

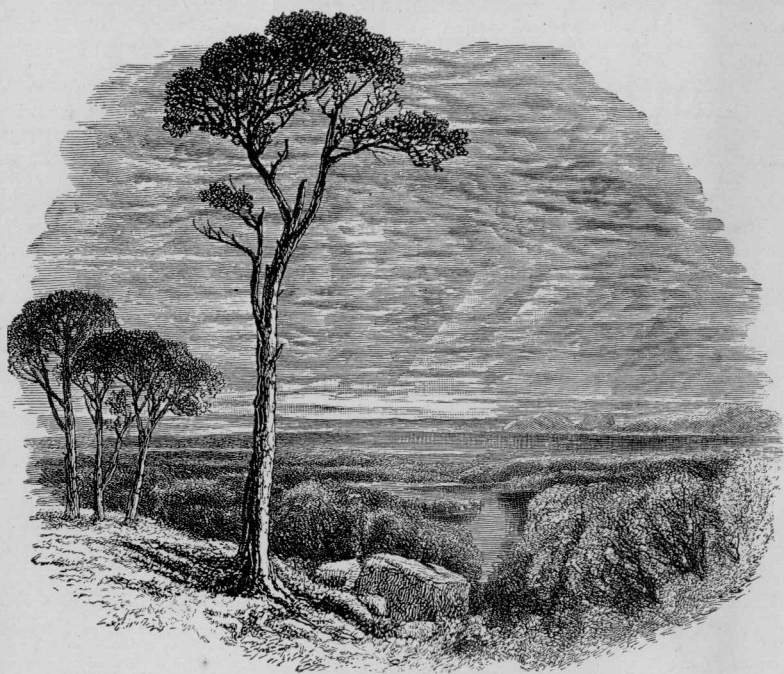




SHAKESPEARE'S COMEDY  
OF  
MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING







“and look, the gentle day,  
Before the wheels of Phœbus, round about  
Dapples the drowsy east with spots of grey” (v. 3. 25).



SHAKESPEARE'S  
COMEDY OF  
MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING.

EDITED, WITH NOTES,

BY

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*WITH ENGRAVINGS.*



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Much Ado about Nothing.

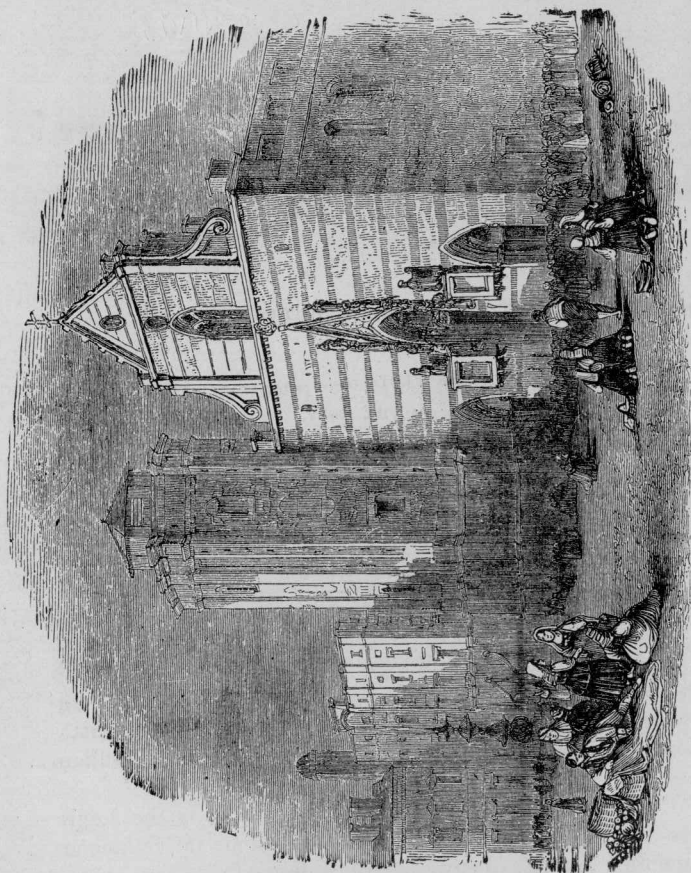
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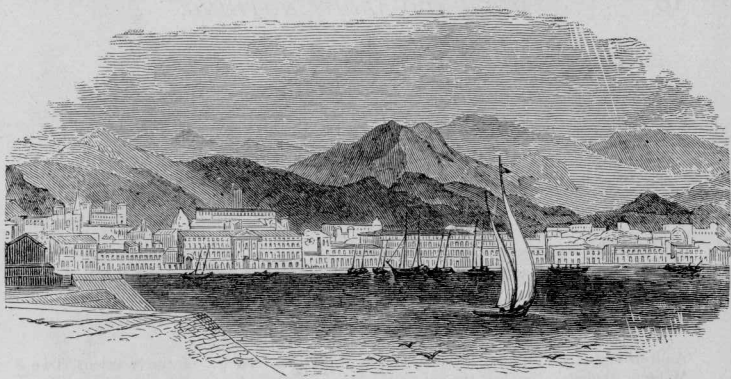
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EXTERIOR OF THE CATHEDRAL OF MESSINA.



