

ASF Study Materials for

MUCH A DO ABOUT NOTHING

by William Shakespeare

Director
Set Design
Costume Design
Lighting Design
Sound Design

Greta Lambert
Robert F. Wolin
Jeffrey Todhunter
Tom Rodman
Will Burns



Study Materials written by: Susan Willis
ASF Dramaturg
swillis@asf.net
Contact ASF: 1.800.841.4273
www.asf.net

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

by William Shakespeare

Characters in the ASF Tour The Spanish-led contingent:

Don Pedro, *the ruling Spanish lord*

Don John, *his illegitimate half-brother, a malcontent*

Benedick, *a lord from Padua in Don Pedro's company*

Claudio, *a young lord from Florence in Don Pedro's company*

In Messina:

Leonato, *governor of Messina*

Hero, *his daughter*

Beatrice, *Leonato's niece*

A Friar

Dogberry, *Master Constable*

Verges, *a constable*

Members of the Watch

Setting: Messina, Sicily

Time: 1840s

Contents of These Study Materials

Adapt these materials to your grade level and students' needs.

The study materials treat:

- genre and themes
- structure and structural strategy/patterns
- plot lines (main & subplots)
- characterization
- issues and values
- information about productions on DVD
- activities and discussion/ writing topics in beige boxes

On the cover: Benedick (Michael Flynn) and Beatrice (Greta Lambert) in ASF's 1995 production of Much Ado

Welcome to *Much Ado about Nothing*

The war may be over, but the battle of the sexes is blazing away in Shakespeare's brilliant romantic comedy *Much Ado about Nothing*. Written about 1598, Shakespeare is at the top of his comedic form, and *Much Ado* is one of his three great romantic comedies from that period, along with *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*.

With a text that is 75% prose, the play and its wit move very quickly, full of banter, badinage, and buffoonery. Language well used, misused, and even comically abused fills its dialogue, and truth confronts both deception and lies in the standoff between honor and love.

... and Welcome to Our **Tour!**

Our love of Shakespeare runs deep at ASF, and we are happy to share it with schools and students across Alabama and our neighboring states, because there is just nothing like the powerful effect of seeing Shakespeare live.

This version of Shakespeare's play trims *Much Ado about Nothing* to fit a one-hour class period while keeping the great characters, the verse, and the compelling comic action. Directed by ASF's Greta Lambert, herself a renowned actress and director, the touring show features eight actors chosen from New York auditions who join the ASF company for the 2017-18 season.

These eight will perform all the roles in the play, doubling or tripling roles just as Shakespeare's own company did. On tour they bring schools a complete theatre with set, costumes, props, and actors in a van and a trailer. In addition, they offer students a series of workshops following the play, so they can work with the actors on theatre skills and Shakespeare's language. They give the same performance at ASF for SchoolFest in February. We're excited to be headed your way with the Bard or to have you coming to us! Let there be much ado about *Much Ado!*

Cupid's arrows strike far and wide, but that does not make the course of true love any easier. In fact, love is beset and suborned in *Much Ado* before it can be confessed or confirmed. If Shakespeare strews the path of comedy with pitfalls and problems to be overcome—and he does—he is true to form here. These lovers undergo some deep self-evaluation before they can celebrate their mutual affection or their nuptials.

"Some Cupid kills with arrows, some with traps."

—Hero, 3.1

Your **Cast** for *Much Ado*



Your cast for *Much Ado*, ASF's interns, from top, left to right, Josh Cahn, Katie Fanning, Ithamar Francios, Brian Ott, Woodrow Proctor, Collin Purcell, Lara Treacy, and Colin Wulff

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

by William Shakespeare

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

—Claudio, 4.1

Fact Sheet about *Much Ado about Nothing*

Genre: usually called romantic comedy; can be considered Italianate comedy

Date: c. 1598

Setting: Messina, Sicily

Length: 2862 lines in 18 scenes; 25% verse and 75% prose (2nd longest comedy and 2nd highest % prose behind *Merry Wives*)

Longest Roles: Benedick, Leonato, Don Pedro

Sources: The Beatrice/Benedick plot and the Watch subplot are apparently Shakespeare's own, but the Hero/Claudio plot line is indebted to the maiden falsely accused motif, which dates to the ancient world. While many tales use the motif, a canto in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1516) influenced Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, Book 2, and may have been known to Shakespeare, and certainly one of Bandello's tales (1554) appears to be a direct source for the plot line (even some names are the same). It also appears in a French translation by Belleforest, a source Shakespeare used for other plays.

Imagery: Caroline Spurgeon, in her groundbreaking study *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us* (1935), calls *Much Ado* "gay, sparkling, unsentimental, witty" and "lively." It abounds in references to dancing, music, and song; to horses and riding; to birds and hunting dogs.

"The most noticeable and continuous idea," she says, "is that of country sports of bird-snaring and angling, both lovers being thought of as birds limed and caught in a net, or fish hooked by the 'treacherous bait.'"

Also note the image of masking/the masked ball for the hidden identity/motive theme.

Tour Production's Plot: The governor, Leonato, his lovely daughter, and sprightly niece welcome Don Pedro's victorious forces back after a battle in which Don Pedro's half-brother, Don John, now newly forgiven, had proved a traitor. The peace-time action involves "wooing, wedding, and repenting."

The battle of the sexes begins, and one bout features Beatrice, Leonato's niece, and Signor Benedick, an officer who in the past wooed and dumped her, so now she uses her wit defensively. Both critique love, both advice the younger lovers, and both reject the idea of marriage. Don Pedro decides to trick them, so each overhears friends say that the other loves him or her; it works so well that both privately admit their love for the other.

The war hero, young Claudio, wants to marry Leonato's daughter Hero, so Don Pedro and her father arrange the match, but Don John decides to spite Claudio for defeating him in battle. To spoil the marriage he will slander Hero's virtue and have Claudio see a man enter her window the night before the wedding (an event Don John arranges with a gentlewoman). Feeling dishonored, Claudio rejects Hero and calls her impure at the altar; she faints and later is publicly declared dead while being secretly hidden away. Beatrice denounces the slander and insists that Benedick defend Hero's honor by challenging Claudio to a duel.

Meanwhile the Watch in Messina has caught the culprit, but cannot get the case straight or anyone to listen to them until after the wedding debacle. The confession from the wrongdoer clears Hero's reputation, and Claudio's love returns; he mourns her death. Agreeing to marry another relative as penance, he gets instead a forgiving Hero as Benedick asks for Beatrice's hand, so two weddings are forthcoming as well as the punishment of Don John.

Things to Look and Listen For:

- how serious the honor/reputation issue is
- the nature and stability of Benedick and Beatrice's new love (round 2 for them)
- the comedic nature of the Watch
- male values/female values: who trusts whom
- Dogberry's malapropisms
- nature and degree of Claudio's repentance



"Let me see your face," says Claudio to the masked woman he has agreed to marry after slandering Hero—the end of the rich theme of masking in the play (John S. Gilbert)

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

by William Shakespeare

"Men were deceivers
ever..."

—song, 2.3

Thinking About What We Take Note Of

Joss Whedon, director of the 2002 modern-context film of *Much Ado*, explains his initial interest in the project, saying:

"I fixated on this notion that our ideas of romantic love are created for us by the society around us, and then escape from that is grown-up love, is marriage, is mature love, to escape the ideals of love that we're supposed to follow."

