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Book Basics

AUTHOR
William Shakespeare

YEARS WRITTEN
1598–99

GENRE
Comedy

ABOUT THE TITLE
The title Much Ado About Nothing suggests the conflict of this play is about nothing, as one of the characters is accused of something that didn't actually happen. A second way to view the title is through the lens of Elizabethan language, when the word nothing was slang for female genitalia. This reading signals the play is about female sexuality.

In Context

Theater in the Elizabethan Era

William Shakespeare is thought to have written Much Ado About Nothing between 1598 and 1599. Shakespeare's writing occurred during the Elizabethan era, which was named for Queen Elizabeth I of England, who ruled from 1558 to 1603. An avid fan of music, poetry, and drama, Elizabeth's ascension to the throne ushered in the English Renaissance movement. One of her most important contributions to the arts was approving the construction of the first public theaters in the country, which gave audiences many opportunities to see the latest work of national playwrights, whose works were departing from the religious and turning toward the secular.

The Church of England often opposed the views imparted by opinionated playwrights, and it condemned theater in general for being vulgar. Parliament was known to shut down plays on the grounds of profanity, heresy, or opposing political viewpoints. Theater companies got around these objections by establishing theaters outside of London's city limits, which were still accessible to the general population. As many as 3,000 people could fit in some of these theaters, and they came from all walks of life. Performances, which usually took place in the afternoon, were rowdy affairs.

Suspicious of those who chose to make their living in the theater, church officials often characterized actors as bohemians lacking morals. Acting troupes like the Lord Chamberlain's Men, of which Shakespeare was a member, were comprised entirely of males. It was unseemly (and illegal)
for a woman to be onstage, so female roles were played by young boys.

Gender Roles in 16th-Century England

As in most societies prior to the 20th century, women played a secondary role to men in Elizabethan England, especially in public. The stereotype of the typical Elizabethan women, as often portrayed in literature, is that she was chaste, modest, subservient, and wholly dependent on the men in her life—first her father, then her husband. In those portrayals marriage is expected as unmarried women didn’t have any means of supporting themselves. That portrayal simply isn’t accurate. It was made popular by the "conduct books" of the 16th century, which served as manuals for the upper class on how to be good Christians. Though some people adhered to the standards presented by these so-called authorities on morals and behavior, that wasn't how most people lived their lives.

There were, of course, great differences between men's and women's roles in Elizabethan England. Most are rooted in schooling. Boys attended grammar school from the age of six or seven, then either did an apprenticeship in a trade or continued their education at university. With a few exceptions for the upper class, girls were schooled at home during their grammar school years. Their education focused on chastity and the household arts of cooking, cleaning, and sewing. Girls from wealthy families could learn reading, writing, and the keeping of accounts in the homes of family friends. The lack of formal education for women during the Elizabethan era led to a disparity between what men and women were thought to be capable of, when, in reality, women were rarely given the chance to develop or show their abilities and talents.

The division of labor between men and women was fairly straightforward. Men earned the bulk of the family's income while women took care of the home. That often included earning money from household duties. Housewives sold the products of their gardens, chicken coops, and spinning wheels at market, and they were wholly responsible for the marketing and bookkeeping of their wares. This was especially important to women who were not married or under a male relative's care. Women were allowed to own property in Elizabethan England, but the laws were such that as soon as a woman married all of her property became the property of her husband. Upon his death a widow would receive only one-third of the property her husband owned in his lifetime even if that property used to be hers. Many women found ways to get around this law, and it wasn't unusual for women to inherit property from their female relatives. Both sons and daughters were allowed to inherit property from their parents. Property ownership and the ability to earn money allowed women a modicum of independence in a society that placed emphasis on the education and independence of men.

Sex in the Elizabethan Era

Sex was considered to be a natural part of life in Elizabethan England. Women were expected to remain virgins until marriage, but most people thought it acceptable if an engaged couple had intercourse between the agreement to marry and the actual wedding ceremony. Historians estimate as many as 30 percent of women were pregnant on their wedding days, as was Shakespeare's wife, Anne Hathaway.

It was of utmost importance for a woman to maintain her virginity until she was at least engaged to be married. Rumors about premarital experiences not only harmed the woman's reputation, but her father’s and her husband’s as well. It was a father's duty to protect his daughter's chastity during her formative years. Likewise a wife's faithfulness was a reflection of her husband's status and his ability to control her. After marriage any expression of female sexuality, particularly feminine desire, was considered deeply disturbing. Many people thought women couldn't control their lustful urges. As a result it was quite common for men to fear their wives' infidelity. This concern preoccupies the male characters in Much Ado About Nothing.

Author Biography

Baptized on April 26, 1564, in Stratford-upon-Avon, England, William Shakespeare began and ended his formal education in grammar school where he would have learned how to read, write, and speak Latin, and where he studied the works of classical historians and poets. He didn't attend university, and at age 18 he found himself at the head of his own family. He married Anne Hathaway, a 26-year-old farmer's daughter, in November, 1582, and their first child was born six months later. Twins followed within two years.
Very little is known about Shakespeare's professional life between the end of grammar school and 1592. Scholars have varying theories regarding how he spent his time, ranging from service in the armed forces to taking care of theater-goers' horses during dramatic productions. By 1592 Shakespeare had settled himself in London while his family remained in Stratford-upon-Avon. He quickly made a name for himself as an actor and writer in the Lord Chamberlain's Men, the best theater troupe in the city.

Many of Shakespeare's early works fall within the genre of romantic comedy. *The Comedy of Errors* (c. 1589–94), *Love's Labour's Lost* (c. 1588–97), and *The Taming of the Shrew* (c. 1590–94) helped him establish a successful formula for romantic comedy, which usually included:

- a young, witty woman who is at odds with her male suitor;
- strife and turmoil as the young couple determines their respective places in society and courtship;
- a marriage that seems to resolve all conflict.

*Much Ado About Nothing*, which Shakespeare wrote sometime between 1598 and 1599, was heavily influenced by these earlier romantic comedies. Though the Claudio/Hero plot was adapted from several classical stories, scholars believe the Beatrice/Benedick plot was inspired by the dual plotline and tart-tongued lead female character Katherine or Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Shakespeare wrote plays and sonnets for 20 years before retiring to his hometown in 1612. He died on April 23, 1616.

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### Characters

#### Benedick

Benedick is from Padua in northern Italy. He's a soldier in the prince's regiment and a close friend of Don Pedro himself. Benedick is older than Claudio and is a self-avowed bachelor. He is known as something of a ladies' man but swears never to marry as he believes women are incapable of remaining faithful to their husbands. He has a quick wit and a silver tongue, and his friends and acquaintances look to him for a hearty laugh (often at his expense). Benedick is in a constant war of words with Beatrice, with whom he has been romantically linked in the past. Despite his promise to never marry, he finds himself falling in love with Beatrice after hearing she is in love with him. His affection for her is tested after Claudio slanders Hero, and Benedick proves his love for Beatrice by siding with the wronged woman instead of his old friends.

#### Beatrice

Beatrice is an orphan and under the guardianship of her uncle, Leonato. Though she is of noble blood and resides in the governor's home, Beatrice does not fit the mold of the traditional Elizabethan woman. Opinionated, outspoken, stubborn, independent, and full of wit, she declares herself averse to love. She is deeply distrustful of men, Benedick in particular. They have a long, unspecified history together, and the reader eventually learns Benedick broke Beatrice's heart. When the play begins, Beatrice seems interested only in insulting Benedick at every opportunity, but she softens at once when she overhears Benedick loves her. She quickly acknowledges she loves him in return.

#### Claudio

Claudio is a young soldier from Florence, Italy, who earned Don Pedro's praise and friendship during battle. He returns to Messina with a heart open to love and finds it in Hero. Claudio's youth marks him as both rash and insecure. He is quick to want to marry Hero and even quicker to cast her aside, believes rumors from untrustworthy sources not once but twice, and neglects every opportunity to ascertain the truth. Threatened by Hero's alleged infidelity, he not only calls off the wedding, he publicly shames Hero to make himself feel superior. He shows no remorse upon Hero's "death" until he learns her slander was part of a nefarious plot orchestrated by Don John. Only then does Claudio feel bad for what he has done to his so-called true love.

#### Don Pedro

Don Pedro is the Prince of Aragon. As such he is the person of highest rank in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Though he does not end up with a wife at the end of the play, he considers himself to be something of an expert lover as he woos Hero for Claudio and offers himself as husband to Beatrice. As a leader
his greatest fault is his innate loyalty to those who may not deserve it. Instead of believing Hero's claims she is innocent, he believes the word of his brother, with whom he only recently reconciled after a bitter feud. Don Pedro also falls victim to his own vanity when his perfect match is called into question and, with Claudio, he ensures the destruction of Hero's reputation.

Leonato

As the governor of Messina, Leonato is used to being in charge of not only his family but his city as well. Don Pedro's arrival changes the hierarchy of power. Though Don Pedro does not rule Messina, Leonato often defers to him out of respect for his title and his status as a guest. They have a friendly relationship until Hero's virtue is called into question. Leonato then breaks with social norms and supports the word of his daughter, a woman, rather than that of the high-ranking prince. He is more loyal to family than he is to power.

Don John

Don John has been marked as inadequate since birth because he was the product of an illegitimate relationship. He and Don Pedro, his half brother, have only recently mended their broken relationship when the play begins, and it is soon clear that Don John's part of the reconciliation was superficial at best. He knows he will never be as good as his brother the prince, so he decides to not even try and becomes a self-proclaimed villain. He's not even very good at that. He relies on Borachio to come up with and execute the plan to prevent the wedding between Claudio and Hero. He skips town when the deed is done, which is the next closest thing to admitting his guilt. He is caught at the play's end, but his punishment remains unknown.

