

B A N T A M C L A S S I C

SHAKESPEARE

Much Ado About Nothing



Edited by David Bevington and David Scott Kastan

THE NEW BANTAM SHAKESPEARE

William Shakespeare



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ABOUT NOTHING

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INTRODUCTION



Much Ado About Nothing belongs to a group of Shakespeare's most mature romantic comedies, linked by similar titles, that also includes *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* (subtitled *What You Will*). All date from the period 1598 to 1600. These plays are the culmination of Shakespeare's exuberant, philosophical, and festive vein in comedy, with only an occasional anticipation of the darker problem comedies of the early 1600s. They also parallel the culmination of Shakespeare's writing of history plays, in *Henry IV* and *V*.

Much Ado excels in combative wit and in swift, colloquial prose. It differs, too, from several other comedies (including *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Merchant of Venice*) in that it features no journey of the lovers, no heroine disguised as a man, no envious court or city contrasted with an idealized landscape of the artist's imagination. Instead, the prevailing motif is that of the mask. Prominent scenes include a masked ball (2.1), a charade off-stage in which the villainous Borachio misrepresents himself as the lover of Hero (actually Margaret in disguise), and a marriage ceremony with the supposedly dead bride masking as her own cousin (5.3). The word *Nothing* in the play's title, pronounced rather like *noting* in the English of Elizabethan London and vicinity, suggests a pun on the idea of overhearing as well as of musical notation; it also has a bawdy connotation, as when Hamlet wryly suggests to Ophelia that "Nothing" is "a fair thought to lie between maids' legs" (*Hamlet*, 3.2.116–18; see also *Othello*, 3.3.317, where Iago responds to his wife's "I have a thing for you" with a degrading sexual insult). Overhearings are constant and are essential to the process of both misunderstanding (as in the false rumor of Don Pedro's wooing Hero for himself) and clarification (as in the discovery by the night watch of the slander done to Hero's

reputation, or in the revelation to Beatrice and Benedick of each other's true state of mind). The masks, or roles, that the characters incessantly assume are, for the most part, defensive and inimical to mutual understanding. How can they be dispelled? It is the search for candor and self-awareness in relationships with others, the quest for honesty and respect beneath conventional outward appearances, that provides the journey in this play.

Structurally, the play contrasts two pairs of lovers. The ladies, Beatrice and Hero, are cousins and close friends. The gentlemen, Benedick and Claudio, Italian gentlemen and fellow officers under the command of Don Pedro, have returned from the war, in which they have fought bravely. These similarities chiefly serve, however, to accentuate the differences between the two couples. Hero is modest, retiring, usually silent, and obedient to her father's will. Claudio appears ideally suited to her, since he is also respectful and decorous. They are conventional lovers in the roles of romantic hero and naive heroine. Beatrice and Benedick, on the other hand, are renowned for "a kind of merry war" between them. Although obviously destined to come together, they are seemingly too independent and skeptical of convention to be tolerant and accepting in love. They scoff so at romantic sentimentality that they cannot permit themselves to drop their satirical masks. Yet, paradoxically, their relationship is ultimately more surefooted because of their refusal to settle for the illusory clichés of many young wooers.

As in some of his other comic double plots (*The Taming of the Shrew*, for example), Shakespeare has linked together two stories of diverse origins and contrasting tones in order to set off one against the other. The Hero-Claudio plot is Italianate in flavor and origin, sensational, melodramatic, and potentially tragic. In fact, the often told story of the maiden falsely slandered did frequently end in disaster—as, for example, in Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, 2.4 (1590). Spenser was apparently indebted to Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (translated into English by Sir John Harington, 1591), as were Peter Beverly in *The Historie of Ariodante and Ieneura* (1566) and Richard Mulcaster in his play *Ariodante and Genevora* (1583). Shakespeare seems to have relied

more on the Italian version by Matteo Bandello (Lucca, 1554) and its French translation by Belleforest, *Histoires Tragiques* (1569). Still other versions have been discovered, both nondramatic and dramatic, although it cannot be established that Shakespeare was reworking an old play. Various factual inconsistencies in Shakespeare's text (such as Leonato's wife Imogen and a "kinsman" who are named briefly in both quarto and Folio but have no roles in the play) can perhaps be explained by Shakespeare's having worked quickly from more than one source.