How does society project its views of young love, amorous love, marital love to us? Disney films? Courtly love sonnets? Valentine's Day? The divorce statistics? What are the "shoulds" and "oughts" that we imprint about love before we ever feel it?

Does the experience of love change our views of what love is and should be, can be, or needs to be? How? Why?

Not Enough Ado about **Noting**

We know better than to believe everything on the internet, or about offers to deposit wealth in our bank accounts, or about gossip we hear. We know it's probably not true or even a ripoff, or that it may be skewed, biased, or incomplete and so not altogether true. The need for such reasoning skills was as prevalent in the Renaissance as now—just ask Shakespeare.

Much Ado about Nothing is the prime example of the need for healthy skepticism, because that trait is so often in short supply in this play. Every plot line gets things wrong—or right in the wrong way. A few well placed questions could prevent the worst of the suffering here, but everyone is so sure of what they've seen or heard that questions seem unnecessary. They almost seem to want to believe the worst—or the best and most flattering.

Critics mention the aural overlap of "nothing" and "noting," words which were pronounced quite similarly in Renaissance English. *Noting*, taking note, can mean:

- observing accurately or
- observing in order to consider further,
- remembering what one has heard, or
- writing something down,

but it is a way of preserving what is worthy or necessary.

What does Benedick take note of? The other men saying he is secretly beloved. What an ego boost. What does Beatrice take note of? The women saying she is beloved. Dream come true. What does Claudio take note of? An accusation of infidelity against his fiancée, innocent Hero, a malicious charade which he hears, sees, and believes. He knows better, but

Noting the Changes in This **Production**

Every editor of *Much Ado* comments on how challenging any doubling of characters is. At minimum, the play calls for at least 9 or 10 actors and 4 actresses. This year's group of interns has 6 men and 2 women. Shakespeare's company doubled, of course, but they had up to 22 actors to work with, so director Greta Lambert has had to make creative choices, as directors often do, about telling the Shakespeare's story within the parameters of the ASF tour.

The major personnel of the story are intact; the changes come in the Don John entourage and the ladies' gentlewomen.

While Don John is the major spirit of malice, in the play the idea for the Hero trick comes



Benedick overhearing Don Pedro, Claudio, and Leonato discuss Beatrice's desperate love for him, which is a practical joke; they're just saying it, but Benedick buys it. (John S. Gilbert)

nonetheless he believes the worst, generating much ado and grief. It's worth keeping a little skepticism in your back pocket.

from his associate Borachio. Now without a Borachio or Conrade, however, Don John gets to conceive his deceptions in soliloquy, taking us into his confidence, and becoming an even clearer precursor to Iago, as he is often called, with dramatic address as well as manipulation.

The gentlewomen fill the women's world in the play. Whereas the men "sting" Benedick about love, in the play the women, Margaret and Ursula, help Hero "sting" Beatrice. In the tour, Leonato gets to participate in both stings, as he can as head of the household. Such changes are a regular part of Shakespeare production; Shakespeare's company used a smaller cast and shorter script when it toured.

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

by William Shakespeare



Don John and his cohorts plot the slander of Hero (John S. Gilbert)

"This looks not like a nuptial."

—Benedick, 4.1



The Accusation of Hero by Marcus Stone (1861)

Genre Issues: Romantic vs. Italianate Comedy

Romantic Comedy

Shakespeare himself best describes the process of **romantic comedy**—"The course of true love never did run smooth" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*). Young lovers, matched and mismatched, sundered and then reunited, make a wild progress through hope and despair, yet they finally end up at the altar, fathers accepting, Mr. Wrongs sidelined, and spoilsports evicted. *Much Ado about Nothing* is usually called a romantic comedy, as if its action were a merry romp with a bit of hectic dyspepsia along the way.

Yet the issues involved in *Much Ado* and the questions it raises are more biting and serious than the usual romantic round-robin. In the mid-1590s Shakespeare begins to explore the darker reaches of romantic comedy, and *The Merchant of Venice* and *Much Ado about Nothing* display that exploration. *Merchant* looks at prejudice and social issues; *Much Ado* incorporates that ever popular counterweight to romance, the Italianate villain.

Italianate Comedy and the Machiavel

One-third of the English plays performed between 1549 and 1640 had Italian sources or locales, probably because the English Renaissance perpetually looked to Italy, the

source of the Renaissance, for inspiration. Yet things Italianate also met with an English backlash, for by the end of the 16th century Italianate fashions were both copied and scorned, and its characters explored and disdained for being passionate, fiery, vain, and malicious. The cities of Italy were said to promote vice openly, not to mention Catholicism, the enemy of English Anglicanism. **Italianate comedy** did not sport its way to a happy ending but reveled in manipulation, trickery, and frank sexuality on a twisted path beset with pitfalls.

Of the many Italian writers who influenced English Renaissance authors, one supplanted all the others for the stage, Machiavelli. His political observations—that politicians are not necessarily what they seem to be and that the masses judge by appearances—do not surprise anyone today, but the English saw such deception centered on a scheming, vengeful, self-interested manipulator as dangerous and thrilling, so they instantly made a major stage villain of this character, called **the machiavel**.

In tragedy a machiavel can prove lethal, and even in comedy both the air and the perspectives of the comic world can be tainted by such a presence. Enter Don John, who may be Spanish, but in the political map for the English, the Spanish are figuratively Italian (remember the Armada; moreover, Spain ruled part of Italy during Shakespeare's time).

Viewed from the Italianate angle, the action of *Much Ado*—seemingly festive and promisingly romantic—is fraught with danger; it is a mine field awaiting disaster. Denied power by his battlefield defeat, Don John reclaims it through treachery, denying Claudio his nuptial happiness and sully his personal honor by using that infamous Italian weapon, poison, here the poison of lies, "poison in the ear." Once the wreckage is complete, he flees.

Don Pedro also becomes a comic machiavel, himself full of schemes and "lies," using false testimony to lure people *into* love just as Don John lures them *out* of it. Whether Don Pedro's role as Cupid supersedes the machiavellian influence should be considered. It may depend on what flavor we want our comedy—sweet or with an edge of bitter.

For Discussion

- How potent is Don John's machiavellian plot? How far from a comic norm does he skew the action? Is his plot "funny"? How can a comedy work through such a threat? Structurally, why does the Watch show up right after Claudio heeds Don John?

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

by William Shakespeare



Benedick, who "will still be talking," as here; Beatrice is not wrong on that score. (Louis Rhead)

"... all women shall pardon me. Because I will not do them the wrong to mistrust any, I will do myself the right to trust none. And [so] ... I will live a bachelor."

—Benedick, 1.1

The **Plot Structure**: All's Fair in Love and War?

In a play filled with machinations, strategies, deceptions, guerilla tactics, and conflicts, it may seem ironic that the action opens with a declaration of peace. The major characters act accordingly, shifting from the bravery of the battlefield to the peacetime pursuit of wooing, an endeavor that takes its own kind of courage.

Yet there are traitors in love just as in war, and since the recent war involved Don John's betrayal of Don Pedro by fighting on the other side, we are not surprised to find him continuing his treachery under the cloak of peace.