Hero

Hero embodies the traits of what is often presented in classic literature as being the feminine ideal. She is modest, reserved, chaste, and happy to defer to her father's guidance. Hero is younger than Beatrice but old enough to marry. She is initially prepared to accept a proposal from Don Pedro, but she seems just as happy to be engaged to Claudio instead. Hero is unable to prove her innocence when accused of having a romantic relationship with a man other than Claudio. Instead of fighting back, she lets others take the lead in restoring her reputation. Hero still wants to marry Claudio despite the shame he brings upon her, which is a sign of both her forgiving nature and her acceptance of letting men run her life.
Minor Character
**Plot Summary**

*Much Ado About Nothing* takes place in Messina, Italy, in the late 1500s. The play opens as Don Pedro and his soldiers arrive at the home of Leonato, the governor of Messina. Leonato has a modest and virtuous daughter, Hero. He is also the guardian of Beatrice, Hero's quick-witted, sharp-tongued older cousin. Beatrice has been long engaged in a "merry war" of words with Benedick, one of Don Pedro's soldiers. They are back to their verbal battle within a matter of moments of the soldiers' arrival, each declaring they do not believe in love or marriage. Meanwhile Claudio, a young soldier from Florence, falls instantly in love with Hero. He asks Don Pedro to help him woo her during the evening's festivities.

Also returning from battle is Don John, Don Pedro's illegitimate half brother and self-described villain. Don John despises Claudio and intends to make him miserable at every turn. Don John and his friends devise a plan to convince Claudio that
Don Pedro wants Hero for himself. Easily duped, Claudio first believes this lie and sulks, but he is all smiles when he realizes Don Pedro has wooed Hero for Claudio. Although Claudio wants to marry Hero as soon as possible, Leonato convinces him it will take at least a week to make the wedding preparations. Don Pedro decides they will pass the time by convincing Beatrice and Benedick they are secretly in love with each other.

Benedick is the first victim of this scheme, for he overhears Don Pedro, Leonato, and Claudio talking about how much Beatrice loves him. Benedick is certain his friends tell the truth, particularly the elderly Leonato. He vows he will requite Beatrice's love and make her his wife despite his previous vehemence against marriage. Hero and Ursula play the same trick on Beatrice, and she falls for it just like Benedick.

As Beatrice and Benedick come to grips with their secret feelings for one another, Don John tries to figure out a way to stop Hero and Claudio's wedding. Borachio crafts a plan to slander Hero's good name. Don John will tell Claudio and Don Pedro that Hero isn't as virtuous as everyone thinks, then take them outside at midnight to prove it. Borachio will be at Hero's window with Margaret, Hero's gentlewoman, who will be dressed in Hero's clothing, suggesting that Hero has taken a lover behind Claudio's back. Claudio will think Margaret is Hero, Hero's reputation will be ruined, and the wedding will be called off. The plan works, and Claudio vows to shame Hero at the wedding the next morning.

After the deed is done, Borachio goes into town and blabs to Conrade about what happened. Their conversation is overheard by the night watch. Borachio and Conrade are arrested for slander by the clownish constable, Dogberry. He proceeds to Leonato's home the next morning, but between Leonato's impatience and Dogberry's overwhelming desire to impress, he ends up being sent away without telling Leonato what he came to tell him—Hero's life is about to be ruined.

The day of the wedding is ugly. Claudio accuses Hero for being unchaste and having relations with another man. Don Pedro backs him up. Leonato is furious with Hero since he believes Claudio and thinks that her actions have ruined his reputation. Claudio and Don Pedro leave the church, but Benedick stays behind. Beatrice swears to him Hero is innocent of the charges brought against her. Friar Francis comes up with a way to clear her reputation. They will pretend she has died from the shame of Claudio's accusations. Her death will make Claudio remember how much he loved her and he will see the error of his ways.

In the midst of all this, Benedick and Beatrice confess their love for one another. Beatrice is distraught about her cousin's fate, and Benedick promises he will do all he can to make things right. He ends up agreeing to challenge Claudio to a duel, and he's not the only one. Leonato's brother, Antonio, tries to fight Claudio. Although Claudio feels no remorse over the news of Hero's death, things change when Dogberry and the watch arrive with Conrade and Borachio in tow. Borachio confesses to the plot to slander Hero. Don Pedro and Claudio feel horrible about the role they played in Hero's death, and they pledge to do anything they can to make it up to Leonato. Leonato tells Claudio he must marry Antonio's daughter, who looks very much like Hero.

The makeup wedding takes place the next day. Claudio is presented with a masked bride he vows to marry. The woman removes the mask, revealing herself as the very alive Hero. Everyone is delighted. Benedick, who had been planning to marry Beatrice, has figured out he and Beatrice were duped into falling for one another. They agree their feelings run no deeper than friendship. But nobody believes this and Claudio produces a love poem written by Benedick while Hero shows one written by Beatrice. Outed by their own hands, Benedick and Beatrice give in and agree to marry. The happy couples dance as news arrives of Don John's arrest.
Introduction

1. The soldiers arrive in Messina.

Rising Action

2. Beatrice and Benedick resume their "merry war" of words.
3. Claudio falls in love with Hero.
4. Don John tells Claudio that Don Pedro woos Hero.
5. Borachio comes up with a plan to slander Hero.
7. Beatrice loves Benedick after hearing he loves her.
8. Don John reveals that Hero is unfaithful.
9. The night watch arrest Conrade and Borachio.
10. Leonato turns away Dogberry on the morning of the wedding.

Climax

11. Claudio publicly shames Hero at their wedding.

Falling Action

12. Hero pretends to be killed by Claudio's slander.
13. Borachio admits to his misdeeds; Hero is innocent.
14. Claudio mourns Hero’s death.
Resolution

15. Claudio and Hero and Beatrice and Benedick are to marry.
### Timeline of Events

**Monday evening**

Claudio and Hero get engaged at a masked ball; Don Pedro plans to join Benedick and Beatrice.

**Tuesday**

Borachio and Don John conspire to slander Hero and ruin the impending wedding.

**Later that week**

Benedick and Beatrice separately overhear conversations designed to make them fall in love.

**Sunday**

Don John tells Claudio and Don Pedro that Hero is not a maid, inviting them to see proof that night.

**Monday**

Claudio and Don Pedro shame Hero at the wedding ceremony.

**Monday, after midnight**

The night watch arrests Borachio and Conrade after overhearing how Hero was slandered.

**Later that day**

Beatrice and Benedick admit their love for one another. Benedick vows to avenge Hero’s reputation.

**Later that day**

The truth comes out about the plot to slander Hero, who Claudio thinks is now dead. He mourns.

**Tuesday**

Hero is revealed to be alive and well. Claudio and Hero plan to marry, as do Benedick and Beatrice.
Act Summaries

William Shakespeare divided *Much Ado About Nothing* into five acts. This study guide provides a summary and analysis of each scene within each act.

Act 1, Scene 1

Summary

*Much Ado About Nothing* opens at the home of Leonato, the governor of Messina, Italy. A messenger brings word to him, his daughter, Hero, and his niece, Beatrice, that Don Pedro, the Spanish Prince of Aragon, is due to arrive any moment with his battalion. The warriors are returning home from war victorious, thanks in particular to young Claudio, who "hath borne himself beyond the promise of his age, doing in the figure of a lamb the feats of a lion." Also amongst Don Pedro’s men will be Benedick, a young lord of Padua about whom Beatrice is particularly curious—and prickly. Although the messenger informs Benedick also performed well during battle, Beatrice twists his words into insults about Benedick. Leonato tells the messenger there is "a kind of merry war betwixt Signior Benedick" and Beatrice.

Don Pedro and his men arrive. They are warmly welcomed by Leonato, who invites them to stay for at least a month. Beatrice and Benedick immediately start their war of words, which will continue throughout the play. As Benedick insists he loves no one and will never marry, Beatrice vows, "I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me." Benedick gets in one more jibe and ends the conversation, irking Beatrice.

The group disperses, leaving Benedick and Claudio alone. Claudio tells Benedick he is suddenly consumed with love for Hero, but Benedick can see the appeal of neither Hero nor the idea of marriage itself. Nevertheless Claudio is intent on making Hero his bride. Don Pedro returns and approves the match while Benedick rants about being "yoked" to another. This results in a lot of good-natured ribbing from Claudio and Don Pedro. Annoyed, Benedick leaves. Claudio repeats his wish to marry Hero and beseeches the prince for help. Don Pedro promises to disguise himself as Claudio and woo Hero in Claudio’s name.

Analysis

*Much Ado About Nothing* takes place in Messina, Italy. At the time of the play’s writing, it was a small port town under Spanish rule (which is why Don Pedro is Spanish while everyone else is Italian). As governor of Messina, Leonato is the most important man in town. His home is most likely the grandest around, and its orchards hint at a rural backdrop. This is a change from the battlefields Don Pedro and his soldiers recently left behind. For them being in Messina is a holiday. A mood of revelry informs their actions at the beginning of the play.

Most of the characters in the play have met before. Don Pedro and Leonato are friends of old, and Claudio remembers looking upon Hero before he left for the war. It is Benedick and Beatrice, however, who have the most intriguing history. The nature of their relationship isn't explicitly stated, but it most certainly has something to do with romance—the main subject they talk about. Beatrice and Benedick have known each other a long time—she reminds him "I know you of old"—and their squabbles indicate a backstory never fully revealed.

Act 1, Scene 1 also establishes two of *Much Ado About Nothing*’s important themes:

- **Honor** is a constant topic of conversation in *Much Ado About Nothing*, mostly as it pertains to women. It first arises when Don Pedro asks whether Hero is Leonato’s daughter. Leonato jokes in reply, “Her mother hath many times told me so.” This is meant to be funny, as anyone can see Hero looks just like her father, but it also plays into the idea of the unfaithfulness of women. Benedick upholds this idea, believing any woman he married would certainly make him a cuckold—a man whose wife cheats on him.

