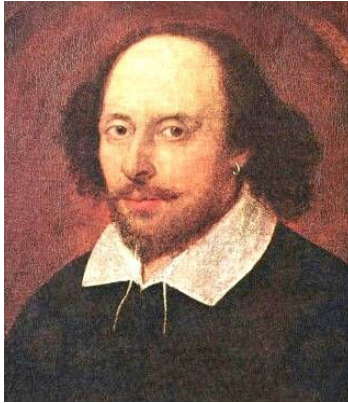


MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

by William Shakespeare



THE AUTHOR

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was born into the family of a prosperous tradesman in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. While in his mid-teens, he was forced to leave school because his family fell into a period of poverty, so that he had only a rudimentary education. In 1582, he married Anne Hathaway, eight years his senior and already three months pregnant. The marriage produced three children in three years, but in 1585, Shakespeare left Stratford to go to London to seek his fortune in the big city.

In London, he embarked upon a career on the stage, becoming a popular actor by the early fifteen nineties. In 1591, he penned his first play, *Love's Labour's Lost*. His early plays were comedies, and show nothing of the depth that characterized his later works. His plots were borrowed from a variety of sources, both ancient and contemporary. During his career, he wrote 37 plays, three narrative poems, and 154 sonnets.

His writing brought him fame and popularity, but he continued to act as well as write (critics love to speculate about which of the characters in his plays would have been played by the author). He eventually became a shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain's Men (later the King's Men when James I ascended the throne). Most of his plays were performed at local theaters like the Rose, the Globe, and the indoor Blackfriars. When the Globe burned to the ground in 1613 (a cannon misfired during a performance of *Henry VIII*), Shakespeare retired, and died in Stratford three years later on his fifty-second birthday.

Much Ado About Nothing was first performed in 1598, after Shakespeare had firmly established himself as a theatrical genius. It contains three major plot threads - the threatened love of Hero and Claudio, the battle of wits between Beatrice and Benedick, and the farcical follies of Dogberry and his posse. Shakespeare weaves these three elements together seamlessly, so that at no time does any one seem to be disconnected from the others. The sharp wit displayed by Beatrice and Benedick make them the favorite characters in the story, and the focus on comedy assures the audience that they need not really fear for the welfare of the star-crossed lovers Hero and Claudio. The story contains no message of great profundity, but has served as a popular entertainment to theater-goers for 400 years.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Don Pedro - Prince of Aragon, he is a noble gentleman who helps to bring resolution to the conflicts in the story at the end.
- Don John - The illegitimate brother of Don Pedro, he is a bitter and angry man. He initiates the plot against Claudio and Hero.
- Claudio - A young Florentine nobleman, in love with Hero.
- Benedick - A nobleman from Padua who possesses great wit. He is a soldier who has no interest in settling down and getting married, but his friends scheme to bring him together with Beatrice in the end.
- Leonato - Governor of Messina, where the story takes place, and father of Hero.
- Antonio - Leonato's brother.
- Borachio and Conrade - Villainous companions of Don John.
- Dogberry - A foolish constable, and the main source of slapstick humor in the play.
- Verges - A local official who serves as Dogberry's assistant.
- Friar Francis - The priest who is to marry Hero and Claudio, and who proposes the ruse that eventually brings them back together.
- Hero - Daughter of Leonato, in love with Claudio; she is the victim of Don John's nefarious plot.
- Beatrice - Leonato's niece, a sharp-tongued and witty young woman who loves to get the best of others in verbal jousts; her friends ultimately bring her together with Benedick, the frequent target of her sharp jests.
- Margaret and Ursula - Gentlewomen waiting on Hero.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“He hath borne himself beyond the promise of his age, doing in the figure of a lamb the feats of a lion.” (Messenger, Ii, 13-15)

“What, my dear Lady Disdain! are you yet living?” (Benedick, Ii, 114-115)

“I had rather hear a dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me.” (Beatrice, Ii, 127-128)

“Why, i’ faith, methinks she’s too low for a high praise, too brown for a fair praise, and too little for a great praise. Only this commendation can I afford her, that were she other than she is, she were unhandsome, and being no other but as she is, I do not like her.” (Benedick, Ii, 165-170)