Things to Notice

- the action returns to Messina, which the army passed through on the way to war. Returning to familiar ground is a pattern in the action—Claudio noticing Hero again, Benedict and Beatrice sparring and then considering a relationship, Don John's treachery, Claudio taking a wife with Leonato's permission
- a pattern of reporting or hearing/overhearing news erroneously begins almost immediately—in 1.2 with Antonio's second-hand and factually incorrect report of Don Pedro's talk with Claudio
- there is a masked dance (often just the men are masked) in 2.1, so the theme of masks and false appearances begins early; the action ends with the ladies masked or veiled in 5.
- Shakespeare develops the lovers' relationships as mirror images: Claudio and Hero attract early on as Beatrice and Benedick spar; then as Beatrice and Benedick become interested in each other as Claudio withdraws from Hero; then once Claudio and Hero are restored, Beatrice and Benedick have an ego glitch on the way to the altar.
- Claudio has several crises of faith, all lies and temptations to falter set up by Don John
- the Watch, in many ways the most mistaken group on stage, manages to discover the truth and save the day, but not before considerable damage is done
- a false wedding on one side leads to a false funeral on the other

Things to Explore

- what a mask or being masked means in terms of truth and identity
- how trust and truth work in relationships, especially love relationships
- what honor means in battle and what honor means in love
- the power of "talk" to change perceptions and actions toward the one talked about; the idea of reputation and the power of gossip or falsehood to affect it—what happens when one's "character" is changed in the public eye
- the relationship between masks and marriage, wedding and death, death and rebirth, and forgiveness in the play
- how to know when love is true
- how to deal with everyone else's desire to "help" your relationship or to "set you up"
- how to overcome fear of failure or betrayal in love (which is the better course, faith or fear?)
- the relationship between the action and issues of the main plot line(s) and the action and issues of the comic subplot (the Watch)

Compare/ Contrast:

- Don John's lies about Hero's constancy to divide Claudio and Hero to Don Pedro's plan for fake conversations about how Beatrice and Benedick love one another. Does Don Pedro really believe they love each other? If he doesn't think it's true, is it funny to tell such lies? Is Don Pedro just as self-indulgent as his half-brother? Or as potentially destructive in playing with others' relationships?
- Are all masks deceptions in the play? Are all deceptions masks? Are any masks useful?
- The role, behavior, vulnerability, and result of purity, virtue, and fidelity and of falsehood, lies, and machiavellianism. [The *machiavel* is a favorite character on the Renaissance stage, an English version or perversion of ideas from Machiavelli's *The Prince* about getting and keeping power, using appearance, and shielding one's true motives.]

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

by William Shakespeare

Don John known to betray

starting point: B ≠ B

+

Cl wants H

listen

Don J wants new attack

mask /false appearance idea

B ≠ B

Cl listens to lie; love crisis #1

but Cl = H

Don Pedro's B & B plot as jest
(spread lies)

Don John's plot planned
(spread lies)

Don Pedro's jests work (lies)
B = B individually

Don John's lie works;
love crisis #2; Cl ≠ H
plot could be foiled...

plot could be foiled! but listen...

Don John's plot succeeds

counterplan for Hero (a lie)

B = B openly

[situation now opposite of 2.1]

truth emerging

Ben defends Hero's honor

Claudio and all learn truth

Cl loves H again, but too late

Claudio's penance

Cl = H and will marry

B & B learn of trick; mini-crisis
averted; B=B

Don John captured

Structural **Details**: Strategy and Tactics

Shakespeare, an excellent dramatic architect, builds solidly as well as elegantly. The structure of *Much Ado* has firm foundations as the two plotlines interweave and also reflect and comment on each other.

1.1— **romantic goals and conflicts emerge**

- the war is over: since drama depends on conflict, new battles will emerge.

Soldiers arrive at Leonato's. Don John has rebelled, but is forgiven (but not repentant?)

- Beatrice and Benedick have a verbal skirmish; in conflict already
- Claudio loves Hero; Don Pedro will arrange the match (in this era of arranged marriages and property settlements)

1.2— **misreporting/errors begin**

- Antonio tells Leonato wrong wooing news

1.3— **Don John back at "war"**

- Don John seeks a plot to spoil wedding

2.1— **masked dance**

- Beatrice uses mask to taunt Benedick
- Don Pedro woos in Claudio's name
- Claudio proves susceptible to Don John's lie, but match confirmed
- Don Pedro schemes joke/misreporting on Benedick and Beatrice (Beat tells DP 'no')

2.2— **counterplot**

- "I can cross it"; lies and false appearance

2.3— **love jest works on Benedick**

3.1— **love jest works on Beatrice**

3.2— **Don John plants the lie; Claudio credits it; visual proof to follow**

3.3— **the Watch arrests the villain(s)**

3.4— **Hero's wedding preparations**

3.5— **Watch tries to tell Leonato of arrest**

4.1— **wedding** [also a "masked" event?]

- Claudio accuses Hero of sexual infidelity
- plan for Hero's fake death
- Benedick and Beatrice declare their love
- he will defend Hero's honor

4.2— **Watch takes testimony**

- truth emerges despite verbal mayhem

5.1— **challenge/confession/repent**

- Benedick challenges Claudio
- Borachio confesses; Leonato demands reparation/new wedding with "niece"

5.2— **truth spreads**

5.3— **Claudio mourns Hero at tomb**

5.4— **marriages** (finally)

- Benedick asks for Beatrice's hand
- Claudio discovers Hero is alive, forgiving
- poems attest truth of B/B's love
- Don John captured, punishment tomorrow

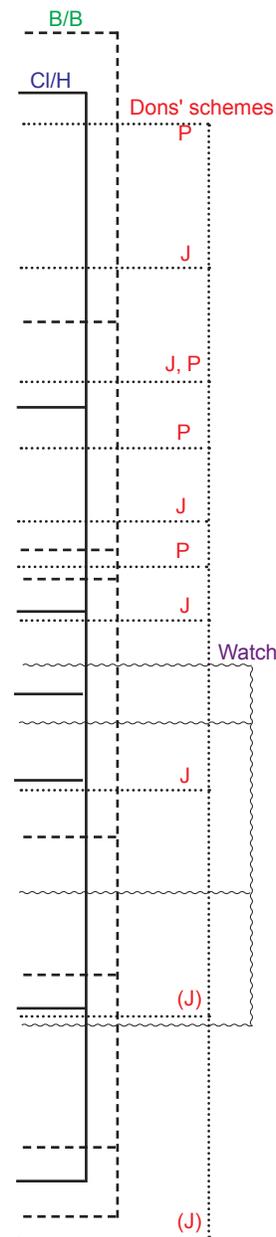
Watch the plot lines interweave:

- the Benedick/Beatrice plotline with the Claudio/Hero plotline: believing what they hear

- the Don John with the Claudio/Hero

Are these two lovers' plotlines both strands of the main plot, or is one of them more "main"?

Consider how the Watch subplot mirrors issues and aspects of the main plots—getting things wrong, verbal "skills," pride. "I am an ass"—how many make themselves "asses" in this play?



MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

by William Shakespeare



Beatrice overhearing how others criticize her character for not loving a worthy man, Benedick—which is a practical joke and not the truth, or so they think. (John S. Gilbert)

"The pleasant'st angling
is to see the fish
Cut with her golden oars
the silver stream
And greedily devour the
treacherous bait.
So angle we for
Beatrice...."