- **Language** plays an important role in the play. The most beloved characters are verbose, while villainous Don John is self-admittedly “not of many words.” Beatrice and Benedick, in particular, have a habit of twisting each other’s words to make contradictory, quibbling points. The messenger says Benedick is “A good soldier too, lady,” to which Beatrice replies, “And a good soldier to a lady, but what is he to a lord?” The messenger defends Benedick while Beatrice insists on putting him down. Language is malleable and the same words can be interpreted in a variety of ways. This
leads to confusion and distress in the course of the play.

Act 1, Scene 2

Summary

Leonato's brother, Antonio, tells Leonato one of the servants overheard a conversation between Don Pedro and Claudio. In it Don Pedro declared his love for Hero; he plans to woo her and ask for her hand in marriage. Leonato is skeptical of this news and insists "we will hold it as a dream till it appear itself." Still he asks Antonio to tell Hero what's going on so she can have an answer prepared just in case the proposal comes.

Analysis

It's a good thing Leonato is skeptical when he's told Don Pedro wants to marry Hero, because the eavesdropping servant has the story all wrong. The prince will not be wooing Hero for himself, but for Claudio. This is the first of several times in the play when perception doesn't match reality. Like the children's game of telephone, what is overheard is rarely the whole truth.

Leonato's wish for Hero to be prepared for the prince's proposal is also significant. Antonio isn't sent to speak to Hero so he can gauge her feelings about the prince; rather he's ensuring she will say yes to his proposal. In Elizabethan England—when and where Shakespeare wrote the play—marriages, particularly for young women of the noble class, were often arranged by parents who could secure more successful partnerships than their offspring. The choice of whom Hero will marry is not hers to make, and Leonato does not seem overly particular about whom she will marry. He wants her to marry Don Pedro when he thinks that's an option, but he's equally as happy when it turns out Claudio is the one who wants her hand in marriage. Both men are a good match for Leonato's family.

Act 1, Scene 3

Summary

Don John, Don Pedro's illegitimate half brother, is in a foul mood. Conrade thinks he should be happy, but Don John doesn't feel he has much to be happy about. He and his brother the prince have recently reconciled after a falling out, yet Don John refuses to play the grateful underling: "I had rather be a canker in a hedge than a rose in his grace," he tells Conrade.

Borachio enters and announces he has gossip to share. Don John wants to hear about it only if it will "serve for any model to build mischief on." It does for Borachio, who's hiding behind a tapestry where he overhears Don Pedro and Claudio's discussion about Hero. Unlike Leonato's servant, however, Borachio understands the prince intends to woo Hero for Claudio.

Don John thinks this is great news because it "may prove food to my displeasure." He decides to use this information for malevolent purposes and secures Conrad's and Borachio's promises to help him.

Analysis

Once again eavesdropping doesn't give the listener a full picture of what's happening. Borachio is under the impression Don John will woo Hero in his own name, then give her to Claudio as a gift. This misunderstanding provides Don John with an opportunity to cause trouble for Claudio, whom he refers to as "that young start-up."

Some productions of Much Ado About Nothing portray Don John as a rival for Hero's affections, but nothing in the text itself indicates romantic longing motivates him to cause trouble. The real root of his villainy is his intense hatred for Claudio. The reader never learns the exact reason for this hatred, but it probably has something to do with Claudio's friendship with Don Pedro. Don John swears Claudio "hath all the glory of my overthrow," meaning he has somehow taken Don John's place in the prince's life.

Shakespeare doesn't explicitly say what caused the quarrel between Don John and Don Pedro, nor does he indicate the impetus for their fragile reconciliation. It may have something to do with Don John's birth status. In a stage direction of Act 1, Scene 1 he is referred to as "John the Bastard." This isn't a
comment on his disposition—though it seems rather fitting—but an indication of his parentage. A bastard is someone who is born illegitimately, or outside of marriage. Don John and Don Pedro are technically half brothers, but because of Don John's illegitimate status, he is not a prince. He receives none of the acclaim or adoration bestowed upon his brother.

**Act 2, Scene 1**

**Summary**

Beatrice, Leonato, Antonio, and Hero discuss their mutual dislike of Don John, and Beatrice suggests the perfect man lies somewhere between Don John's speechlessness and Benedick's verbosity. Antonio tells Hero he hopes she, unlike her cousin, "will be ruled by your father." Leonato reiterates his hopes for Beatrice to wed, but she assures him such an occurrence will remain unlikely "till God make men of some other metal than earth."

The soldiers enter the room. They are all wearing masks befitting a masquerade ball. The men and women pair up: Don Pedro goes off with Hero, Benedick dances with Margaret, and Ursula dances with Antonio. Benedick ends up with Beatrice, who pretends not to recognize him behind his mask. She insists Benedick is "the Prince's jester, a very dull fool" while the be-masked Benedick pretends not to know about whom she is speaking. While the others dance, Don John and Borachio put their plan into motion. They tell Claudio—pretending to believe he is Benedick—Don Pedro is wooing Hero for himself. Claudio is heartbroken. When Benedick fetches him for Hero and Don Pedro, Claudio insists the prince has done him wrong.

Benedick explains this to Don Pedro, who then nonchalantly brings up the subject of what Beatrice told her "gentleman" dance partner about Benedick. Benedick rails against Beatrice, and when she and Claudio reappear, he pleads with Don Pedro to send him on an assignment for "any service to the world's end" just so he doesn't have to be near her. He leaves in a huff, and Don Pedro tells Beatrice she has "lost the heart of Signior Benedick." She replies she once had it and gave him her own, which he won with "false dice."

Changing the subject Beatrice presents Claudio, who is still upset with Don Pedro. Don Pedro explains he has successfully wooed Hero for Claudio, and all is forgiven. Claudio and Hero whisper sweet nothings to one another while Beatrice jokingly laments her lack of a husband. Don Pedro offers to find her one, then suggests himself. She rejects him kindly, saying, "Your Grace is too costly to wear every day." She excuses herself for being full of "all mirth and no matter" and soon leaves the group.

Don Pedro and Leonato discuss what a good match Beatrice and Benedick would make, and the prince vows to unite them before Claudio and Hero's wedding, which will take place in a week. Don Pedro says, "If we can do this, Cupid is no longer an archer; his glory shall be ours, for we are the only love gods."

**Analysis**

Don Pedro isn't taking a huge chance when he decides to bring Beatrice and Benedick together. Their "merry war" indicates their mutual attraction, and Beatrice even admits she and Benedick had romantic feelings for one another in the past. The cause of the breakup isn't known. The only clue given is Beatrice's feeling Benedick won her heart with lies, which she refers to as "false dice." Based on Benedick's vehement feelings against marriage, he may have realized during the course of their relationship he wasn't ready to be a husband. Beatrice's ever-present ire with Benedick stems from this heartbreak, and her melancholy mood when discussing the situation with Don Pedro suggests she still loves Benedick.

Even if Beatrice does love Benedick, that's not the reason why she turns down Don Pedro's proposal. Without watching actors on the stage, it's hard to tell whether the prince is being serious or not. Based on the text alone, it appears Don Pedro's proposal is real. Beatrice has been joking about her own lack of romantic prospects in light of Claudio and Hero's engagement, and the prince tries to solve her problem in the manner of his father, who was good at "getting husbands." In Don Pedro's mind there's no better husband than himself. He thinks of himself as something of an expert at love ladies' man, as evidenced by his confidence that he could woo Hero for Claudio, and he greatly admires Beatrice's wit and spirit. Her noble background makes her a suitable match for a prince. Yet the best evidence about the seriousness of Don Pedro's question is Beatrice's reaction to it. She makes a flippant response—"No, my lord, unless I might have another for working days"—then immediately apologizes for it. This apology is the only one she makes in the entire play, and it's
with good reason. She's terribly embarrassed to have refused the prince's genuine proposal with mirthful words instead of the respect he deserves. If he had been joking, she wouldn't have apologized. Beatrice's sharp wit is a source of her pride throughout the play, but it doesn't always reveal itself at the right time.

Pride proves to be the downfall of many characters in *Much Ado About Nothing*, particularly Claudio. His ego, combined with his youth and gullibility, make him an easy target for Don John's lie about Don Pedro wooing Hero for himself. In the grand scheme of things, this cruel trick doesn't cause much trouble for any of the characters, and the resulting fallout is short lived. It does, however, establish Claudio as someone who is willing to believe the worst about those he loves most, such as Don Pedro and Hero, even when it comes from a most unreliable source. Establishing his short temper and his tendency to accept everything he hears as fact makes his actions later in the play entirely believable.

**Act 2, Scene 2**

**Summary**

Don John asks Borachio to come up with another idea on how to “cross this marriage” of Claudio and Hero. Borachio lays out a plan to make Claudio and Don Pedro think Hero has a secret lover. Borachio is romantically involved with Margaret, Hero's gentlewoman (really a glorified maid). He instructs Don John to tell Claudio and Don Pedro of Hero's infidelity. They will naturally not believe him, so he will offer “proof” in the form of two lovers canoodling in Hero's window on the night before the wedding. Borachio will convince Margaret to have a liaison with him in Hero's bedroom during which he will call her "Hero" and she will call him "Claudio." From a distance Claudio and Don Pedro will be unable to tell the woman with Borachio is not Hero. Claudio will be appalled the woman he intended to marry is not as virtuous as he believed, and the wedding will be canceled.

Don John approves the plan and tells Borachio he will find out the day on which the wedding will occur.

**Analysis**

Borachio’s plan for ruining Claudio's marriage—calling Margaret by Hero's name, having Margaret dress up in Hero's clothes—sounds a little strange to today’s readers, but it would have struck a chord with Elizabethan audiences. Margaret and Borachio are of lower class than Hero and Don John. Borachio suggests a sex game wherein he and Margaret will pretend to be their social betters. It's a little weird, but it's not entirely unusual since Elizabethan England put so much emphasis on social status.