“I had rather be a canker in a hedge than a rose in his grace, and it better fits my blood to be disdained of all than to fashion a carriage to rob love from any. In this, though I cannot be said to be a flattering honest man, it must not be denied but I am a plain-dealing villain.” (Don John, Iiii, 25-30)

“If it prove so, then loving goes by haps;
Some Cupid kills with arrows, some with traps.” (Hero, IIIi, 111-112)

“I do love nothing in the world so well as you. Is not that strange?” (Benedick, IVi, 288-289)

“O that I had been writ down an ass!” (Dogberry, IVii, 85)

“No, I was not born under a rhyming planet, nor I cannot woo in festival terms.” (Benedick, Vii, 39-41)

“A miracle! Here’s our own hands against our hearts.” (Benedick, Viv, 105-106)

NOTES

Act I, scene 1 - Leonato welcomes Don Pedro and his entourage, which includes his half-brother Don John, Benedick, and Claudio, to his home in Messina. He greets them with his daughter Hero and niece Beatrice. Beatrice and Benedick embark on their accustomed verbal sparring, while Claudio takes notice of Hero’s beauty. Claudio expresses his love to Benedick and Don Pedro; the former mocks him, insisting he will never fall prey to a woman’s love. Claudio asks Don Pedro to intercede for him with Hero and her father, and Don Pedro agrees to woo Hero for him in disguise, then ask Leonato for his permission for Claudio to have her hand.

Act I, scene 2 - Leonato’s brother Antonio informs him that his servant overheard Don Pedro telling Claudio of his love for Hero and his intention to express that love that same evening (a bit of confusion here...).

Act I, scene 3 - Don John hears from his man Borachio that Don Pedro intends to woo Hero for Claudio. He hates his half-brother, despite the fact that he pardoned a recent rebellion against his authority, and hates Claudio because he is high in Don Pedro’s favor. He and his henchmen therefore determine to make mischief of this situation if they can.

Act II, scene 1 - At dinner that night, Leonato warns Hero that she may be approached with an offer of love. Don Pedro asks her to dance at the first opportunity and succeeds in winning her love for Claudio. Benedick and Beatrice continue to banter. Don John pulls Claudio aside and

tells him that Don Pedro is wooing Hero for himself, and Claudio immediately believes him, but shortly thereafter is blissfully happy when he hears that Don Pedro's suit on his behalf has been successful. The marriage is scheduled for a week later. Meanwhile, Don Pedro, Leonato, Claudio, and Hero decide to amuse themselves by trying to bring Beatrice and Benedick together in time to make a double wedding.

Act II, scene 2 - Don John and Borachio plot to ruin the upcoming wedding. Borachio, who is friendly with Hero's lady-in-waiting Margaret, proposes to climb to Hero's window in the middle of the night, converse with Margaret (she will be wearing Hero's clothes and Borachio will call her Hero), while Don John brings Don Pedro and Claudio to watch the proceedings, thus convincing them that Hero is unchaste. Don John promises Borachio a thousand ducats if he can pull off the deception.

Act II, scene 3 - Benedick, speaking again of the folly of love and marriage, hides in the arbor when he sees Leonato, Don Pedro, and Claudio coming. They stage a conversation for his benefit in which they insist that Beatrice is secretly in love with him, but that she will never admit it to him for fear of his scorn and mockery. Every sign of her love they speak of was supposedly witnessed by Hero. They would never tell Benedick, though, because he is such a proud man he would only ridicule the poor, sweet, lovesick girl. Benedick believes them and determines to love Beatrice to show he is not the callous man they think him to be. When Beatrice comes to call him to dinner, he begins to read all kinds of signs of love into her usual mocking words.

Act III, scene 1 - Meanwhile, Hero and Ursula are pulling the same trick on Beatrice, talking of Benedick's love for her while she is eavesdropping on the conversation. They insist he is lovesick for her, but they would never tell her for fear of her mocking response. She, too, believes the ruse and swears to love Benedick.

Act III, scene 2 - Leonato, Don Pedro and Claudio meet Benedick and remark on how much he is changed - he has shaved, put on cologne, and seems much subdued. They conclude he is in love. Benedick then draws Leonato aside to ask him for Beatrice's hand. Don John then arrives and tells Don Pedro and Claudio that Hero is unchaste, and offers to prove it by having them hide and watch her window that night. They believe not a word of it, but agree to watch with the villain, and swear to disgrace Hero in public at the wedding if she proves faithless.