—Hero, 3.1

- How much bait-setting and angling for a "fish" is there in this play? How much of the bait is "treacherous"?

Ado about Establishing Lovers' Relationships

Love and Marriage, Shakespeare Style

In the Renaissance, the higher one's social status, the more likely one's marriage would be arranged by fathers rather than chosen by oneself. After all, marriage then was a business alliance, not a matter to base on so unstable an emotion as love. Shakespeare explores the stability of love in his romantic comedies, often showing shifts and changes in the early (hormonal) phases but often growing to stability with shared experience and knowledge. We can sense our definition of love-and-marriage in Shakespeare and also the Renaissance mindset at work in various pairings.

In *Much Ado* we have a world of men, the officers returning from war and Leonato's governorship of Messina, and also a female world in Messina with marriageable young women. Relationships emerge in the first scene and complicate almost immediately. With these lovers, we do not get love at first sight; we watch and compare two couples who have already seen or

known each other (compare *Shrew*, where we see the first meetings).

Claudio and Hero: "A Soldier's Eye"

These are the younger lovers, newer in their relationship than Beatrice and Benedick. They met when Don Pedro's troops came through Messina on the way to the war from which they have now returned, as Claudio tells Don Pedro:

Claudio: Hath Leonato any son, my lord?

Don P: No child but Hero. She's his only heir.

Dost thou affect her, Claudio?

Claudio: O my lord,
When you went onward on this ended
action

I looked upon her with a soldier's eye,
That liked, but had a rougher task in hand
Than to drive liking to the name of love.

But now I am returned, and that war-
thoughts

Have left their places vacant, in their rooms
Come thronging soft and delicate desires,
All prompting me how fair young Hero is,
Saying I liked her ere I went to wars. (1.1)

At the end of 1.1 Claudio uses standard courtly love imagery; he seems a credible young man in love. This passage also shows the practical side of loving—what the dowry is likely to be. Since Hero is an only child, she will inherit—a key point for any Renaissance match.

Claudio is frank about his priorities; he is young and making his way in the world. Given his success in battle, he can command a noble and wealthy match, and Don Pedro instantly calls Hero "worthy"—apparently in all necessary categories of position, wealth, demeanor, and beauty. Claudio is forthright whereas Hero is almost silent in the wooing.

For Analysis

How well and deeply do these two know and trust each other? What is the basis of their relationship? A Renaissance dating service might match them, but what do we learn in the play? Why do we get the debacles that occur in their relationship (2.1, 3.2, 4.1)? Since Hero does no wrong, must the cause be on Claudio's side for believing Don John, that is, for believing a man he should distrust above a woman he says he loves? What view of women (especially of their fidelity and sexuality) does this plot line reveal, and does that view reflect the "loyal" traitor Don John? Does Claudio view all the action with "a soldier's eye"?

Beatrice and Benedick: "I Know You of Old"

By contrast, Beatrice and Benedick have apparently had a relationship of some sort in the past, as Beatrice explains:

Don Pedro: You have lost the heart of
Signor Benedick.

Beatrice: Indeed, my lord, he lent it me a
while, and I gave him use for it, a double
heart for his single one. Marry, once
before he won it of me, with false dice.
Therefore your grace may well say I have
lost it. (2.1)

So apparently they were an item and Benedick broke it off or proved untrue, so now Beatrice's snarkiness keeps him at a distance, and he replies in kind.

For Analysis

- How serious did they get before? What happens when a broken-up couple must keep seeing each other socially? Does that explain their banter and trash talk toward each other? How should they each behave? How do they each feel? Are there scars? Would it be easy for these two to open up to each other again? What has to change for a second chance to occur?
- Are Beatrice and Benedick *tricked* into love where there is none, or are they *released* into a love they each feel and fear?

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

by William Shakespeare

"Would you not swear,
All you that see her, that
she were a maid,
By these exterior
shows? But she is
none.
She knows the heat of a
luxurious bed."

—Claudio at the wedding,
4.1

luxurious = lustful



Claudio about to accuse Hero
(H. C. Selous, 1830)

Ado about Man's Honor, Woman's Honor

Shakespeare thought critically about the meaning and value of honor in the late 1590s. His second tetralogy of English history plays, especially the *Henry IVs* and *Henry V*, assess and question honor by turns, especially in the person of the engagingly dishonorable Falstaff, the self-preserving fat man with a cup of sack perpetually in hand, who, after Prince Hal claims on the battlefield, "Thou owest God a death," says:

'Tis not due yet.... Can honor set to a leg? No. Or an arm? No. Or take away the grief of a wound? No.... What is honor? A word.... What is that honor? Air. A trim reckoning. Who hath it? He that died o' Wednesday. Doth he feel it? No.... Therefore I'll none of it. (5.1)

Much Ado is written just before Shakespeare finishes that tetralogy, the year before *Henry V* appears at the new Globe Theatre. In this context, even comedy can raise serious questions about honor.

Man's Honor

A man's honor is his word and his actions, especially his martial actions; it is living up to the chivalric ideal. In the recent war Claudio has made the most of his first opportunity to shine as an officer, becoming the hero and gaining a reputation. His male/military honor is now established and his worth and esteem grounded. But it is all new, shiny bright, and unsullied, the way he wants to keep it and enjoy it.

He sees Hero as his female cognate—pure, unsullied, lovely, and worthy (including fiscal worth)—a Renaissance female ideal. His wooing language terms her a "jewel," "the sweetest lady that ever I looked on," yet he does (legitimately?) worry a proposal might seem a bit quick: "But lest my liking might too sudden seem / I would have salv'd it with a longer treatise," to which the dealmaker Don Pedro responds, "What need the bridge much broader than the flood?" (1.1).

How much of the situation in the love relationship is affected by Claudio's youth and newly won reputation? Would he behave differently if he were older and/ or more experienced (in life/in love)? How much is affected by the speed of the wooing/wedding?

How much of the situation is fostered by the fact that another man besmirches Hero's chastity to his face? (In essence, she's called a whore, a term that still reverberates in our world in such circumstances.)

Woman's Honor

Woman's honor has a word-and-action dimension as well, but her honor also traditionally depends to a much larger degree on sexual purity (virginity before and fidelity within marriage) than a man's honor. Man's honor is defined in the outside world, woman's honor in the home and bedroom. Distrust about women's fidelity dates back to Eve and to St. Paul's apparent misogyny, and throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance the Eve/Virgin Mary or virgin/whore dicotomy was readily available to use against any woman. The double standard prevailed.

Don John times his poison perfectly; on the day before the wedding he tells Claudio "the lady is disloyal.... [she is] Leonato's Hero, your Hero, every man's Hero," offering "proof"—rigged, false "proof"—"Go but with me tonight, you shall see her chamber window entered, even the night before her wedding day" (3.2).

Note the subtlety of his innuendo and how much he lets Claudio's imagination fill in the gaps—technically Don John does not say Hero will be "entered" or even that she will be there, just her "window" entered.

The power of imagery, window=woman.

Then he nails the innuendo to Claudio's honor with manly concern—"If you love her then, tomorrow wed her. But it would better fit your honour to change your mind." The threat of dishonor drips from Don John's every word (and he should know; he's the most dishonored man in the play, a rebel). Just to have Don John cast the aspersion dishonors Hero; the mere questioning of her purity can be seen as a tarnish, a stain, whether true or not.

