass that he repeats it for the rest of the play, making himself look like an ass.

ACT 5, SCENE 1

Antonio cautions his brother Leonato not to be so upset about what has happened to Hero. Leonato responds that the advice of those who are not suffering themselves means absolutely nothing to those who are. In a long speech, he rails against attempts to "patch grief with proverbs," (5.1.17) and "charm ache with air and agony with words." (5.1.26) Antonio calls this opinion childish, and advises him to get back at Don Pedro, Don John and Claudio instead. Leonato agrees, admitting he has come to believe his daughter was lied about.

Leonato's outrage and complaining make him act childish, despite his years and gray beard. His fit here is a lot like Claudio's in the second act: he rejects the words and offers of help made by other people, choosing to trust only his own feelings.

Don Pedro and Claudio arrive. When Leonato accuses them of murdering his daughter with their slander, a fight almost breaks out. Leonato hints at challenging Claudio to a duel. Antonio, who thinks that his niece Hero is really dead, steps in and tries to start a fight right then and there. Leonato calms Antonio down, and leads him away.

Leonato has to keep his brother from ruining the entire plan: Claudio will marry Hero after her name has been cleared.

Benedick arrives. Claudio and Don Pedro say that they had been looking for him, and mention the fight they almost had with the old men just before. When Claudio asks Benedick to cheer them up with his wit, he replies that it is in his scabbard—do they want him to draw? Benedick challenges Claudio to a duel, and Claudio accepts. Claudio implies that beating Benedick will be as easy as carving meat at a feast. Not yet believing that Benedick is serious about dueling, Don Pedro teases him about Beatrice's love. Paying no attention to this, Benedick leaves, promising to meet "Lord **Lackbeard**," (5.1.192) later in combat. As he goes, he mentions that Don John has fled from the city, suggesting that running away probably means he is guilty of something or other. Don Pedro and Claudio finally realize that Benedick is not kidding, concluding that he has lost his reason out of love for Beatrice.

To show that he isn't joking around, Benedick implies that his sword is his wit. Earlier in the play, characters spoke about violence as a metaphor for battles of wit. Now, the reverse is true: Benedick and Claudio talk about witty banter and "carving meat," for a feast, but really mean violence. Benedick uses Claudio's lack of a beard to insult him and suggest that he is not masculine. It is ironic that Claudio accuses Benedick of losing his wits over love. After all, it's Claudio's passion for Hero that has caused the confused and dangerous situation in this scene.

Dogberry, Verges and the members of the watch arrive with Borachio and Conrade in their custody. Don Pedro is shocked to see two of his brother's men arrested. Dogberry has Borachio confess his treachery, and Borachio brags that "I have deceived even your very eyes; what your wisdoms could not discover, these shallow fools have brought to light." (5.1.231-233) Don Pedro and Claudio are filled with remorse for their awful mistake, and Claudio exclaims that he again loves Hero as he did when he first saw her.

Borachio reveals one of the central ironies of the play: the information needed to stop the evil plan has somehow ended up in the hands of the most incompetent characters. We can see this as a delaying tactic by Shakespeare. The long time it takes for the truth to come out allows for the story to unfold in more interesting ways.

Leonato and Antonio reenter, and Leonato forgives Claudio on the condition that he will admit Hero's innocence, put an epitaph on her tomb, and marry Leonato's niece. Claudio, filled with gratitude and regret, agrees to do so. Though it is totally unrelated to the conversation going on (as well as inappropriate), Dogberry complains to Leonato that Conrade called him an ass, and urges Leonato to correct him. Leonato and the members of the watch head off to interrogate Margaret about her involvement in the scheme.

Leonato sends Claudio to a funeral right before the wedding. This is intended to heighten Claudio's surprise and joy at finding Hero still alive in the final scene. Once again, it is a ploy or tactic in the "war" of love. Dogberry's biggest problem in language is also his biggest problem in social situations. Just as he doesn't know which word belongs in which sentence, he doesn't know what kind of behavior is appropriate in a given situation.