Act III, scene 3 - Dogberry, Verges, and the rest of the night watch prepare for their evening's work, complete with silly instructions that mark the group as the comic relief. They then encounter Borachio and Conrade, the former boasting to the latter of the money he earned by ruining Hero's reputation. With considerable slapstick comedy, the two villains are arrested.

Act III, scene 4 - As her gentlewomen prepare Hero for her wedding day, the three of them tease Beatrice about loving Benedick. She, as Benedick had been in scene 2, is out of sorts and does not exercise her usual wit.

Act III, scene 5 - Dogberry and Verges try to tell Leonato about the men they have arrested, but their conversation is so confusing that he tells them to examine the men themselves and report to him after the wedding.

Act IV, scene 1 - At the wedding, Claudio accuses Hero of unfaithfulness, which Don Pedro, who had also been watching the charade at the window, confirms. Hero faints, and Don Pedro, Claudio, and Don John leave. Beatrice remains convinced of Hero's innocence. The friar who was to have performed the ceremony advises Leonato to put Hero in hiding and say that his daughter died of shame, believing that news of her death will soften Claudio's anger. Meanwhile, if further examination proves her innocence, the marriage may yet go on; if not, she can be sent to a convent. In the emotion of the moment, Benedick and Beatrice confess their love to one another, and Beatrice asks Benedick to prove his love by killing Claudio. Benedick reluctantly agrees.

Act IV, scene 2 - Dogberry and Verges examine Borachio and Conrade (with many malapropisms and Dogberry's famous regret that the sexton had not remained to write him down as an ass) and are told of the plot they carried out against Hero. The constable reports that Claudio has denounced Hero, that she has died, and that Don John has fled the city. The two villains are then bound to be taken to Leonato.

Act V, scene 1 - Leonato and Antonio meet Don Pedro and Claudio in the street and issue a challenge to a duel, but the nobles refuse to fight the two old men. Benedick then arrives and challenges Claudio to a duel, but the latter thinks he is jesting. Benedick, enraged, leaves and promises to pursue the matter later. Borachio and Conrade are then brought to Don Pedro and Claudio, and confess their villainy. Don Pedro and Claudio are ashamed of themselves, and Claudio promises to do anything Leonato demands to make amends. Leonato proposes that he publicize Hero's innocence and marry Hero's cousin, who looks very much like the wronged and supposedly dead maiden. Claudio agrees to do so.

Act V, scene 2 - Benedick is trying to write a poem to Beatrice, but can't manage to do it. When she appears, he tells her that he has challenged Claudio to a duel, but she refuses to kiss him until his vow is fulfilled. Ursula then arrives to tell them that Borachio has confessed and Hero has been exonerated. They then go to Leonato's house.

Act V, scene 3 - Claudio places a memorial epitaph on Hero's grave, sings a song in her memory, and promises to do so yearly, then he and Don Pedro prepare to go to the agreed-upon wedding.

Act V, scene 4 - While awaiting the arrival of Claudio and Don Pedro, Benedick proposes to Beatrice and she accepts him. When the wedding takes place, the bride is revealed to be Hero herself. Benedick and Beatrice discover how they were tricked into professing love for one another, but are content to go through with the marriage. Meanwhile, Don John has been arrested and is being brought back to Messina.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. The figure of the Machiavellian was a common one in the drama of the sixteenth century. In William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, Don John is presented as such a figure. What characteristics of the self-proclaimed villain mark him as a Machiavellian? Connect his actions with specific instructions from Machiavelli's *The Prince*.
2. Discuss the difference between wit and comedy, using characters from William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* to illustrate your points. Which do you find more enjoyable, and why?
3. Discuss the ruse employed by Don John and Borachio to disgrace Hero in William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. Would such a contrivance have had the same effect today? Why or why not? What does your conclusion indicate about the changes that have occurred in society over the last four centuries, and about the nature of society today and its attitudes toward appropriate sexual behavior?
4. Suppose that Hero had really died of shame when she was falsely accused in William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. How might the rest of the play worked itself out? Would it then have qualified as a tragedy? Why or why not?
5. Many commentators over the years have suggested that love and hate are emotions not far removed from one another. Discuss this concept in the light of the relationship between Benedick and Beatrice in William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. Despite the fact that the play is a comedy, and therefore the actions are not to be taken seriously, are you able to believe the rapid transition between scorn and affection the two characters undergo? Why or why not?
6. Discuss the characters of Beatrice and Benedick in William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. Which set of behavior reveals their true characters, the witty verbal wars or the tender love scenes? Why do you think so? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play.
7. For the boys in the class: If you were looking for a marriage partner, would you choose Hero or Beatrice from William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*? Defend your choice by discussing the characters of both women. Girls, answer the same question for Claudio and Benedick.
8. Discuss the role of deception in William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. Choose three acts of deception in the play (the tricks played on Benedick and Beatrice only count as one) and evaluate their impact on the plot and the morality of the actions involved. Is deception always evil, or is it sometimes able to accomplish good? What does the Bible say about this?