So when the offstage enactment "convince" Claudio that Hero is "disloyal," with manly honor he plans to disavow her at the altar—not to go knock on the door and talk to her or her father, not to ask a single question or actually prove the validity of what he saw. Seeing is believing—with a prestidigitator like Don John.

And once you make this accusation in public, at the wedding, can you unsay it?

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

by William Shakespeare

"Are you good men and true?"

—Dogberry, 3.3



Will Kempe, comedian and morris dancer, here shown on his "nine days' wonder," a 100-mile morris dance



Setting the Watch, with Dogberry front right and Verges left (H. C. Selous, 1830). Dogberry's wide stance declares his alpha status here.

Shakespeare's Clowns and the Subplot

Hamlet specifically requests that "the clown speak no more than is set down for him." Apparently Shakespeare knew all too well how clowns on stage could ad lib. Dogberry, the principal clown in *Much Ado about Nothing*, joins a long line of comic roles already penned by the Bard—the twin Dromios of *Comedy of Errors*, Costard in *Love's Labours Lost*, *Two Gents'* Launce and Speed, Grumio and Tranio in *The Taming of the Shrew*, the irrepressible Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and Lancelot Gobbo in *The Merchant of Venice*—all quite capable of milking an extra joke on stage.

On the Renaissance stage the term *clown* indicates a rustic or yokel. For these characters Shakespeare wrote a specific kind of comedy—the servants are quick to quip and quick to seek reward, loyal, and often interested in girls, while the independent clowns are bombastic and egocentric. And they all were very likely played by the same comic actor, the leading comedian of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, Will Kempe. Kempe was a physical comic, good at pomposity and rustic roles. He left the company in 1598, the year *Much Ado* premiered, so Dogberry was probably his last Shakespeare role. The comedian hired after Kempe, Robert Armin, played a very different kind of comedic role, the witty fool, a professional entertainer and skilled user of language and wit; he was also a singer.

Dogberry's Verbal Comedy

Since the comedy in Shakespeare's subplots always reflects the action in the main plot and since his comedies are consistently feasts of language, it is not surprising that his clowns love to wrap their tongues around words. The servants can be quick-witted and skilled with banter, but some clowns' tongues work faster than their brains and they grab the wrong word, as do Bottom and Dogberry—comic kin because they both are "asses."

The type of verbal comedy Dogberry specializes in is called *malapropism*, intending one word but using another, as Bottom also does when he speaks the line "odours savors sweet" as "odious savors sweet." Shakespeare perfected such wildly-worded comics.

The Comic Duo

Much Ado also provides us with another staple of comedy, the duo act. Think of Laurel and Hardy or Abbott and Costello playing policemen, then meet their ancestors in Shakespeare. The loquacious Dogberry is partnered by the taciturn but equally word-challenged Verges, and whatever verbal havoc Dogberry wreaks, Verges usually seconds. Appropriately for a comedy such as *Much Ado*, with so many high-ranking military officers, the only characters able to grasp that mischief is afoot are the comic officers of the watch, who create their own mischief of tongue, but who do apprehend (or, as they say, "comprehend") the wrongdoers.

Catch that Malapropism!

Here are a few samples from *Much Ado*; listen for more in performance:

- Dogberry and Verges's opening exchange in 3.3 (words to note underlined; key word italicized in red):
Dogb: Are you good men and true?
Verg: Yea, or else it were pity but they should suffer *salvation*, body and soul.
Dogb: Nay, that were a punishment too good for them...
 [to *suffer* implies pain or privation, but *salvation* is a good, a gift (and involves only the *soul*, not the *body*); it is something one need not *pity* but should be grateful or joyous for; it is not a *punishment* (not to have salvation is the punishment)]
- also in 3.3:
Dogb: You are thought here to be the most senseless and fit man for the constable of the watch...
 [he means *sensible* but says the opposite]
- later in 4.2, the Sexton tries to rein in their errant word sense:
Sexton: Which be the *malefactors*?
Dogberry: Marry, that am I and my partner...
Sexton: But which are the *offenders* that are to be examined?
 [*malefactors* are wrongdoers, but Dogberry does not know the impressive polysyllabic word and thus claims to be the culprit (which he is, but only in terms of language use), so the Sexton tries a synonym]

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

by William Shakespeare



Greta Lambert as Beatrice,
ASF 1995

Analyzing Character

Much Ado is a play of social relationships, power relationships, male/female relationships, and friendship. It has two sets of lovers, two sets of brothers, and several different leaders/authority figures. It looks at loyalty and betrayal, truth and lies, the linguistic confidence of both wit and nit-wit, and the verbal and aural aspects of social communication and their (un)reliability.

Consider the pairs of characters, comparing:

- the lovers and the sets of lovers
- the leaders and their relationship with their cadres
- the families (kinship, military) and the values of each
- the working of honor and how it is defined for men and for women
- how the men compare
- how the women compare and
- how eager almost everyone is to deceive someone else on some level.

Is there a reason the social identities are sometimes "masked" in this play? What does that say about human psychology and social relationships?

Character Dynamics: Comparison/Contrast

Benedick

- older, more experienced than Claudio
- many jokes about him as a ladies' man
- professes to be anti-marriage
- savage jests against Beatrice, especially her wit, her talkativeness, her looks, all of which sting if he dumped her in the past
- a respected military officer and good friend
- keen sense of honor and principle
- a bit vain
- takes Beatrice's word over men's claims

Claudio

- younger than other officers
- newly acclaimed a hero
- keen sense of own honor
- a good friend
- perhaps untried in intricacies of relationship; new to love?
- willing to make restitution for wrongs
- may not know Hero well; an arranged marriage

Don Pedro

- the older, legitimate brother; in charge
- has loyal officers, is respected
- enjoys the social whirl
- likes to be a matchmaker and trickster; willing to trick his friends and officers
- believes his half-brother's promise of new start
- keen sense of honor

Leonato

- aware of own social position and the high rank of Don Pedro (an attractive alliance)
- a loving but principled father
- willing to believe men rather than daughter
- keen sense of honor, seeks to redeem any smirch

Dogberry

- proud of own position and authority
- assumes he is right; interrupts others
- quick to give orders
- mis-speaks or gets words wrong, but never hears or acknowledges it
- considers the accusation that he is "an ass" to be outrageous

Beatrice

- older than Hero (how much older?)
- continually joking about Benedick, men, marriage, herself; a very quick wit
- says she's a old maid, no one will have her, yet she is very particular about men
- sensible and clear-sighted in observations; speaks her mind
- a loyal friend and kinswoman
- seems to have been hurt by some relationship with Benedick in the past (the best defense is a good offense?)

Hero

- younger than Beatrice
- seems sheltered and comparatively innocent
- obedient to father and friar
- likes Claudio but may not know him well yet
- loving, faithful, forgiving

Don John

- the younger, illegitimate brother; envious
- malicious and scheming
- has cohorts who are like him in malice
- cannot accept defeat, seeks revenge
- lies to brother, Claudio, everyone
- does not mind slandering innocent Hero in order to damage or hurt Claudio

Antonio

- a loyal brother and kinsman
- quick temper, eager to fight if roused
- can get things muddled

Verges

- loyal #2 constable
- wants to talk, but accepts Dogberry's interruptions
- often knows what is going on
- a benign individual who catches or shares Dogberry's malapropisms



John S. Gilbert's visual joke on Dogberry, who is also sitting in this chair in a nearby illustration

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

by William Shakespeare



Intense interest disguised as utter disdain fuels the relationship of Beatrice and Benedick, but Benedick's claims also parallel Don John's claims at times as the plot lines weave.