It’s also not unusual Borachio's plan hinges on convincing Claudio his intended bride, Hero, isn't virtuous. Honor was immensely important in Elizabethan England, and when people talked about honor, they were usually talking about a woman's virtue, or chastity. Women were expected to remain virgins until marriage. The "ideal" woman, examples of which were more likely to be found in conduct books of the era than in actual society, was also expected to be modest, quiet, and subservient. These are all apt descriptions of Hero, who serves as the stereotypical ideal of femininity in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Positioning her as unchaste and a cunning seductress would destroy her reputation and marriageability. Reputation was an important part of a person's honor, and Borachio's attacks the insecurities felt by several men in the play. Rumors about Hero's illicit affairs wouldn't harm only her, but Claudio as well. Doubts about Hero’s chastity would reflect poorly on Don Pedro, since he made the match, and upon Leonato, Hero's father. Don John wants to make as much mischief as possible, and ruining three men's reputation is a good way to do it.

Significantly, barely a thought is given to the woman in question. Borachio only says the plan will "undo Hero," which makes light of the consequences she will suffer once news of her false infidelity spreads. No one will want to marry her, and her father won't want anything to do with her. If those closest to her don't believe in her purity, she will be completely ruined with no home, family, or means of income; yet neither Don John nor Borachio give this a second thought. To them Hero is simply a means to an end—destroying Claudio, Don Pedro, and Leonato. She is, after all, just a woman.
Act 2, Scene 3

Summary

Benedick is in the garden, talking to himself about Claudio's sudden change from soldier into lover. He briefly wonders if this will ever happen to him, then immediately dismisses the idea. He will not fall in love until "all graces be in one woman."

Claudio, Don Pedro, Leonato, and Balthasar come into the garden. Benedick hides from their view, but they're aware of his presence. Balthasar sings a song about how women must be patient with faithless men, then departs. Claudio, Don Pedro, and Leonato lay the trap for Benedick to fall in love with Beatrice. Leonato begins by telling Claudio and Don Pedro how Beatrice is secretly in love with Benedick. Benedick can't believe what he's hearing, but he assumes it must be the truth because "the white-bearded fellow speaks it. Knavery cannot, sure, hide himself in such reverence." The men continue to spin a story about how Beatrice will never tell Benedick about her feelings as she has "so oft encountered him with scorn," yet she cannot help getting out of bed 20 times a night to pour her heart out to him on paper. Leonato says Hero fears Beatrice will "do a desperate outrage to herself"—commit suicide—because she loves Benedick so much. Claudio confirms this. Don Pedro suggests they tell Benedick so as to relieve Beatrice's suffering, but they all agree he would "make but a sport of it and torment the poor lady worse." As they extol her virtues, Don Pedro says, "I wish [Benedick] would modestly examine himself to see how much he is unworthy so good a lady."

As the three men go inside to dinner, Benedick comes out of hiding. "This can be no trick," he assures himself as he reviews everything he overheard. He vows to return Beatrice's love for she embodies all the graces he desires: beauty, virtue, and intelligence. He easily rationalizes his change of heart about marriage—"When I said I would die a bachelor, I did not think I should live till I were married"—as Beatrice storms her way toward him. She announces that "against [her] will," she has been sent to fetch him for dinner. Benedick interprets her terse message as a declaration of love and goes into the house.

Analysis

Trickery is an ongoing theme in Much Ado About Nothing. Sometimes it's used for nefarious purposes, such as when Don John fools Claudio into thinking Don Pedro is wooing Hero for himself. Other times, such as when Don Pedro schemes to make Benedick and Beatrice fall in love with each other, it's for the betterment of the characters' lives. Lies and deceit by themselves are neither good nor bad—it all depends on who is doing the deceiving and their intentions.

Act 2, Scene 3 brings up the question as to why people believe what they believe. Benedick was a stalwart opponent of marriage prior to overhearing the conversation in the garden, and he dismissed Don Pedro's and Claudio's face-to-face urgings to give love a chance. Yet when he hears the same thing through eavesdropping, he's ready to abandon bachelorhood and take Beatrice as his wife. Throughout Much Ado About Nothing, hearsay is more convincing than logic and reason. In this case it's because the hearsay is so flattering. Don Pedro, Claudio, and Leonato appeal to Benedick's vanity as they weave the story of a lovesick Beatrice. Hearing a woman would kill herself out of love for him is enormously flattering, and it seemingly erases the months, perhaps years, of ire between the two. Benedick, who has borne the brunt of Beatrice's disdain time and time again, ignores all physical evidence to the contrary and suddenly believes she loves him. The change in Benedick is swift. He begins Act 2, Scene 3 by puzzling over the sudden change in Claudio's character. He isn't quite sure how a man so attuned to the life of the soldier could suddenly become a lover at war's end. Yet he does the very same thing himself at the end of the scene because he doesn't dislike the idea of marriage, but rather the possibility of getting hurt. Benedick's jokes about wearing the cuckold's horns underline his fears of his love going unrequited. Knowing (however falsely) Beatrice does love him gives him permission to accept his feelings for her. He has several rationalizations for changing his mind, but the one closest to the heart of things is his belief he wouldn't live long enough to find someone he was willing to marry.

Act 3, Scene 1
Summary

Hero initiates her part of the plan to make Beatrice and Benedick fall in love. She sends Margaret to tell Beatrice that Ursula and Hero are discussing her in the orchard, then instructs Ursula as to what they will say. Ursula will heap praise upon Benedick while Hero will speak of how Benedick is "sick in love with Beatrice."

Beatrice arrives at the orchard and hides. She listens as Hero tells Ursula how Claudio and Don Pedro told her Benedick loves Beatrice. They think Beatrice should know, but Hero doesn’t. She thinks Beatrice will only make fun of him, as "nature never framed a woman's heart of prouder stuff than that of Beatrice." Hero further says her cousin has patience for no man, and turns them all "the wrong side out." Hero tells Ursula she intends to dissuade Benedick of his love by telling him bad—and untrue—things about Beatrice. Ursula says that isn't fair; Beatrice is far too intelligent to pass up a man as wonderful as Benedick. They remark on his good name and reputation, then move out of earshot to congratulate themselves on a job well done before leaving the orchard.

Beatrice emerges from her hiding place, slightly shocked at the negative things her cousin said of her. She vows to requite Benedick’s love and let him tame her "wild heart to [his] loving hand." She ends her brief speech by saying she’ll marry Benedick because others—Hero and Ursula—believe he deserves her.

Analysis

The second part of Don Pedro’s plan proceeds much like the first, but at a more rapid rate. This is partly because the audience has already seen how the tricksters disparage the character of the eavesdropper and extol the virtues of the supposedly lovesick. It’s also partly because Beatrice is a woman eavesdropping on a conversation between two women. For the most part the jokes and insults in Much Ado About Nothing are the province of men, and Claudio, Don Pedro, and Leonato make plenty at Benedick’s expense. Beatrice is usually the jokester of the group of female characters, and in this scene she is relegated to the position of listener while Hero and Ursula paint a sympathetic portrayal of lovesick Benedick. This is a more serious scene than the previous, which was highly focused on humor.
Analysis

Like Beatrice in Act 3, Scene 1 Benedick also goes through a transformation upon falling in love. The changes are both emotional and physical. He has shaved off his beard—he has most likely heard Beatrice doesn't like beards—and Claudio and Don Pedro tease him about having washed his face for once. His demeanor has changed as well. Instead of entering a battle of wits and wills with his friends as he's been known to do, he endures their playful banter with an air of suffering. This could be because of the toothache he claims to have. In Elizabethan times toothaches were often attributed to diseases of the head or brain—one of which was love. This new Benedick is much more serious than when he was so against love just a day ago.

Though Claudio and Don Pedro find Benedick's lovelorn persona amusing, they immediately become sober upon hearing Don John's accusations about Hero. Neither of them fully believe Don John, but nor do they attempt to verify this claim with Hero herself. One of the recurring ideas in Much Ado About Nothing is that women are untrustworthy, as exemplified by Benedick's fears of becoming a cuckold and Claudio's easy persuasion to thinking Hero is unchaste. In reality it's the men's own insecurities that are the cause of all of the problems. Don John is insecure about his position with his brother, and Claudio is insecure in his social standing. Even Don Pedro, a prince, is insecure about how others perceive him.

Though they are not technically villains, Don Pedro and Claudio prove themselves to be some of the ugliest characters in the play. They respond to Hero's alleged affair not by calling off the wedding, but by making plans to publically shame her during it. Claudio, so blinded by rage at being dishonored, never pauses to question whether Hero would do something so terrible. Though Don John's lie slanders the woman Claudio loves, Claudio accepts it as fact because somebody else says it is. His romantic life relies more on the input of others than it does on his own analysis.

Act 3, Scene 3

Summary

The setting shifts from inside Leonato's property to a deserted street in the middle of the night. Four members of the neighborhood watch are on duty. Dogberry, the local constable, and his second-in-command, Verges, arrive to give the watchmen—two are named Hugh Oatcake and George Seacoal—their instructions. These are more than a little confusing, as Dogberry is forever mixing up words. He tells the watch to “comprehend all vagrom men” (meaning “apprehend all vagrant men”) and make sure the local drunks get home to bed. Dogberry suggests if they encounter a thief, it’s better to just “let him show himself what he is and steal out of your company.” Before he leaves, Dogberry reminds the men to keep a close eye on Leonato’s house since the wedding is the next day.

Dogberry and Verges leave, the members of the watch remain to hide in the shadows, and Conrad and Borachio enter. Borachio begins to tell Conrade how he earned a thousand ducats from Don John, but their conversation veers off in a tangent about fashion. Borachio finally gets back on track and tells Conrade how he wooed Margaret in Hero’s bedroom while Don John, Claudio, and Don Pedro watched from the orchard. He says Claudio and Don Pedro thought Margaret was Hero, but Don John knew the truth. Borachio overheard Claudio say he would shame Hero in the church the next morning “and send her home again without a husband.”