MESSINA. FROM THE SEA.

# INTRODUCTION

## TO

# MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING.

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### I. THE HISTORY OF THE PLAY.

THE first edition of *Much Ado About Nothing* was a quarto, published in 1600 with the following title-page :

Much adoe about | Nothing. | *As it hath been sundrie times  
publikely* | acted by the right honourable, the Lord | Cham-  
berlaine his seruants. | *Written by William Shakespeare.*  
London | Printed by V. S. for Andrew Wise, and | William  
Aspley. | 1600.

The earliest known reference to the play is in the Registers of the Stationers' Company, among some miscellaneous memoranda at the beginning of Volume C.\* The memorandum follows one dated May 27th, 1600, and is thus given by Arber :

\* See our ed. of *As You Like It*, p. 10.

## 4. Augusti

|   |                |
|---|----------------|
| <i>As you like yt / a booke</i>                                   | } to be staid. |
| <i>HENRY the FFIFT / a booke</i>                                  |                |
| <i>Euery man in his humour / a booke</i>                          |                |
| <i>The commedie of 'muche a Doo about nothing',<br/>a booke /</i> |                |

The year is not given, but there can be little doubt that it was 1600.

In the same volume, among the regular entries of the year 1600, we find the following :

## 23 Augusti

|                |  |
|----------------|--|
| Andrew Wyse    | Entred for their copies vnder the handes of the wardens Two bookes, the one called <i>Muche a Doo about nothinge</i> . Th[e] other the second parte of the history of kinge HENRY the III <sup>th</sup> with the humours of Sir JOHN FFALLSTAFF: Wrytten by master SHAKESPERE - - - - - xijd |
| William Aspley |  |

This, by the way, is the first occurrence of the poet's name in these Registers.

The quarto of 1600 was, on the whole, well printed ; and no other edition of the play is known to have been issued previous to the publication of the Folio of 1623. The printers of the latter appear to have used a copy of the quarto belonging to the library of the theatre and corrected for the purposes of the stage ; but the changes are for the most part very slight and seldom for the better, as will be seen by our *Notes* below.

As the play is not mentioned in Meres's list of 1598 (see our ed. of *A. Y. L.* p. 10), while it had been "sundrie times" acted before its publication in August, 1600, it was probably written in 1599.

## II. THE SOURCES OF THE PLOT.

The earlier incidents of the serious portion of the plot may have been taken from the story of Ariodante and Ginevra in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, canto v. ; where Polinesso, in order to revenge himself on the princess Ginevra (who has rejected his suit and pledged her troth to Ariodante) induces

her attendant Dalinda to personate the princess and to appear at night at a balcony to which he ascends by a rope-ladder in sight of Ariodante, whom he has stationed there to witness the infidelity of Ginevra. A translation of this story by Peter Beverley was entered on the Stationers' Registers in 1565-6, and was doubtless printed soon afterwards; and in 1582-3 "A History of Ariodante and Geneuora" was "shewed before her Ma<sup>tie</sup> on Shrovetuesdaie at night, enacted by Mr. Mulcasters children." According to Sir John Harrington, the same story had been "written in English verse" by George Turberville, before the publication of his own translation of the *Orlando* in 1591. Spenser had also introduced the tale, with some variations, in the *Faerie Queene* (ii. 4. 17 fol.), and this part of the poem was published in 1590.