Vows about to be made become vows broken, as Claudio's rejection of Hero also accomplishes Don John's rejection of alliance and fidelity to Don Pedro. (Both illustrations by Sir John Gilbert)

Working with the Text: An Example of **How Ideas Weave**

Analyzing Shakespeare involves attention to detail and simultaneously a radar for the larger patterns of character and action, because one phrase or exchange can apply both specifically and more broadly when considered. Let's look at some examples, starting with the running comparison of Benedick and Don John in the early part of the play:

1) Beatrice in 1.1 before men arrive:

"He hath every month a **new sworn brother**.... If there no young squarer now that will make **a voyage with him to the devil?** ... O lord, he will hang on him **like a disease ... and the taker runs presently mad.**"

Beatrice is told Benedick is now close friends with Claudio. The "brother" reference gives us the male fraternity of warriors and young lords vying for favor. But "brother" is more specific; there are brothers in the play, one of whom has behaved most unbrotherly in the immediate past and now does so to his brother's favorite, Claudio.

Claudio becomes the focus here; he is the "young squarer," the man ready to fight and go to the devil with his companion—and he will move in that direction not with Benedick but with Don John, whom he will believe and upon whose leadership he will act.

Benedick's "disease" is eternal fraternity, not developing familial or marital ties, along with a joking and not-so-joking misogynistic patter about women's capacity for infidelity. Claudio ignores Benedick on this point, but he heeds Don John when he invokes honor/dishonor about marrying Hero. Don John does infect Claudio like an anthrax bomb, and Claudio

runs mad, suddenly seeing and accusing his beloved of being a whore.

2) love banter and Don John:

In squaring off with Benedick in 1.1, Beatrice claims, "**I had rather hear** by dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me." In 1.3 Don John makes a parallel claim about his brother: "**I had rather be** a canker

in a hedge than a rose in his grace."

Beatrice compares the sound and empty substance; Don John compares his own being or state; given a choice (and does he choose or is this innate?), he will be a canker rather than a rose; he will corrupt and destroy rather than bloom—the "disease" metaphor continues.

For his part, Benedick claims to be superior to love, just as Beatrice finds all men unworthy (but since they only talk about each other we have a sense of where the radar is aimed).

Don John continues, "**I cannot hide what I am.**" He hides it now, but cannot hide it forever, given his treacherous nature—just as Benedick, despite his many protests, cannot forever hide that he has a loving nature that admires Beatrice.

No sooner does Don John state his malice than Beatrice's banter about men and horns (infidelity, a betrayal of bonds that works on several levels in the play) leads to the proverb, "God sends a curst cow short horns," vowing that an angry cow thus cannot do great damage—and Don John is our most "curst cow" in the action.

3) In the dance/partnered dialogue section of the masked ball, Beatrice's first line to Benedick (both masked) is "Will you not tell me **who told you so?**"—with the emphasis on messenger as much as message, a key point in this scene, since Don John is about to relay a dangerous innuendo and lie to Claudio, who does not consider "who told him so," here or later. She then accuses Benedick of "**devising impossible slanders**" (his insults about her), but Don John will soon devise yet more impossible slanders and not in jest. Benedick's contribution to this growing litany is "that my Lady Beatrice **should know me and not know me,**" which is exactly what Claudio has done in the immediately preceding talk with Don John, who did know he was Claudio when he planted the poison seed. It is Claudio who knows and does not know Don John—and later Hero. Benedick, when faced with someone who seems to deny him his proper place, declares as has Don John, "**I'll be revenged as I may.**"

Thus the dialogue and actions swirl around each other in the various plot lines, creating their own masked dance of cognate emotions and intents.

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

by William Shakespeare

"Love me! Why it must
be requited."

—Benedick, 2.3

Criteria for a Mate

Evaluate Benedick's checklist of traits for his ideal mate. Does the order of traits in his list matter? What is expected of marriage and a wife in the Renaissance? Compare that to today. How close is his list to Claudio's? How close is his list to expectations today? Is there a different list for a date than for a mate?

Why is Benedick skeptical or wary about marrying? Why is Beatrice wary of marriage? Do they have good reasons or are they just playing hard to get?

Benedick in 2.3 says "till all graces be in one woman, one woman shall not come in my grace." His ideal woman would be:

- rich
- wise
- virtuous
- fair
- mild
- noble
- of good discourse
- an excellent musician
- hair color ... (negotiable)

Is it wise to expect perfection in a mate? What happens if some disappointment follows? Is one offering perfection in return, or is that ego?

Working with the Text: Lines and Phrases to Explore

Each of the following phrases or lines has thematic import, often on several levels or for several different characters or situations. The marginal tag is a starting point or springboard; the implications or potential of the phrases often range far beyond this one aspect. Find other lines to add.

- "there is a kind of merry war betwixt [them]" (Leonato, 1.1) • *battle of sexes*
- "I know you of old" (Beatrice, 1.1) • *experience*
- "I cannot hide what I am" (Don John, 1.3) • *identity*
- "wooing, wedding, and repenting..." (Beatrice, 2.1) • *nature of love/ romance*
- "Can virtue hide itself?" (Ursula, 2.1) • *hide/ mask/ obscure + virtue*
- "Let every eye negotiate for itself / And trust no agent" (Claudio, 2.1) • *dilemma of trust*
- "I have wooed in thy name" (Don Pedro, 2.1) • *friendship/ interference*
- "May I be so converted and see with these eyes?" (Benedick, 2.3) • *change of view*
- "men were deceivers ever" (song, 2.3) • *infidelity*
- "Of this matter
Is little Cupid's crafty arrow made,
That only wounds by hearsay" (Hero, 3.1) • *innuendo/ falsehood*
- "One doth not know / How much an ill word may empoison liking" (Hero, 3.1) • *falsehood/lies*
- "If it prove so, then loving goes by haps;
Some Cupid kills with arrows, some with traps" (Hero, 3.1) • *better to love or be loved?
+ assault/entrapment*
- "What men daily do, not knowing what they do!" (Claudio, 4.1) • *irony, given who says it*
- "Out on thee, seeming!" (Claudio, 4.1) • *disillusionment + appearance*
- "remember that I am an ass..." (Dogberry, 4.2) • *being foolish/ mistaken*
- "for man is a giddy thing, and this is my conclusion" (Benedick, 5.4) • *changeability vs. constancy*



Dogberry in action after being called an ass: "Dost thou not suspect my place? ... Though it be not written down, yet forget not that I am an ass!" (H. C. Selous, 1830). For how many characters is that true?

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

by William Shakespeare

"A bird of my tongue is
better than a beast of
yours."