The watchmen jump out of the shadows and arrest Conrade and Borachio. Someone sends for Dogberry, who tells Don John’s henchmen, “Masters, never speak, we charge you, let us obey [he means “order”] you to go with us.” Conrade and Borachio are taken to jail.

Analysis

Like many of the characters in the play, Dogberry’s use of language provides an insight into his character. He thinks a lot of himself and his position of constable, and he tries to make his speech match the importance of his position. He uses multisyllabic words to make himself sound smarter, but he has no idea what they mean. The resulting malapropisms—humorous misuses of words in place of similar-sounding words—make him seem like a complete idiot while simultaneously endearing him to the audience. If Beatrice’s and
Benedick’s war of words is the highbrow comedy of *Much Ado About Nothing*, Dogberry’s verbal buffoonery is the slapstick.

Dogberry’s misuse of language also highlights his ineptitude for law enforcement. His focus is not on preventing crime, per se, but on keeping the peace. Those are two very different things. He insists the watchmen remain quiet and agrees it’s a good idea if they just fall asleep. If the drunks don’t want to go home, it’s best to wait until they’re sober. In his own wacky way, Dogberry’s method of policing supports one of the overarching ideas of the play: protect your own reputation at all costs. To him it is far worse for a man’s reputation to be tarnished by standing in close proximity to a thief than allowing the thief to steal all he wants. Dogberry is a terrible policeman, but he’s quite in tune with the values of Elizabethan England.

Conrade and Borachio are also wiser than they appear. Their short digression about fashion is usually cut from stage productions of *Much Ado About Nothing* as it doesn’t further the plot or provide any comedic relief. It’s important, though, because it comments on how the nobility use clothing to mold their image. All of the “hot bloods,” or noblemen who sport fancy attire, dress not only for protection from the elements, but to impart something about their personality. Perhaps they dress “like Pharaoh’s soldiers” to show their bravery, or “like god Bel’s priests,” who dressed in expensive finery, to show their wealth. Some men even wear enormous codpieces to boast about the size of their literal manhood. Conrade thinks dressing with more clothing than needed for comfort is unnecessary, and he accuses Borachio of falling prey to the trappings of nobility. He’s essentially saying Borachio is starting to think himself more important than he really is. The same thing could be said of Claudio and Don Pedro, who dress and speak like nobles but often act below their class.

**Act 3, Scene 4**

**Summary**

It’s the day of the wedding. Hero sends Ursula to wake Beatrice while Margaret helps her dress. They argue over what Hero should wear. Hero says her heart is “exceeding heavy,” meaning she feels nervous about her upcoming nuptials. Margaret makes a crass joke about Hero’s heart being “heavier soon by the weight of a man.” Hero thinks Margaret should be ashamed of saying such a thing, but Margaret says it’s perfectly fine for her to say things about Hero having sex with her own husband.

Beatrice enters. She has a cold and doesn’t feel well. Hero shows off her new perfumed gloves, which were a gift from Claudio. Beatrice can’t smell anything as she is “stuffed,” a remark Margaret turns into a joke about being pregnant while still a maiden. Annoyed, Beatrice asks Margaret how long she’s been such a wit, and Margaret replies, “Ever since you left it.” Margaret suggests Beatrice take some *carduus benedictus* for her ills, and when Beatrice accuses her of insinuating something, Margaret swears she isn’t. She says she knows Beatrice will never fall in love. Unprompted she continues to say that Benedick, on the other hand, is showing signs of changing his mind about love.

Ursula enters to say all of the men are waiting to take the ladies to the church. Margaret and Beatrice help Hero finish dressing.

**Analysis**

The women of *Much Ado About Nothing* talk about sex just as much as the men, but only if the men are out of earshot. Margaret, who is of a lower class than Hero and Beatrice, has no qualms about telling dirty jokes and insinuating Hero will soon be underneath her husband both in the eyes of the law and in the bedroom. The virtuous, ladylike Hero is scandalized by this kind of talk, but it doesn’t bother Beatrice. She makes dirty jokes of her own throughout the play, which also places her in contrast with Hero.

Attitudes about sex were surprisingly relaxed during the Elizabethan era, which is why Margaret and Beatrice both feel comfortable joking about it. Though the Church of England and the monarchy decried any hint of sexual activity before marriage, the general population felt it was acceptable for people intending to marry to engage in intercourse after agreeing to wed but before partaking in the religious ceremony. This is why Margaret says she can joke about Hero’s wedding night—she was talking about Hero having sex with her husband, which is acceptable.

The “heaviness” of Hero’s heart foreshadows the impending catastrophe she faces at the church, while Beatrice’s illness is symbolic of her decision to love. She and Benedick both find
themselves in pain after deciding to love the other, which is representative of the vulnerability of allowing oneself to be open to love.

**Act 3, Scene 5**

**Summary**

Dogberry and Verges visit Leonato. He is in the midst of preparations for the wedding, and he doesn't have time for a long conversation. Dogberry beats around the bush as to the reason of their visit, and Leonato informs them they are tedious. Dogberry takes this as the highest compliment.

Verges finally tells Leonato the evening watchmen arrested two men overnight. Dogberry invites Leonato to come to their questioning, but Leonato insists he doesn't have time. He tells them to examine the criminals and then bring him a report of their findings. He leaves for the wedding, and Dogberry and Verges go to the jail.

**Analysis**

Dogberry is so busy trying to impress Leonato he forgets to tell the governor the real news: Hero is going to be falsely slandered. Leonato would have been saved a world of trouble had he not been so impatient with the dim-witted Dogberry. Yet Leonato's good breeding keeps him from losing his temper when confronted with Dogberry's idiocy. He is only mildly surprised when Dogberry says, "If I were as tedious as a king, I could find in my heart to bestow it all of your Worship," and he seems to take no offence when Dogberry insults the intelligence of those of an advanced age.

For all of Dogberry's and Verges's idiocy, they are the ones who uncover the plot to besmirch Hero's good name. Claudio and Don Pedro are far more intelligent than the lowly law enforcement officials, but intelligence doesn't necessarily equate with good judgment. They put their faith in the wrong person—Don John. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, the wise men prove themselves to be fools and the fools are the wisest of all.

**Act 4, Scene 1**

**Summary**

All of the nobles are gathered at the church. The ceremony gets off to a rocky start when Claudio denies he has come to marry Hero. When Friar Francis asks whether anyone knows of a reason why they shouldn't be wed, Claudio pointedly asks Hero if she has anything she wants to say. A tense conversation follows, and Claudio finally explodes, accusing Hero of knowing "the heat of a luxurious bed." Leonato says if Claudio is the man who has taken Hero's virginity, it is only because she thought of him as her husband. Claudio insists it wasn't he, as he has behaved no more sexually toward Hero than would a brother to a sister. Leonato looks to Don Pedro for help, but Don Pedro supports Claudio, saying, "I stand dishonored that have gone about/To link my dear friend to a common stale."

Claudio demands to know to whom Hero was speaking at her window the night before. She swears she was with no one. Don Pedro tells Leonato he and Don John saw and heard a man at Hero's window talking about "the vile encounters they have had/A thousand times in secret." Claudio denounces Hero once and for all, prompting Leonato to pronounce "Hath no man's dagger here a point for me?" Hero faints. Beatrice runs to her aid as Don John, Claudio, and Don Pedro exit. Benedick stays and asks Beatrice if she had been with Hero the night before. It turns out the evening in question was the only time in the past 12 months the two cousins did not share a bed. Leonato, who has already declared "death is the fairest cover for her shame," takes this as confirmation of Hero's misdeeds.

Friar Francis finally steps in. He is sure Hero is innocent and "the princes" must have misunderstood the situation. Benedick says two of the men in question "have the very bent of honor," but Don John is not to be trusted. Friar Francis suggests they hide Hero and pretend she has died from Claudio's slanderous words. Claudio's rage will turn into remorse, and Hero's memory will become more precious to him than when they were first betrothed. If it turns out Hero is lying, she can live the rest of her life in seclusion. Leonato and Benedick agree to the plan.

Hero, Leonato, and Friar Francis exit, leaving Benedict and Beatrice alone. Benedick tells a weeping Beatrice he thinks...
Hero has been wronged, and Beatrice wishes a man loved her enough to avenge Hero's honor. Benedick says he's such a man, and they confess their love to one another. He tells Beatrice to name something, anything he can do for her. She replies "Kill Claudio." Benedick laughs, intending to do no such thing to his friend, and Beatrice questions Benedick's love. She rants, stating she wishes she were a man, for if she were she would "eat [Claudio's] heart in the marketplace." Instead, all she can do is die of grief. This is too much for Benedick. He reaffirms his love for Beatrice and vows to challenge Claudio.

Analysis

Claudio's public humiliation of Hero is the climax of Much Ado About Nothing, and the accompanying scene addresses several of the themes present throughout the play:

- **Honor:** Though Hero is questioned about her fidelity, the conflict at hand is not so much about her as it is about how her alleged actions reflect upon the men connected to her. Claudio and Leonato are furious with her not only for supposedly losing her virginity, but how the loss of said virginity makes them look. This mindset was the norm in Elizabethan England. A woman's father was thought to be the protector of her virginity, and if it was lost, he was considered to be the party responsible, sometimes even literally. Once the woman is married, her "faults," including previous sexual encounters, become the responsibility of her husband. Learning about his wife's lack of virtue after the wedding ceremony could be potentially ruinous for a new husband.

- **Gender Politics:** Hero is essentially put on trial in front of her friends and family at the church. Claudio brings forth the accusation, and Don Pedro provides the evidence. Hero is hardly given a chance to defend herself or provide any evidence of her own. When she does protest, even her own father disregards what she has to say. He believes the word of three men—one of whom, Don John, he doesn't even like—over the word of his own daughter. Even Hero's status as a blood relative doesn't endear her to Leonato, who is more than ready to see his daughter die than endure more shame. Beatrice, too, feels constrained by her gender. She wishes she were a man so she could kill Claudio herself. As a woman her only chance of relief from such sorrow is death.