9. Discuss the role of sexual infidelity in William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. Be sure to include not only the attempted disgrace of Hero, but also the character of Don John, who was himself the product of an act of marital unfaithfulness. Does the view of extramarital sex in sixteenth-century society cause more harm than good in the story, or are the values expressed worthy ones that our society would do well to emulate? Support your arguments with evidence from the play and from Scripture.
10. Evaluate the relationships of Benedick and Beatrice and Claudio and Hero in William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. Which couple do you think will have the happier marriage? Why? Support your conclusion with details from the play.
11. Compare and contrast the central couples in William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* and *The Taming of the Shrew*. Be sure to include their personalities, their verbal battles, and their eventual relationships. Which couple do you think went on to have the happier marriage? Why?
12. Compare and contrast the characters of two of Shakespeare's illegitimate sons, Don John in *Much Ado About Nothing* and Edmund in *King Lear*. Both are villains, but are they villains for the same reasons? Does Shakespeare provide adequate motivations for their villainies? Do you find significant differences in their characters? To what extent is the behavior of the men due to inherent evil, and to what extent is it due to the way they are viewed and treated by society? Support your answer with specifics from both plays.
13. In William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, why do the tricks played on Beatrice and Benedick by their friends work? What motivates the two verbal combatants to change so quickly? What does this tell you about their personalities and their true feelings? Could the tricks have worked if the two did not already have feelings for one another?
14. Discuss the character of Claudio in William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. He clearly is highly respected and admired by both Don Pedro and Benedick, yet he easily falls prey to suspicions, first about Don Pedro in connection with the wooing of Hero, and then with regard to Hero herself. Given these contradictions, do you find his character credible? Why or why not? How does your assessment affect your enjoyment of the play?
15. Discuss the role of language as a source of comedy in William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. Be sure to analyze the comedy found both in the exchanges of Benedick and Beatrice and those of Dogberry and Verges. How is the use of language different in these two settings? Do they have anything in common? Why does the audience find both to be funny? Use specific examples from the play to support your arguments.
16. In William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, the characters of Leonato and Antonio are often played for laughs, much like the character of Polonius in *Hamlet* - they are crotchety, half-senile old men who are badly out of touch with their surroundings. Evaluate this approach to the two characters. Should they be presented as comic figures, or is the play more effective if the director and actors, and thus the audience, take them seriously? Why?

17. According to James 3:9-10, “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be.” Discuss the use of the tongue as a weapon in William Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*. How does the play demonstrate the truth of James’ words? Can one use the tongue as a weapon without doing harm? Why or why not? Support your answer with details from the play.
18. Discuss the use of foils in William Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*. Choose three pairs of characters who serve as foils for one another. How do these contrasts help to advance the plot and themes of the play? Be specific.
19. Discuss the significance of the title chosen by William Shakespeare for his *Much Ado About Nothing*. What is the meaning of the title, and how does it relate to the contents of the play? Does the title help the audience know how to interpret the actions of the play before it even begins? How?
20. Discuss the interactions of appearance and reality in William Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*. To what extent do these interactions serve as artificial devices to drive the plot to its predetermined end? In what ways are these interactions the foundation for serious messages about human relationships conveyed by the play? Support your conclusions with specifics from the script.