—Beatrice, 1.1

Vocabulary: Shakespeare's Precise Word Choice

Understanding all the words in a few early key scenes can make a difference, so the list is divided into vocabulary for key scenes and then other period words that might be less aurally familiar, though many are easily understood in context.

in the first scene:

Aragon = a kingdom in northeast Spain

league = a unit of distance, 3 miles; so 3 leagues is 9 miles

Signor/signior = a respectful Italian title of address to a man

Florentine = someone from Florence, Italy

Mountanto = a pun on a fencing term, *montanto*, implying Benedick will thrust his way upward
be meet = get even

in your books = in your good graces

a young *squarer* = someone ready to quarrel (as when people "square off" to fight)

he has *stood out* against = rebelled against

in the masked dance scene:

horns = a major Renaissance image for a man with an unfaithful wife, variously explained as associated with goat-like lust or ancient gods turning themselves into horned animals to seduce women. Horn references and images fill the play since fidelity/infidelity is a major concern

some other *metal* than earth = some other substance, with pun on *mettle*, spirit. An obvious allusion to the story of man's creation from dust; also, in the Renaissance, earth is one of the four elements, associated with being cold, heavy, dull

The Hundred Merry Tales = an unsophisticated joke book (1526), i.e. Jokes For Dummies

civil as an orange = a pun, in our world a bad pun. Many bitter oranges came from Seville, Spain; the city's name was also spelled *civil* in the Renaissance. The pun extends to the yellow color associated with jealousy



words that affect the deceptions by Don John or Don Pedro:

a stale = a prostitute

a gull = a trick or deception (also used for the foolish one tricked)

untowardly turned = unfavorably, perversely

a *luxurious* bed = lustful

other words:

blazon = description (from heraldry)

the windy side = upwind

bate = (abate), give up

in troth = by my loyalty, truth

haggard = wild female hawks (hard to train for hawking)

spell him backward = take it the wrong way

she's *limed* = stuck, as in birdlime, a sticky substance

civet = scent, basis for perfume

these hobby-horses = here, fools; literally, stick/toy horses

a great *coil* = a bustle or hubbub

comely love = proper

speak so *wide* = off the mark, errantly

shall *conjecture* hang = suspicion

Wherefore sink you = *why* do you sink

Count *Comfect* = candy, confection, made of mixed ingredients

Borachio = name of one of Don John's companions, means drunkard in Spanish

noisome = offensive (as an odor)

flout = mock

Why is a Spanish lord in charge in Sicily? History! In Shakespeare's time Spain controlled the Iberian peninsula, southern Italy, and Sicily, and as late as the 1640s also Belgium and the Netherlands

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

by William Shakespeare

"Lady, as you are mine, I am yours."

—Claudio, 2.1

Director's **Design Inspirations** for ASF's Touring *MUCH ADO*

The setting of *Much ADO* is Italy—actually Messina in Sicily. Most of the characters are Italian, and director Greta Lambert sought a very warm Italian feel for the show. She found herself responding to the vistas and architecture of Tuscany and to portraits by Italian artist Eugene de Blass (1843-1932; he had Austrian parents, hence the name). Lambert observes, "What I love about these images is the beautiful Italian countryside, the sun bleached colors, and the ease and informality in the clothing." That is the spirit she wants for the show and was the basis of her conversations with the designers.

Pictures from the Director's Album



Tuscan villas



Eugene de Blass, clockwise from upper left, "Daydreaming," "The Water Carrier," "The Flirt."



MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

by William Shakespeare

"My dear friend Leonato hath invited you all. I tell him we shall stay here at the least a month, and he heartily prays some occasion may detain us longer."
—Don Pedro

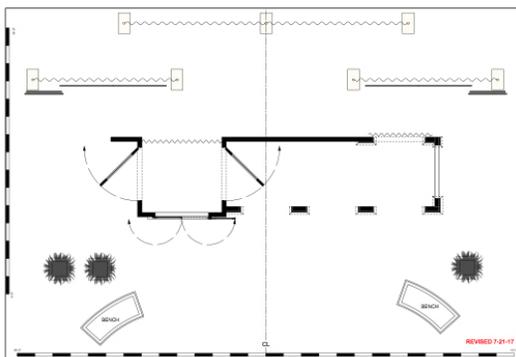
Set Design for ASF's Touring *MUCH ADO*

So how does set designer Robert F. Wolin, who has designed many of ASF's schools tour shows, respond? He says:

Let's go to Tuscany! There's an intimate villa there with a lovely quiet courtyard garden. In the distance are the hills of Tuscany and Italian cypress trees. The sun is shining brightly. A small fountain burbles (in our imaginations) and topiary bushes provide a touch of green. There is a covered arcade with a curtained archway leading to the hills.

Presto! Tuscany in Alabama! Since the courtyard will actually be painted on the Octagon floor, it will not tour, but will be part of the ASF Schoolfest performances.

Like most contemporary stage designs, this one is CAD, computer-assisted design, which has made the conversations between directors and designers and between designers and the scene shop (carpenters and scenic charge/painters) much easier, being able to change angles or zoom without completely re-drawing the image every time as before.



The floor plan for the set on tour

Robert F. Wolin's elevation drawing for the set of the 2017-18 ASF tour of *MUCH ADO* (shown in configuration for Octagon stage SchoolFest run with painted floor)

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

by William Shakespeare

Beatrice and Benedick in Four Video Productions



Kenneth Branagh and Emma Thompson making his 1993 film



Robert Lindsay and Cherie Lunghi in 1984 BBC television production



Kathleen Widdoes and Sam Waterston in the 1973 New York Public's play-on-tv



Interpretations of *Much Ado* on DVD

Four widely available video versions of Shakespeare's play offer audience members an additional chance to consider the impact of interpretive choices on character, emphasis, and meaning.

• **Kenneth Branagh's vibrant 1993 film** set in a villa in the lush Tuscan countryside, starring Branagh and then-wife Emma Thompson as Benedick and Beatrice, Denzel Washington and Keanu Reeves as Don Pedro and Don John, and Michael Keaton as a demented Dogberry. From the opening shots it gives us a passionate male/female context. It also shows graphic sexual action in a balcony scene (Dogberry and Margaret) that is not scripted in the play.

• **The BBC made-for-television production from 1984**, part of the BBC's televised canon. Renaissance costumes and slightly more mature Hero and Claudio. Robert Lindsay and Cherie Lunghi are sharp as Benedick and Beatrice.

• **Joseph Papp's CBS televised version of his celebrated 1973 stage production** for New York Public Theatre's Shakespeare in the Park, set in small-town America after the Spanish American War, with the Watch as Keystone Kops. Sam Waterston and Kathleen Widdoes as a lively Benedick and Beatrice.

• **Joss Whedon's 2012 black-and-white modern-dress film** shot at director's home. Party motif with cynicism hits all edges of play. Modern context works here.

Things to Watch For in Production

- the 1.1 meetings of warriors and locals, sparring former lovers, and young lovers
- the dynamic between Don Pedro, Benedick, and Claudio (the "fraternity") and how young Claudio is portrayed
- the dynamic between the Messina family, especially the women, and how sheltered Hero is portrayed
- the relationship between Don Pedro and Beatrice; is his proposal jesting or real?
- the nature of Don John—real villain or comic villain?
- how and why Claudio responds to the lie about Hero as he does
- how 2.3 and 3.1 (the "s/he loves you" scenes) are handled—where, how credible, the reaction

Alexis Denisof and Amy Acker in the 2012 Joss Whedon film

Hero and Claudio in the Productions



Robert Sean Leonard and Kate Beckinsale in the 1993 Branagh film



Katharine Levy and Robert Reynolds in the 1984 BBC production



Fran Kranz and Jillian Morgese in Joss Whedon's 2012 modern updating

- how the Watch is characterized; effect?
- how the wedding is handled—where, what Claudio's emotions and behavior are, what Leonato's are, Hero's response, plus the B & B love scene (especially how "kill Claudio" lands and its audience response)
- how Claudio takes the revelation of his shame; how he tries to restore his character/honor and whether he succeeds
- how and why Hero takes Claudio back, the credibility of the forgiveness

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

by William Shakespeare

"I have deceived even
your very eyes."