- **Language:** The marriage ceremony begins in prose, then switches to verse as Claudio begins to accuse Hero of wrongdoing, then switches back to prose when Benedick and Beatrice are left alone in the church. This happens throughout the play, and it's done for a specific reason. Prose is used for conversations veering toward the lighthearted, while verse is used for serious or formal situations and occasions. Claudio and Hero mostly speak in verse, while Beatrice and Benedick squabble in prose. They speak in prose even as they declare their love for one another. Beatrice, in particular, clings to her usual verbal tricks as she hesitantly tells Benedick how she feels. "It were as possible for me to say I loved nothing so well as you, but believe me not, and yet I lie not," she hedges, fearful of Benedick's reaction. He, however, isn't afraid and tells her over and over, in no uncertain terms, he loves her.

Act 4, Scene 1 is a pivotal moment for Benedick. Instead of leaving the church with Don Pedro and Claudio, he stays behind with Beatrice and her family. This small act symbolizes his transformation from soldier into lover. It also illustrates the differences between his relationship with Beatrice and Claudio's relationship with Hero. Though Beatrice and Benedick have spent years squabbling, each knows the other is a good and honest person. The trust between them is implicit. Benedick takes Beatrice's word Claudio has slandered Hero, which is enough to make him discount his friendship with the young man. Claudio, on the other hand, has absolutely no faith or trust in the woman he was supposed to marry. Their relationship is based solely on physical attraction and reputation. Beatrice and Benedick look past each other's prickly exteriors to see the real person inside.

Act 4, Scene 2

Summary

Dogberry, Verges, the men of the watch, Conrade, and Borachio are gathered in the courthouse or another official building. The sexton, who oversees church property, is also in attendance. He is serving as the official note taker during the examination of the criminals. It becomes apparent Dogberry has no idea what he's doing, so the sexton instructs him to have the watch give their account of the previous night's events.

The first watchman says they overheard Borachio say Don
John paid him for "accusing the Lady Hero wrongfully." He goes on to describe what Borachio told Conrade, including the part about Claudio intending to shame Hero at the wedding. The sexton finds this extremely interesting since Don John fled Messina that very morning, and Claudio did indeed shame Hero, which resulted in her death. He instructs Dogberry to bring Borachio and Conrade to Leonato's home. The sexton leaves the examination to present the evidence to Leonato before Dogberry arrives.

Dogberry tries to physically remove Conrade from the room. Conrade tries to shake him off, yelling, "Away! You are an ass, you are an ass!" Dogberry is deeply offended and wishes the sexton were still around so he could record what Conrade said about him. He insists everyone remember he is an ass.

Analysis

Shakespeare is known for injecting his tragedies with comedic relief at crucial moments. Though *Much Ado About Nothing* is technically a comedy, the role of Dogberry is meant to lighten the darkness creeping in around the edges of the play. His appearance after the emotionally draining scene in the church is no accident. A few verbal blunders, an incompetent examination of the prisoners, and an affirmation he is indeed an ass all lift the mood of the fourth act. This assures the audience that most of the characters will get their happy ending after all.

Though his repetition of "I am an ass" is funny, Dogberry is truly hurt by Conrade's condescending attitude. Conrade, who introduces himself as a "gentleman," clearly looks down upon the verbally incompetent constable. Dogberry is so affronted he defends himself with boasts about his intelligence, his occupation, his home ownership, and even his physical person. This very human reaction to Conrade's insults, combined with his assertion he isn't an idiot, is what makes Dogberry such a great comedic character.

Don John, who proclaims himself to be a "plain-dealing villain," turns out to be a pretty lackluster bad guy. He manages to ruin Claudio's life for a short amount of time, but then what? Don John clearly knows the truth will come out in the end, which is why he hightails it out of Messina immediately after the wedding. Perhaps he knew Borachio would squeal, or maybe he figured someone would try to defend Hero's honor. In either case his decision to leave is a tacit—and blatant—admission of his guilt. Shakespeare doesn't spend a lot of time developing Don John's character because the villain himself isn't particularly important to the progression of the plot. Claudio's doubts about his impending nuptials are far more important to the story's plot and themes than Don John's motivations for ruining the wedding.

Act 5, Scene 1

Summary

Leonato is terribly upset about Hero's slander, and Antonio suggests Leonato, "make those that do offend you suffer too." Leonato intends to do so and beseeches Claudio and Don Pedro to stop for a moment as they pass by. He informs Claudio of Hero's death and states it's all Claudio's fault. Claudio isn't even fazed when Antonio stands up for his brother and challenges Claudio to a duel. Don Pedro finally steps in and says he's sorry to hear Hero died, but "she was charged with nothing but what was true and very full of proof." Angry that they're being ignored, Leonato and Antonio leave.

Benedick arrives much to the delight of Claudio and Don Pedro, who say they could use some cheering up. Don Pedro quickly realizes something is bothering Benedick, but Claudio carries on teasing him in their usual manner. Benedick calls Claudio a villain and challenges him to a duel, which Claudio doesn't take seriously. Don Pedro changes the subject to Beatrice, which sets off another round of jokes at Benedick's expense. Benedick barely listens to them. He tells Don Pedro he can no longer keep his company, says Don John has left town, and reiterates his challenge to "Lord Lackbeard" before leaving. Don Pedro and Claudio finally realize that Benedick is serious about his challenge to Claudio and in his love with Beatrice.

Dogberry, Verges, and the watchmen enter with their prisoners. Don Pedro asks why Conrade and Borachio are under arrest. Dogberry replies with a convoluted list of charges. Since Dogberry is "too cunning to be understood," Don Pedro asks Borachio and Conrade to explain themselves. Borachio confesses how he and Don John conspired to slander Hero. Don Pedro and Claudio are horrified. Dogberry butts in to remind the men "to specify, when time and place shall serve" that he is an ass.
Leonato comes storming out of the house followed by his brother and the sexton, who has just told them the results of the interrogation. Leonato wants to see the villain, but isn't satisfied when only Borachio presents himself, for Don Pedro, Claudio, and Don John are also responsible. Claudio begs for a means of repentance, and Don Pedro says he would “bend under any heavy weight” Leonato will ask of him. Leonato commands them to tell everyone in Messina of Hero’s innocence, and then asks Claudio to marry Antonio’s daughter, who is “almost the copy of my child that’s dead” (and doesn’t actually exist). Claudio gratefully accepts the offer.

Leonato pays Dogberry, who has reminded him once again he is an ass, and takes custody of Borachio so they can visit Margaret. Borachio assures Leonato that Margaret was an unwilling participant in the plot to slander Hero and “always hath been just and virtuous in anything that I do know by her.” Claudio and Don Pedro vow to be present for the next morning’s wedding after spending the night mourning Hero.

Analysis

Claudio’s lack of remorse over Hero’s death is a stark contrast to the devotion Benedick shows Beatrice in Act 4, Scene 1. Claudio was engaged to be married to Hero but left her humiliated at the first sign of trouble. The friar tries to appeal to Claudio’s compassionate side by having Hero pretend to be dead, but Claudio feels no remorse until Borachio explains exactly how he and Don John tricked everyone. Claudio’s loyalty only extends as far as himself. Benedick, on the other hand, has been verbally tormented by Beatrice for ages yet still supports her in her time of need. Benedick loves Beatrice despite her faults; Claudio loves Hero because he thinks she doesn’t have any. Leonato is right when he says Borachio isn’t the only villain. Though the plot to slander Hero was Borachio’s idea, Claudio is the one who publicly shamed her in front of the whole town. He is perhaps more responsible than anyone for the damage done to her reputation.

Borachio is also correct when he tells Claudio and Don Pedro, “What your wisdoms could not discover, these shallow fools have brought to light.” The “shallow fools” in question are Dogberry, Verges, and the watch. They didn’t have to do much to uncover the plot to slander Hero—it was mainly a case of being in the right place at the right time—but they did more to clear her name than the reigning head of state and the young nobleman betrothed to her. Shakespeare is making the point that class is not an indicator of a person’s intelligence, morals, or sense of justice. In this instance the members of the lower class are the heroes while those in the upper class do more harm than good.

Though trickery is at the root of the major conflict in Much Ado About Nothing, it’s also the main means of resolution. When Claudio breaks down after learning of Hero’s innocence, Leonato decides it would be best to add another layer of deception to the already elaborate ruse of Hero’s death. For Leonato it’s not enough Claudio accepts Hero’s innocence; Leonato wants all of Messina to know she was wrongfully shamed. He also wants Claudio to suffer a little more for all of the hurt he has caused Leonato’s family. As punishments go it’s not very severe. Claudio still ends up marrying Hero, but for a few hours he thinks he’s going to have to marry someone he’s never met. This suffices for Leonato given he wants to be assured of the depth and breadth of Claudio’s regret before allowing him to marry Hero. This also gives Claudio the chance to redeem himself to the audience, thus allowing him to reclaim his status as a sympathetic character while distancing himself from the villainy of Don John and Borachio.

Act 5, Scene 2

Summary

Benedick is looking for Beatrice but finds Margaret instead. They jest back and forth and Margaret makes a dirty joke. Benedick praises her wit, saying it “is as quick as the greyhound’s mouth.” She retorts Benedick’s wit is “as blunt as the fencer’s foils, which hit but hurt not.” Benedick says his is a manly wit, which is not meant to hurt women. Margaret makes another dirty joke and fetches Beatrice while Benedick tries to find appropriate rhymes for a sonnet he’s writing for her.

Beatrice enters. She jokingly tries to leave as soon as she arrives, then asks what happened between Benedick and Claudio. Benedick says only “foul words” passed between them. He tries to kiss Beatrice, but she wittily refuses him. Benedick capitulates and tells her the details before asking, “But for which of my bad parts didst thou first fall in love with me?” She says she fell for all of them together, then asks the same of him. They banter back and forth and Benedick pronounces them both “too wise to woo peaceably.” Their
moods darken momentarily as they talk about Hero, then lighten again as Ursula brings news Hero has been proven innocent.

