

THE NEW PENGUIN SHAKESPEARE



MUCH ADO  
ABOUT  
NOTHING  
*by*  
WILLIAM  
SHAKESPEARE



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ABOUT NOTHING

EDITED BY  
R. A. FOAKES



PENGUIN BOOKS

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Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books Ltd, 27 Wrights Lane, London W8 5TZ, England

Penguin Books USA Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia

Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2

Penguin Books (NZ) Ltd, 182-190 Wairau Road, Auckland 10, New Zealand

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England

This edition first published in Penguin Books 1968

Reprinted with revised Further Reading 1996

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**NEW PENGUIN SHAKESPEARE**

**GENERAL EDITOR: T. J. B. SPENCER**

**ASSOCIATE EDITOR: STANLEY WELLS**



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## INTRODUCTION

ONLY two performances of *Much Ado About Nothing* within Shakespeare's lifetime are recorded, both at court in 1613, as part of the festivities associated with the marriage of Princess Elizabeth to the Elector Palatine, Prince Frederick (of Bohemia). At one of these the play was called 'Benedicke and Betteris', a title King Charles I also preferred, for he entered it in his copy of Shakespeare's plays, so confirming the impression given by Leonard Digges, in his commendatory verses prefaced to Shakespeare's *Poems* (1640), that, for cultured audiences at any rate, these characters stole the play:

*let but Beatrice  
And Benedick be seen, lo in a trice  
The Cockpit galleries, boxes, all are full.*

This has been true almost ever since, for with the exception of a period of sixty years after the restoration of Charles II in 1660, when the play was adapted in various versions, it has been popular on the stage, and leading actors and actresses, from David Garrick and Mrs Pritchard in the eighteenth century to John Gielgud and Peggy Ashcroft in the twentieth, have played Benedick and Beatrice with notable success.

At first glance it may seem odd that these two characters should so dominate a play in which the main 'ado' concerns Don John's villainous attempt to thwart the marriage arranged between Claudio and Hero; but clearly Shakespeare planned it this way, and it is important therefore to

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try to understand how and why the action turns for any audience on the relations of Beatrice and Benedick. Much has been said about their wit, and it is true that they are more consistently and outrageously witty than others in a play in which the dialogue crackles with repartee. Yet some part of their skirmishes of wit has lost its force over the years; these are often bawdy, and dependent on sexual innuendoes that no longer have effect, like the jokes about cuckolds' horns (see, for example, I.1.222-4), the easy allusions to legends not now so familiar, to Cupid, Vulcan, Hercules, or Prester John, or the word-play drawn from terms used in hunting or fencing. Perhaps it is not so much the quality of their witty exchanges that makes them such powerful and vibrant figures, as the energy and skill with which they parry each other, and so preserve a stance of tough-minded independence.

The world they inhabit, the world of the play, presents itself in the opening scene as a courtly society of Messina awaiting a visit by the Prince of Aragon; but the ostensible scene matters perhaps less in this play than in any of Shakespeare's other comedies. Most of the play is written in prose, and the easy flow of the dialogue establishes a conversational realism that speaks home at once to us. Its atmosphere is very different from that created by the poetic lushness and romantic ardours of Illyria or the Forest of Arden; in *Much Ado* Benedick and Beatrice all the time, and all the court characters at some time, speak with the grace, freedom, and ease of the finest conversation among social equals, who feel free to say what they please to one another; Benedick and Beatrice are recognized and applauded by the others in this highly civilized group of figures as supreme in the 'merry war' of wit, as the cleverest talkers in a society which values their dexterity.

The conversation in this society is realistic in the sense

that it appears to flow spontaneously, as though its happiest jests and quibbles arise naturally from the narrative context, and are not worked in as formal devices; so it is, for example, with Beatrice's clever joke on 'civil' – 'Seville', the Seville orange being sour, and yellow-orange the colour of jealousy:

DON PEDRO *Come, lady, come; you have lost the heart of Signor Benedick.*

BEATRICE *Indeed, my lord, he lent it me awhile, 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.*

DON PEDRO *You have put him down, lady, you have put him down.*

BEATRICE *So I would not he should do me, my lord, lest I should prove the mother of fools. I have brought Count Claudio, whom you sent me to seek.*

DON PEDRO *Why, how now, Count! Wherefore are you sad?*

CLAUDIO *Not sad, my lord.*

DON PEDRO *How then? Sick?*

CLAUDIO *Neither, my lord.*

BEATRICE *The Count is neither sad, nor sick, nor merry, nor well; but civil count, civil as an orange, and something of that jealous complexion.*

II.1.253-71

Here Beatrice has been asked to fetch Claudio, who thinks Don Pedro has betrayed his trust and wooed Hero for himself. The poise with which Beatrice accepts the loss of 'the heart of Signor Benedick' contrasts with Claudio's sullenness at the idea of losing Hero, and she sharply observes the true origin of his ill-humour in her joke about him. The whole dialogue stems appropriately from the occasion, and Beatrice's quibble brings out what is important for the play's developing action, the jealous disposition of Claudio.