ACT 5, SCENE 2

Benedick banters with Margaret, who calls his gibes as "blunt as fencer's foils." (5.2.13) Benedick says that this is because his wit is not meant to hurt women. Leaving to fetch Beatrice, Margaret wittily replies that women have bucklers to defend themselves from the swords of men. While he waits for Beatrice to arrive, Benedick complains that he cannot write a good love poem for Beatrice—he was "not born under a rhyming planet." (5.2.40)

There is a metaphoric connection between war, witty banter, and sex here. Bucklers are shields designed to catch the tips of swords—this is a rather obvious sexual innuendo. Benedick's difficulty writing poetry stands in for the way characters in this play are trapped by language. Unable to use it for their own purposes, they are caught by the language of other people—whether by hearsay, witty put-downs, or tricks.

Beatrice arrives and wants to know what has happened between Benedick and Claudio. After learning that they have only had an argument, she threatens to leave without giving Benedick a kiss. She is relieved when Benedick explains that he has challenged Claudio to a duel. From there, the two begin talking like lovers, engaging in a more friendly and flirtatious version of their earlier "merry war" of wits. In the middle of this, Ursula arrives and tells them the good news: that Don John's tricks have been uncovered, and Hero's name cleared.

Again, Beatrice is dissatisfied with just words. The parallels between violent battles, battles of wits, and the battle of sex (see the discussion between Margaret and Benedick above) are extended here. For Benedick and Beatrice, the same way of speaking works for both flirting and fighting.

ACT 5, SCENE 3

Don Pedro accompanies Claudio to the tomb of Hero. Claudio reads out an epitaph for her, and attendants sing a dirge. The two men then depart for Claudio's second marriage, with which he hopes he will have much better luck.

Here, Much Ado comes closest to tragedy. Claudio has to be in despair over Hero, so that he'll be overjoyed to see her when she "comes back to life."

ACT 5, SCENE 4

Leonato, Benedick, Antonio and the Friar wait at the church for Claudio and Don Pedro. Everyone is happy that the slanders against Hero have been discredited, and that Don John has fled from Messina. Benedick takes the opportunity to ask Leonato if he can marry Beatrice. Leonato immediately gives his permission, and slyly hints that he may have something to do with Benedick's love, and Hero with Beatrice's: "That **eye** my daughter lent her." (5.4.23)

Here, the play suggests another answer to Claudio's earlier question: "Are our eyes our own?" Leonato hints that Benedick and Beatrice perceive one another a certain way because they have been given "eyes," by him and the others. Their senses have been affected by those who have tricked them.

Claudio and Don Pedro arrive, and two masked women—Beatrice and Hero—are brought forward. Claudio, noticing that Benedick is nervous, teases him about becoming a married man, but promises that he shall have gold-tipped **horns** like Jove (Zeus). As Claudio prepares to marry the masked woman, presented to him as Antonio's daughter, he promises to go through with it even if she is an "Ethiope." (5.4.38) When he discovers the niece is really Hero he is overjoyed to find her still alive.

The image of the horned (cuckolded) and yoked beast has been happily transformed. Now, Benedick is compared to Zeus, a god known for his power and sexual appetite, who once disguised himself as a bull to seduce Europa. Dark-skinned women were considered unattractive in the Europe of Shakespeare's time.The unmasking of Hero at the end of the play suggests that everything that happened up to this point has been a kind of dream or masquerade: the hurt, outrage and threatened violence can all be forgotten.

Benedick unmasks Beatrice and asks if she loves him. She says that she loves him "no more than reason," (5.4.74) and when asked the same question, he says the same. They discover that they have been set up by their friends and relatives, and did not initially love each other after all. At the last minute, Claudio and Hero bring out two love poems: one written by Benedick for Beatrice, and one written by Beatrice for Benedick. Benedick cries out "A miracle! Here's our own hands against our hearts." (5.4.91) Joyous, Benedick kisses Beatrice and calls for dancing, even though the Friar objects that it should wait until after the wedding. Defying the others to mock him, Benedick concludes in favor of marriage, saying "there is no staff more reverend than the one tipped with **horn**." (5.4.122-123)

In the very end, the theme of love as a kind of game or ritual—with a set of rules and a sequence of steps—becomes clear. Though Beatrice and Benedick learn that they have been set up, they marry anyway—tricked or not, they have already gone through all the motions of the dance, and they now truly do love each other. The use of the poems as a marriage contract emphasizes the importance of language to the perception of reality in the play. Benedick insists that dancing happen before *the wedding. This reinforces the comparison between love and dancing that Beatrice makes earlier in the play. Marriage must come after, because it puts an end to the frantic and youthful of love.*

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