Analysis

Shakespeare loves a dirty joke, and so do the characters of *Much Ado About Nothing*. There are three in this short scene alone. Benedick says he’ll write a sonnet about Margaret’s beauty, which no other man “shall come over,” or surpass. Margaret twists his words into “to have no man come over me?” joking no man will lie on top of her during intercourse. Benedick concedes to Margaret’s superior wit with “I give thee the bucklers.” A buckler is a small shield with a detachable spike in the center. “Buckler” is also slang for the vagina, and Margaret chooses to use that interpretation to make a pun about swords, which naturally represent the penis. Benedick retorts “they are dangerous weapons for maids.” This back and forth between Margaret and Benedick shows how Margaret isn’t nearly as proper of a lady as Hero, which doesn’t bother Benedick. He enjoys a good sparring partner no matter their gender. He’s even lewd with Beatrice, telling her “I will live in thy heart, die in thy lap, and be buried in thy eyes.” It sounds awfully romantic, but “dying” is a euphemism for having an orgasm.

Many Elizabethan women would be shocked by Benedick’s language. Not Beatrice. She is more hesitant to speak truthfully of her love than to dish out dirty jokes of her own. Beatrice and Benedick’s relationship is on uneven ground at this point in the play. Benedick has wholly committed himself to loving Beatrice, even breaking off his friendships with Claudio and Don Pedro as means of showing his devotion. Beatrice, on the other hand, still hides her feelings behind jokes and gentle teasing. She loves him, but she’s afraid to trust him with her heart.

Beatrice is more comfortable in the familiar pattern of joking banter. Benedick, too, has trouble expressing himself in the traditional format of sonnets and love songs, and he decides to “woo peaceably” is a lost cause. His realizes since his and Beatrice’s courtship is far from the norm of traditional Elizabethan standards, their marriage will be different, too. He and Beatrice will be equals in almost every sense of the word, which is a far cry from the male-dominated relationship of Claudio and Hero.

Act 5, Scene 3

Summary

Claudio and Don Pedro go to Leonato’s family tomb in the church courtyard, where they are greeting by lords holding candles and a few singers. Claudio reads aloud the epitaph declaring Hero’s innocence, then vows to return to her tomb every year. Don Pedro dismisses the lords and the singers as the sun rises, and he and Claudio return to Leonato’s home to prepare for the upcoming nuptials.

Analysis

Some productions of *Much Ado About Nothing* before the early 20th century omitted this scene completely, most likely to cut down on time and scenery. In other versions of the play, Claudio’s reading of the epitaph is assigned to one of the lords. Both of these staging decisions diminish the impact of Claudio’s remorse. This short scene is important in establishing Claudio’s guilt before he is forgiven.

Claudio does feel bad, but he’s also looking toward the future. He prays to Hymen, the Roman god of marriage, to make his next marriage better than “this for whom we rendered up this woe.” He acknowledges he and Don Pedro were the source of “woe” for Hero, and he’s intent on making his next marriage work even though he has no idea who the bride is. He truly does regret his actions, but it’s hard to say if he’s learned anything from them.

Act 5, Scene 4

Summary

Leonato’s family, their servants, the friar, and Benedick all gather before the wedding ceremony. Leonato declares Don Pedro and Claudio to be just as innocent as Hero, but says “Margaret was in some fault for this,” though Borachio insists she knew nothing about it. He instructs the women to put on masks as they go to another room to make final preparations. With Beatrice out of earshot, Benedick asks Leonato for her
hand in marriage. Leonato confesses to the scheme, but Benedick doesn't seem to understand what he is saying.

Don Pedro and Claudio enter. Claudio promises to marry whomever Leonato presents to him, even "were she an Ethiope." The women come into the room wearing their masks, and Claudio asks to see his bride's face. Leonato says no. Claudio takes her hand and says "I am your husband, if you like of me," and Hero removes her mask. She tells him, "One Hero died defiled, but I do live,/And surely as I live, I am a maid." Everyone rejoices.

Benedick interrupts to ask which woman is Beatrice. She unmasks herself. By this point he's figured out what Leonato was trying to tell him before the wedding. He asks, "Do you not love me?" Beatrice says "Why no, no more than reason." They quickly unravel the plot conceived to make them fall in love and agree they love each other only as friends. Nobody believes them, and Claudio and Hero both produce sonnets Benedick and Beatrice wrote to one another. Benedick declares, "Here's our own hands against our hearts." He says he'll take Beatrice for his wife out of pity, and she agrees but only because she heard he was dying of consumption. They kiss.

Don Pedro asks Benedick if he'll enjoy being married, and Benedick revokes all of his previous thoughts about marriage. He and Claudio joke about how it's a good thing they are going to become relatives, or else they would have beaten the tar out of each other. Everyone is happy save Don Pedro, whom Benedick thinks looks sad. "Get thee a wife, get thee a wife," he tells the prince. News arrives of Don John's capture, and Benedick promises to think of a suitable punishment for him. The play ends.

Analysis

Leonato's declaration of Don Pedro's and Claudio's innocence indicates he has forgiven them for their role in Hero's dishonor. This is probably for the best. Don Pedro is Leonato's superior in both government and social class, and Claudio is going to marry Leonato's daughter. Life will be a lot easier for Leonato if he can forgive and forget. The one person he doesn't forgive is Margaret, who he says "was in some fault for this,/Although against her will." Margaret is a servant in Leonato's household, so he can afford to take out his anger on her.

Though Leonato has forgiven Claudio, he doesn't exactly trust him. That's why he tells Claudio to take his new bride's hand "and swear to marry her." It's a literal handshake contract to ensure Claudio will go through with the ceremony no matter what. Leonato has every right to expect this of the man who humiliated his daughter and who still doesn't seem very remorseful. When the veil is removed from Hero's face, all he says is "Another Hero!" He does not apologize to her, and he does not beg for her forgiveness. He doesn't even say he loves her. Because of this Claudio is one of Shakespeare's least sympathetic romantic leads. For him the idea of Hero is more exciting and deserving of his love than Hero herself.

The plot to bring together Beatrice and Benedick is made public in this final scene of the play, and for a moment it looks like they're going to forget all thoughts of love and go back to where they began. They are both embarrassed to have fallen for such a simple ruse, and they're also made uncomfortable by the idea of publicly admitting they have changed their minds about love and marriage. But the sonnets discovered by Claudio and Hero serve as proof that what the heart wants is sometimes different than what the mind wants. Beatrice and Benedick didn't want to fall in love with one another, yet found themselves writing love poems to express their feelings. Against their better judgment they fell in love and reconsidered their previous stances against matrimony.

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

— Benedick, Act 1, Scene 1
Benedick is dismayed by Claudio's rash decision to marry Hero. For someone who does not believe in marriage, it's hard for Benedick to understand why one of his closest friends is suddenly obsessed with it.

"It must not be denied but I am a plain-dealing villain."
— Don John, Act 1, Scene 3

Shakespeare isn't going for subtlety in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Don John literally proclaims himself a villain in his first major scene. This lets the audience know there isn't anything more to his character than the desire to create chaos.

"We are the only love gods."
— Don Pedro, Act 2, Scene 1

Don Pedro believes he's something of an expert in love and feels he and his friends can make better matches than Cupid. Don Pedro's self-importance on this topic is in direct contrast to his unmarried status throughout the play.

"Bait the hook well; this fish will bite."
— Claudio, Act 2, Scene 3

Claudio is encouraging Leonato's made-up story about how Beatrice is desperately in love with Benedick, who is listening on the other side of the hedge. If the story is good enough, Benedick will believe it.

"A man loves the meat in his youth that he cannot endure in his age."
— Benedick, Act 2, Scene 3

In a conversation with himself, Benedick rationalizes his sudden interest in marriage by pointing out decisions made in one's youth are not binding.

"But it would better fit your honor to change your mind."
— Don John, Act 3, Scene 2

Don John tries to prevent the marriage of Claudio and Hero by appealing to Claudio's ego. He knows the fastest way to break up the happy couple is to tell Claudio Hero isn't good enough for him.

"Our watch, sir, have indeed comprehended two auspicious persons."
— Dogberry, Act 3, Scene 5

Dogberry is notorious for malapropisms, or mixing up words that sound alike but mean very different things, often to humorous effect. In this instance he mixes up *auspicious*, which means “favorable or successful,” with the word he really means, *suspicious*. Dogberry is trying to sound more important and upper class than he actually is, which only serves to make him look foolish.

"Hath no man's dagger here a point for me?"
— Leonato, Act 4, Scene 1

Leonato is worried only about himself, not his daughter, when Hero is accused of sleeping with an unknown man. In Elizabethan England an unmarried woman's virtue (namely her virginity) was considered to be the responsibility of her father. If Hero were unchaste, Leonato's reputation would be ruined as well.
“O God, that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the marketplace.”

— Beatrice, Act 4, Scene 1

Beatrice feels helpless when her cousin is accused of sleeping with a man outside of wedlock. As a woman she has no recourse against Claudio. Her desire to be a man in this situation illustrates how very little power women had during the Elizabethan era.

“But masters, remember that I am an ass.”

— Dogberry, Act 4, Scene 2

Dogberry is seriously offended when Conrade calls him an ass, and he wants to make sure everyone remembers it when it's time for Conrade's punishment. Instead, Dogberry's reminders just reinforce the idea he is, indeed, an ass.

“What your wisdoms could not discover, these shallow fools have brought to light.”

— Borachio, Act 5, Scene 1

Borachio points out that Don Pedro's and Claudio's combined intelligence was no match for the witless Dogberry and Verges, who managed to clear Hero's name without even trying. The low-class, foolish Dogberry has somehow outsmarted the prince.

“I thank you, princes, for my daughter's death.”