—Borachio, 5.1



Kenny Meadows' illustration shows Cupid reading the news or a proclamation by the light of the Watch's lantern. Explore the meaning of this image for the play.

Worksheet for *Much Ado*

1. When the action starts we are told the war is over, but that seems not to be true because war can be verbal or mental as well as physical. How many kinds of verbal or mental games/wars/conflicts/skirmishes are there in the action of MUCH ADO? What relationships do they affect? Why?
2. In romantic comedies men and women fall in love. In MUCH ADO the men and women do that, but they also seem to form girls vs. guys gender battle lines, each suspecting the other. How do the men see "women," and how do the women see "men" here? Why? Where do these views come from?
3. Compare Hero and Claudio's relationship with Beatrice and Benedick's relationship. What are they based on? What makes each tick? What are the challenges and obstacles for each in achieving happiness?
4. Reputation and honor become major elements of the Hero/Claudio plot line. What do reputation and honor mean to them, what are they based on, and do we have similar concepts in our world?
5. In the subplot, the Watch (pre-police force watchmen) gets things wrong but also gets things right. How does that idea relate to other actions in the play?
6. What moment in the production stood out or made an impression on you and how/why did it work?
7. What ideas or questions does Shakespeare's play convey?

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

by William Shakespeare

Post-Performance Discussion Topics—or Pre-Performance



Claudio's Wedding Rejection
(H. C. Selous, 1830)

The Power of Forgiveness

- Throughout his career, Shakespeare considers the fallibility of humans—their betrayals or the false suspicions on which they act, sometimes quite brutally—and thus their need for forgiveness (*Two Gents*, *Merchant*, this play, *Measure*, the romances). What does it take to forgive another person who has done you bitter wrong? Can such people change or prove worthy of forgiveness? Must love forgive—or is that co-dependence? What is the power of forgiveness? Does Claudio deserve to be forgiven here? Make a case.

Art/Image

- What graphic image best expresses the values of this play? What image best expresses the conflict or emotional core of this play? Design and draw or collage a show poster for this play—graphics, text, colors, and layout.
- What image best expresses the view of love and marriage in this play?

Activities for Working with *Much Ado about Nothing*

Comparisons Then and Now

Love as Changeable

- How do we see love in our world? What is the nature of this emotion? What is the range of emotion we can call love (like the many words Eskimos have for snow)? Is it pure and lasting? Is it temporary and unstable? how many people (and things?) can you love? How do we deal with love when it changes?

Looking for the Ideal

- Benedick provides a list of traits he expects his ideal mate to have. The only negotiable element is her hair color. Do we look for perfect people to date and/or marry? How many perfect people are there?
- Make a list of traits you would look for in a date, in a boyfriend/girlfriend, and in a spouse. Are the lists alike? What might any differences be and why? Do we look for different aspects in someone we expect to marry? What does marriage mean? Compare your list to Benedick's—have the "categories" changed?

Honor and Reputation

- Compare how "reputations" are gained and lost (and re-won?) in *Much Ado* compared to the way they are gained and lost in our social world. Is one's honor, reputation, virginity/fidelity important any more? Or is winning/profitting/scoring all that matters?
- If you were Claudio and someone told you your girlfriend was "disloyal," what would you do and/or say?
- If your boyfriend accused you of being "disloyal," what would you do and say? How can someone prove sexual virtue?
- How easy is such an accusation, if false, to forgive?

Trash Talking

- What makes Don John tick? Is he just acting out because he's the younger and illegitimate half-brother, or does he work by an entirely different set of values? What does he want? What does he expect to achieve? He could not win on the battlefield; why can he prevail for a time in Messina?
- Beatrice and Benedick snark at each other for much of the play, and we enjoy it. What fuels their banter; why do they do it? How do we take such talk in our world?

"For man is a giddy thing..."

—Benedick, 5.4

Much Ado and Other Shakespeare Plays

- A man at a woman's window describes the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, one of the most romantic scenes in the canon. Compare that scene and what we know of the window scene in *Much Ado*.

Is Shakespeare riffing on that scene in this play—same idea but reverse values? In how many ways does that unseen balcony scene work in the play? Is Shakespeare right not to show it? (Do we fill in the gap with our imaginations?)

Even if Shakespeare didn't show it, some productions choose to include it—do we need that? Does seeing it help or hurt our sense of character?

- *Julius Caesar* is a play driven by schemes and plans to overthrow another man. Compare Cassius's motives and schemes to Don John's; compare their characters and the characters of the men they hope to topple.

When he believes the accusation, Hero's father tells her to die, that death is preferable to shame. Do we see a comparable idea in *Julius Caesar*?

- In *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth uses her husband's love for her as her last resort motivation for him to murder Duncan, a deed she believes is crucial for their success. Right after her cousin is shamed in church, Beatrice uses Benedick's newly professed love for her—his "Come, bid me do anything for thee," to test that love: "Kill Claudio." Is she serious?

When he refuses, she replies, "There is no love in you.... You dare easier be friends with me than fight with mine enemy." Is she as bloody-minded as Lady Macbeth in this passage at the end of 4.1? What is the basis of her values and feelings here? How does this moment fit with the larger values in the play?

- In *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*, most of the major characters are battlefield warriors and/or generals, and in *Romeo and Juliet* all the young men are adept at swordplay and street brawling. Compare the male/military ethic/emotion/values to those of the military and patriarchal figures in *Much Ado*.

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

by William Shakespeare



Photo: Alamy

2017-2018 SchoolFest Sponsors

Supported generously by the Roberts and Mildred Blount Foundation.

PRESENTING SPONSOR

Alabama State Department of Education

SPONSORS

Alabama Power Foundation

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Alabama

Hill Crest Foundation

Shakespeare in American Communities

CO-SPONSORS

Robert R. Meyer Foundation

PARTNERS

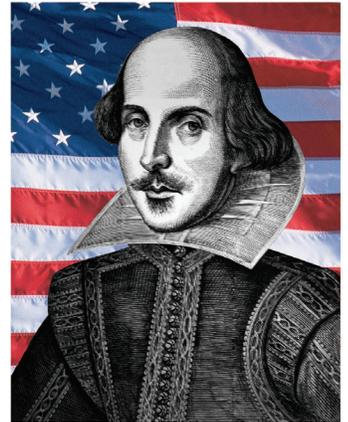
Gannett Foundation

PATRONS

Honda Manufacturing of Alabama

C&S Wholesale Grocers

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS
PRESENTS



SHAKESPEARE
IN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES

PROGRAM MANAGED BY

Arts
MIDWEST

Shakespeare in American Communities is a program of the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with Arts Midwest.

ASF's production of *Much Ado about Nothing* is part of Shakespeare in American Communities, a program of the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with Arts Midwest.