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Within this realistic dimension of the play, this natural flow of good talk, Beatrice and Benedick excel by virtue of their intelligence and vitality, and the other characters allow them this supremacy. It is the source of their immediate appeal to readers and audiences. But it would be a mistake to think of them as 'real', and somehow opposed to 'romantic' figures like Claudio and Hero. They belong, with all the court-figures in the play, to a stylized, highly conventional world in which the mundane needs of everyday life fade into the background, no one has to earn a living, the wars are over, and, Don John excepted, all may devote themselves to revelry, and to match-making. In such a world, demure daughters find their mates in accordance with their rank and fortune, and if the match is not arranged by their parents in the normal way, the lovers win through to parental blessing and harmony in the end. Hero belongs to such a pattern, but Beatrice and Benedick seem superior to it, as if their intelligence and vigour enable them to flout conventions, and thus within the play's 'realism' they stand out as more realistic than others.

They are able to flout conventions too because Shakespeare has taken care not to encumber them with close relatives; Benedick has none, and Beatrice is an orphan to whom Leonato, her uncle and guardian (II.3.167) allows a freedom he would not permit his daughter Hero to have. Beatrice talks with a man's licence, and Benedick with the liberty of an independent visitor, the more readily in that there is no one to restrain either of them; and the rest accept this presumption on the part of the young in homage to their superior wit. The supremacy of intelligence, or wit, in the values of the world of the play helps to account for both its brilliance, and its prose. The brilliance is achieved centrally in Beatrice and Benedick, but a price is paid for it; there is a coolness about the gaiety of this world, where

to score a point in conversation matters most. However diverting and splendid the two central figures are, they do not arouse in an audience the warmth of feeling accorded a Rosalind or a Portia.

The character in *Much Ado About Nothing* who might conceivably do this is Hero, but to some the presentation of her and of Claudio has seemed a flaw in the play, because they do not sufficiently engage our sympathies. This is to ask for a different kind of play from the one we have; for, given the high valuation put on wit, on sharpness of intelligence, Hero is bound to appear a little stupid, and Claudio too somewhat imperceptive. The contrast between them and Beatrice and Benedick was surely designed in part to expose the limitations of both couples, and Hero and Claudio are shown up as conventional and prim, where in a more straightforwardly 'romantic' play these aspects might have passed unnoticed. In a different way, Beatrice and Benedick are exposed too, the mockers mocked, when they are brought to feel 'little Cupid's crafty arrow', and yield a triumph to heart over mind.

In this festive courtly society, which is relieved of the necessity of doing anything but dance, play, and make schemes for matrimony, maids and young bachelors need to have defences to protect themselves against the wrong kinds of pressure. Beatrice and Benedick have their sharp tongues, which scare fools away, and preserve them as individualists from the need to conform to society's usual arrangements; so Beatrice, who has no father to please, can mock at Hero's obedience:

*it is my cousin's duty to make curtsy and say, 'Father, as it please you'. But yet for all that, cousin, let him be a handsome fellow, or else make another curtsy and say, 'Father, as it please me'.*

II.1.46-9

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Hero and Claudio fit into the norm, in so far as their love springs from the eye, not the mind, as Claudio says to Don Pedro:

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.* I.I.275-84

Don Pedro woos on Claudio's behalf, and wins the lady, off stage. The whole thing depends not merely on Hero, but on the permission of her father, whose duty it is to take stock of Claudio as husband, and on satisfactory financial arrangements – Claudio makes sure Hero is Leonato's heir. Some have argued that their sole concern is social position, and certainly Claudio has an eye to his future wealth and status; but this is the way of the world, and also the way of prudence. His love may be real enough notwithstanding.

Hero and Claudio play the game of love by society's normal rules; they make arrangements through intermediaries, on whom they rely for advice and protection – Hero on her father, Claudio on Don Pedro. The young warrior, returning from the fray, is drawn to Hero for her beauty; just as Troilus looked on Cressida and discovered

*that Love hadde his dwellynge  
Withinne the subtile stremes of hir yen;  
That sodeynly hym thoughte he felte dyen,  
Right with hire look, the spirit in his herte.  
Blissed be Love, that kan thus folk convertel*

Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde* I, 304-8



The eye is arbiter, and they love at sight. The guarantee of parents or friends brings judgement into play, and tempers ardour with common sense; but when the game is played by these rules, the parties in it are subject to trickery and deception, simply because the lovers do not know each other fully.

Beatrice and Benedick play by other rules, and like less with the eye than with the mind, relying on their own judgement, not on society's customs. Their wit is not merely a weapon of offence, it is also a means of displaying themselves, what they are, to the world. For all their posing, represented in Benedick's resolve to 'live a bachelor' (I.1.227), and in Beatrice's boast, 'I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me' (I.1.123-4), they are showing themselves off as a preparation for mating, and for ensuring that intelligence matches with intelligence. This is made clear in their preoccupation with each other from the start, and the way in which they talk about each other when they are not speaking together. When Benedick is invited to praise Hero, he talks instead of the beauty of Beatrice (I.1.177-80), and when Beatrice criticizes Don John, she cannot help comparing him with Benedick (II.1.6-7). The tricks practised on them to make them fall in love merely bring into the open what is already implicit in their attention to each other. The power of their love is recognized by them, and by the audience, only when Beatrice calls on Benedick to defend the honour of her friend Hero, and he breaks the ties of friendship with Claudio to accept her mission and 'Kill Claudio' (IV.1.285). In the end they agree together, in terms of an honourable draw as one individual with another; the terms are their own, not those of society, which commonly requires the subjection of women to parents and husbands.

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