— Leonato, Act 5, Scene 1

Though Borachio confessed to being the mastermind of the plan behind Hero's slander, Leonato thinks Claudio and Don Pedro should take an equal share of the blame. They were the ones who believed the untrustworthy Don John, and they were the ones who publicly shamed Hero in the church. He thinks her "death" is more their fault than anyone else's, conveniently forgetting his own role in her shame.

“Thou and I are too wise to woo peaceably.”

— Benedick, Act 5, Scene 2

Benedick and Beatrice continue their merry war of words even after acknowledging their love for one another. Their attempts to conform to the standards of traditional courtship seem false as they try to repress the wit that brought them together in the first place.

"And surely as I live, I am a maid."

— Hero, Act 5, Scene 4

During their first wedding ceremony, Claudio gives Hero no opportunity to defend herself against his slanderous claims. At their second wedding ceremony, she rebukes him (in the nicest way possible) for not believing her in the first place.

“Here's our own hands against our hearts.”

— Benedick, Act 5, Scene 4

Though Beatrice and Benedick protest they're no more than friends, the sonnets they wrote to each other confirm they truly do love one another. Neither likes the idea of being in love, but they can't control how they feel.
Symbols

Horns

Horns, such as those from a bull, are the traditional symbols of cuckoldry. A cuckold is a man whose wife sleeps with other men without his knowledge, which was a source of great worry for men during the Elizabethan era. To be branded a cuckold meant everyone except the husband knew about the wife's extramarital activities, which would have been intensely shameful for her husband. The horn is a perfect symbol of this shame—everyone can see the horns on a cuckold's forehead while he cannot.

Don Pedro jokes with Benedick about the horns of the "savage bull" when Benedick protests against marriage, suggesting that marriage tames the wild bull. The symbol transforms throughout the course of the play as the characters' views of marriage transform. As Benedick approaches marriage, Claudio promises Benedick's horns will be gold tipped, a reference to Zeus.

Poetry

The poems in Much Ado About Nothing symbolize Benedick and Beatrice's failed attempts at a conventional romance. In the Elizabethan era poetry was often used to express romantic feelings. Beatrice and Benedick both try their hands at it, as evidenced by the sonnets their friends show as proof of their love, but they aren't natural poets. Benedick, in particular, frets over rhyming schemes and eventually determines he "cannot woo in festival terms." This is a sign their relationship will function differently from that of Hero and Claudio.

Masks

Masks are worn for two reasons in Much Ado About Nothing: to deceive and to hide one's true feelings. Their most notable use is during the dance in Act 2, Scene 1. All of the men wear masks, and in some versions of the play the women do, too. Don Pedro wears a mask to woo Hero for Claudio, and Benedick wears a mask to find out Beatrice's feelings about him. In these cases masks are symbols of insecurity. Claudio worries he will not be able to adequately woo Hero, so he sends a masked Don Pedro to do the job. Benedick is afraid to ask Beatrice how she feels about him face-to-face, but he feels safer doing so behind the anonymity of the mask. In a sense the masks function as shields protecting male vanity from female scorn.

Themes

Honor

Honor is the most important theme of Much Ado About Nothing, and it's depicted in a few different ways. The first type of honor is the adherence to what is right as a means of protecting one's reputation. This is most often seen in Claudio. When Hero's chastity is called into question, Claudio publicly scorns her to protect his own honor. He would rather let Hero die than be linked to an unvirtuous woman. The same goes for Don Pedro, who does not want to be remembered for helping forge the romance between the young lovers once Hero's
virtue is questioned. Both Don Pedro and Claudio denounce Hero to protect their reputations. Though it may not seem like the nicest decision, it fits within the moral code of Elizabethan society.

The second type of honor is chivalric honor, which holds men are obligated to protect the wronged, the ill, and the inferior (as a woman, Hero fits into the first and third categories). To defend Hero's reputation, Benedick risks his own and his friendships as well. More importantly he's defending the honor of Leonato's entire family, particularly Beatrice. He uses his honor to protect her from shame and sadness, as well as to show her how much he cares about her.

The third type of honor in *Much Ado About Nothing* is a woman's honor, which is called into question in the play. In this sense honor is a synonym for chastity or virtue. Women were held to much higher standards than men in the Elizabethan era, and they were expected to remain chaste until married. Failing to do so would harm the reputation of the woman in question. Her dishonor also reflected poorly on the woman's family, particularly her father. When Hero's honor is called into question, so is Leonato's, for it was his duty to ensure she remained chaste. He, like Claudio and Don Pedro, has a lot to lose if Hero is proven to be unchaste. Everyone else's reputation depends on hers.

**Trickery**

Trickery and deception abound in *Much Ado About Nothing*, and the plots to deceive piggyback off one another through the end of the play. Some things, like bringing Beatrice and Benedick together, are for the good, while others are purely to harm. Shakespeare doesn't take a stance on the use of tricks to achieve a certain goal, but he does show how once deceptions begin, they're hard to stop:

- Don Pedro pretends to be Claudio and woos Hero for him.
- Don John tells Claudio Don Pedro is wooing Hero for himself.
- Beatrice pretends she doesn't know Benedick is behind the mask and insults him.
- Don Pedro creates a plan to bring Beatrice and Benedick together by making each think one loves the other.
- Borachio and Don John team up to make Claudio and Don Pedro think Hero is unchaste.
- The friar suggests Hero pretend to be dead to make Claudio and Don Pedro feel guilty.
- Leonato instructs Claudio to marry his niece (who is actually Hero) sight unseen.

In most instances telling the truth would have been much simpler and produced a better outcome. Hero wouldn't have been slandered, Leonato wouldn't have wished her dead, and Beatrice and Benedick would have gotten together before the final scene of the play. But the truth may not have worked. Benedick and Beatrice may never have accepted their love for one another had they not been set up to overhear fake conversations. And Claudio refused to listen to Hero when she tried to defend herself. Shakespeare uses trickery as a means of showing his characters the truth when they won't listen.

**Language**

Language is important in any piece of literature, but it's especially significant in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Language distinguishes social status, separates the comic from the serious, and serves as both weapon and balm. The latter is most notable in the ongoing "merry war" between Benedick and Beatrice. From Act 1, Scene 1 they twist one another's words into insults and barbs. They are both quick on their feet and even quicker with their tongues, and their wit distinguishes them as the most intelligent of their group. Yet language can be hurtful, and Benedick compares Beatrice's words to stabs. It's an apt metaphor, as Beatrice uses language to protect her heart from falling in love with Benedick again. When they are tricked into loving one another, the sharp jabs relax into playful banter peppered with "Sweet Beatrice" and "Alas, poor heart." Beatrice and Benedick maintain their witty repartee throughout the wooing phase, simply softening their words into those of love.

Language is also an indicator of social class in *Much Ado About Nothing*. The high-born nobles such as Don Pedro, Beatrice, and Leonato all speak gracefully, even when telling dirty jokes. Characters of the serving class, including Margaret, use language not as refined. Margaret, in particular, tries to match Beatrice's wit, but her delivery isn't nearly as smooth. The plainest language comes from the working class,
Motifs

Youth

From the first moment Claudio is mentioned in *Much Ado About Nothing*, so is his youth. One of the most notable things about the "young Florentine called Claudio" is his tender age. This reference serves a few purposes:

- Claudio's youth and inexperience make his feats in battle look all the more impressive, which makes him a viable suitor for Hero.
- His impetuousness in proposing to Hero can be attributed to his youth, as can his desire to be wed immediately. He tends to rush headfirst into things. It takes someone older, such as Leonato, to explain that some things, like weddings, take time to prepare.
- Youth is also responsible for his gullibility. He has neither the wisdom nor experience of Benedick, and as such, he's willing to believe just about anything anyone tells him. This makes him the perfect target for Don John's villainy not once, but twice.

Gender Politics

Many of the injustices in *Much Ado About Nothing* have to do with gender. Women were treated like second-class citizens in the Elizabethan era, and as such, they weren't afforded many opportunities to better their situations without the assistance of a father or a husband. Women could inherit property but not as much as a man, and though many women did work, they didn't have the opportunity for high-paying careers like doctors or lawyers. A man's word was considered more trustworthy and valuable than a woman's, even if the woman was in the right. This happens to Hero, who is accused of being unchaste and is not given the opportunity to defend herself and prove her accusers wrong.

Gender is also an indicator of power, both when the play was written and within the play itself. Hero's father rules her life, for women were generally in their father's charge until they were married. Beatrice feels the acute pain of powerlessness due to her gender: "O God, that I were a man!" she rages to Benedick after Claudio slanders Hero. She wants to avenge her cousin's name, but as a woman she must rely on Benedick to uphold Hero's honor. This is a double blow to a woman who prides herself on not needing a man for anything.

Dirty Jokes

As in most of William Shakespeare's works, *Much Ado About Nothing* is filled with double entendres and dirty jokes, some of which are downright scandalous. For example:

- Beatrice has a knack for relating most of her conversations to the act of marital congress in which the woman is literally and metaphorically beneath her husband, such as in Act 2, Scene 1.
- In Act 2, Scene 3 Claudio mentions a sheet of paper found by Hero, which prompts Leonato to make a comment about "'Benedick' and 'Beatrice' between the sheet."
- When Beatrice has a cold in Act 3, Scene 4 Margaret makes a joke about a maid being "stuffed," or pregnant.

These jokes are of course meant to be entertaining, but like the rest of the language in the play, they also indicate important qualities of the characters who tell them and hear them. Beatrice's double entendres are sly and not immediately recognizable as such, while Margaret's puns and quips are
intended to be salacious. Beatrice is praised for her wit, which is much like that of the men in the play, while Margaret is called out for being vulgar. Thus Beatrice is established as nobility and an equal to the men in the play, while Margaret is constantly trying to claw her way into the upper class. And Hero, who represents Elizabethan femininity at its best, is shocked when Margaret even mentions sex. She would never be caught saying such things.

Suggested Reading