It is more probable, however, that the source from which Shakespeare drew this part of his materials was the 22d Novel of Bandello, which had been translated into French by Belleforest in his *Histoires Tragiques* (see our ed. of *Hamlet*, p. 13), and probably also rendered into English, though the version has not come down to our day. In Bandello's story, as in the play, the scene is laid at Messina; the father of the slandered maiden is Lionato; and the friend of her lover is Don Piero, or Pedro. How closely the poet has followed the novel will be seen from the outline of the latter given by Staunton: "Don Piero of Arragon returns from a victorious campaign, and, with the gallant cavalier Timbreo di Cardona, is at Messina. Timbreo falls in love with Fenicia, the daughter of Lionato di Lionati, a gentleman of Messina, and, like Claudio in the play, courts her by proxy. He is successful in his suit, and the lovers are betrothed; but the course of true love is impeded by one Girondo, a disappointed admirer of the lady, who determines to prevent the marriage. In pursuance of this object, he insinuates to Timbreo that Fenicia is false, and offers to show him a

stranger scaling her chamber window. The unhappy lover consents to watch ; and at the appointed hour Gironde and a servant in the plot pass him disguised, and the latter is seen to ascend a ladder and enter the house of Lionato. In an agony of rage and jealousy, Timbreo in the morning accuses the lady of disloyalty, and rejects the alliance. Fenicia falls into a swoon ; a dangerous illness supervenes ; and the father, to stifle all rumours hurtful to her fame, removes her to a retired house of his brother, proclaims her death, and solemnly performs her funeral obsequies. Gironde is now struck with remorse at having 'slandered to death' a creature so innocent and beautiful. He confesses his treachery to Timbreo, and both determine to restore the reputation of the lost one, and undergo any penance her family may impose. Lionato is merciful, and requires only from Timbreo that he shall wed a lady whom he recommends, and whose face shall be concealed till the marriage ceremony is over. The *dénouement* is obvious. Timbreo espouses the mysterious fair one, and finds in her his injured, loving, and beloved Fenicia."

The comic portion of the play is Shakespeare's own, as indeed is everything else in it except this mere skeleton of tragic incident. Claudio and Hero, Don Pedro and Don John, are as really his own creations as Benedick and Beatrice, Dogberry and Verges, who have no part in Bandello's novel or Ariosto's poem. As Knight remarks, "Ariosto made this story a tale of chivalry, Spenser a lesson of high and solemn morality, Bandello an interesting love-romance ; it was for Shakspeare to surround the main incident with those accessories which he could nowhere borrow, and to make of it such a comedy as no other man has made—a comedy, not of manners or of sentiment, but of *life* viewed under its profoundest aspects, whether of the grave or the ludicrous."

## III. CRITICAL COMMENTS ON THE PLAY.

[From Schlegel's "*Dramatic Literature*."\*]

The manner in which the innocent Hero before the altar at the moment of the wedding, and in the presence of her family and many witnesses, is put to shame by a most degrading charge, false indeed, yet clothed with every appearance of truth, is a grand piece of theatrical effect in the true and justifiable sense. The impression would have been too tragical had not Shakspeare carefully softened it, in order to prepare for a fortunate catastrophe. The discovery of the plot against Hero has been already partly made, though not by the persons interested; and the poet has contrived, by means of the blundering simplicity of a couple of constables and watchmen, to convert the arrest and the examination of the guilty individuals into scenes full of the most delightful amusement. There is also a second piece of theatrical effect not inferior to the first, where Claudio, now convinced of his error, and in obedience to the penance laid on his fault, thinking to give his hand to a relation of his injured bride, whom he supposes dead, discovers, on her unmasking, Hero herself. The extraordinary success of this play in Shakspeare's own day, and even since in England, is, however, to be ascribed more particularly to the parts of Benedick and Beatrice, two humorous beings, who incessantly attack each other with all the resources of raillery. Avowedly rebels to love, they are both entangled in its net by a merry plot of their friends to make them believe that each is the object of the secret passion of the other. Some one or other, not overstocked with penetration, has objected to the same artifice being twice used in entrapping them; the drollery, however, lies in the very symmetry of the deception. Their friends attribute the whole effect to their own device,

\* *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, by A. W. Schlegel; Black's translation, revised by Morrison (London, 1846), p. 386.

but the exclusive direction of their raillery against each other is in itself a proof of a growing inclination. Their witty vivacity does not even abandon them in the avowal of love; and their behaviour only assumes a serious appearance for the purpose of defending the slandered Hero. This is exceedingly well imagined; the lovers of jesting must fix a point beyond which they are not to indulge in their humour, if they would not be mistaken for buffoons by trade.

[From Gervinus's "*Shakespeare Commentaries*."\*]

Bandello's tale did not afford the poet even a hint of any moral view of the story; it is a bald narrative, containing nothing which could assist in the understanding of the Shakespearian piece. In *As You Like It* he had to conceal the vast moralizing of the source from which he drew his material; here, on the other hand, he had to strike the latent spark within the material. The story of Claudio and Hero was transferred by Shakespeare from the shallow novel into life; he dived into the nature of the incidents; he investigated the probable character of the beings among whom it was imaginable; he found the key-note by means of which he could bring the whole into harmony. The subject expanded in his hands; the main action received an explanatory prelude; the principal characters (Hero and Claudio) obtained an important counterpart in the connection between Benedick and Beatrice, which is entirely Shakespeare's property; these characters gained an importance even beyond the principal ones; the plot, as is ever the case with our poet, and as Coleridge† has especially pointed out in this

\* *Shakespeare Commentaries*, by Dr. G. G. Gervinus, translated by F. E. Bunnett; revised ed. (London, 1875), p. 406 fol. (by permission). A few slight verbal changes have been made by the editor.

† Coleridge remarks: "The interest in the plot is always on account of the characters, not *vice versa*, as in almost all other writers; the plot is a mere canvas and no more. Hence arises the true justification of the



play, gave place to the characterization; the question seems almost what manner of men made the *much ado* about nothing, rather than the *nothing* about which *ado* was made. The whole stress seems to lie, not in the plot, not in the outward interest of the catastrophe, but in the moral significance which the disturbance caused by Don John exercises upon the two engagements which are concluded and prepared, and again dissolved and left unconfirmed, or rather upon the beings who have entered into these engagements. . . .

The poet has with extraordinary skill so arranged and introduced the tragic incident that the painful impression which is perhaps too sensible in the reading is lost in the acting. He omitted upon the stage the scene of Claudio's agitation on overhearing Hero, in order that he might thus avoid the gloom, and not weaken the comic scene in which a trap is laid for the listening Beatrice. The burlesque scenes of the constables are introduced with the impending tragic events, that they may afford a counterbalance to them and prevent them from having too lively an effect on the spectator. But, above all, we are already aware that the authors of the deception are in custody before Hero's disgrace in the church takes place; we know, therefore, that all the *ado* about her crime and death is for nothing. This tact of the poet in the construction of his comedy corresponds with that in the design of Claudio's character, and in the unusually happy contrast which he has presented to him in Benedick. Shakespeare has so blended the elements in

same stratagem being used in regard to Benedick and Beatrice—the vanity in each being alike. Take away from *Much Ado About Nothing* all that which is not indispensable to the plot, . . . take away Benedick, Beatrice, Dogberry, and the reaction of the former on the character of Hero, and what will remain? In other writers the main agent of the plot is always the prominent character; in Shakspeare it is so, or is not so, as the character is in itself calculated, or not calculated, to form the plot. Don John is the mainspring of the plot of this play; but he is merely shown and then withdrawn.”



Claudio's nature, he has given such a good foundation of honour and self-reliance to his unstable mind and fickle youth, that we cannot, with all our disapprobation of his conduct, be doubtful as to his character. Changeable as he is, he continues stable in no choice of friends and loved ones, since he had never continuously tested them; at the slightest convulsion of events he is overpowered by first impressions, and he is without the strength of will to search to the bottom of things. This would be an odious and despicable character, if the changeableness were not tempered by the sensitiveness of a tender feeling of honour. Our interest in Claudio is secured by this blending of the moral elements in his nature; but the foundation for a comic character does not appear to lie either in him or in the whole action in which he is implicated. If we separate it from the rest, we shall retain a painful and not a cheerful impression. The poet has thus added the connection between Benedick and Beatrice, in order to produce a merry counterbalance to the more serious and primary element of the play, and to make the former predominate. The same self-love and the same spoiling by prosperity fall to the lot of these two characters as to that of Claudio; but, instead of his changeableness, we see in them only what, with a fine distinction, we should (with Benedick) call giddiness. We connect the idea of changeableness with a continual wavering after resolutions taken; that of giddiness with unstable opinions and inclinations before the same: changeableness manifests itself in actions, it is productive of pernicious consequences, and for this reason causes contempt and hatred; giddiness manifests itself only in contrary processes of the mind, which are by nature harmless, and this is the reason why it offers excellent material for comedy. Few characters, therefore, on the stage have such truly comic character as Benedick and Beatrice, and they have not lost their popularity in England even to the present day. Shakespeare's contemporary, Leonard