Shakespeare's other plot, of Benedick and Beatrice, is much more English and his own. The battle of the sexes is a staple of English medieval humor (Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*, the Wakefield play of *Noah*) and of Shakespeare's own early comedy: Berowne and Rosaline in *Love's Labor's Lost*, Petruchio and Katharina in *The Taming of the Shrew*. The merry war of Benedick and Beatrice is Shakespeare's finest achievement in this vein and was to become a rich legacy in the later English comedy of William Congreve, Oscar Wilde, and George Bernard Shaw. The tone is lighthearted, bantering, and reassuring, in contrast with the Italianate mood of vengeance and duplicity in the Claudio-Hero plot. No less English are the clownish antics of Dogberry and his crew, representing still another group of characters although not a separate plot. Like Constable Dull in *Love's Labor's Lost* or the tradesmen of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the buffoons of *Much Ado* function in a nominally Mediterranean setting but are nonetheless recognizable London types. Their preposterous antics not only puncture the ominous mood threatening our enjoyment of the main plot but also, absurdly enough, even help to abort a potential crime. When Dogberry comes, laughter cannot be far behind.

The two plots provide contrasting perspectives on the nature of love. Because it is sensational and melodramatic, the Claudio-Hero plot stresses situation at the expense of character. The conspiracy that nearly overwhelms the lovers is an engrossing story, but they themselves remain one-dimensional. They interest us more as conventional types, and hence as foils to Benedick and Beatrice, than as lovers in their own right. Benedick and Beatrice,

on the other hand, are psychologically complex. Clearly, they are fascinated with each other. Beatrice's questions in the first scene, although abusive in tone, betray her concern for Benedick's welfare. Has he safely returned from the wars? How did he bear himself in battle? Who are his companions? She tests his moral character by high standards, suspecting that he will fail because she demands so much. We are not surprised when she lectures her docile cousin, Hero, on the folly of submitting to parental choice in marriage: "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'" (2.1.49-52). Beatrice remains single not from love of spinsterhood but from insistence on a nearly perfect mate. Paradoxically, she who is the inveterate scoffer is the true idealist. And we know from her unceasing fascination with Benedick that he, of all the men in her acquaintance, comes closest to her mark. The only fear preventing the revelation of her love—a not unnatural fear, in view of the insults she and Benedick exchange—is that he will prove faithless and jest at her weakness.

Benedick is similarly hemmed in by his posturing as "a professed tyrant to their sex." Despite his reputation as a perennial bachelor and his wry amusement at Claudio's newfound passion, Benedick confesses in soliloquy (2.3.8-34) that he could be won to affection by the ideal woman. Again, his criteria are chiefly those of temperament and moral character, although he by no means spurns wealth, beauty, and social position; the happiest couples are those well matched in fortune's gifts. "Rich she shall be, that's certain; wise, or I'll none; virtuous, or I'll never cheapen her; fair, or I'll never look on her; mild, or come not near me; noble, or not I for an angel; of good discourse, an excellent musician, and her hair shall be of what color it please God." This last self-mocking concession indicates that Benedick is aware of how impossibly much he is asking. Still, there is one woman, Beatrice, who may well possess all of these qualities except mildness. Even her sharp wit is part of her admirable intelligence. She is a match for Benedick, and he is a man who would never tolerate the submissive conventionality of someone like Hero. All that appears

to be lacking, in fact, is any sign of fondness on Beatrice's part. For him to make overtures would be to invite her withering scorn—not to mention the I-told-you-so mockery of his friends.

Benedick and Beatrice have been playing the game of verbal abuse for so long that they scarcely remember how it started—perhaps as a squaring-off between the only two intelligences worthy of contending with each other, perhaps as a more profoundly defensive reaction of two sensitive persons not willing to part lightly with their independence. They seem to have had a prior relationship with each other that ended unhappily. They know that intimate involvement with another person is a complex matter—one that can cause heartache. Yet the masks they wear with each other are scarcely satisfactory. At the masked ball (2.1), we see how hurtful the “merry war” has become. Benedick, attempting to pass himself off as a stranger in a mask, abuses Beatrice by telling her of her reputation for disdain; but she, perceiving who he is, retaliates by telling him as a purported stranger what she “really” thinks of Benedick. These devices cut deeply and confirm the worst fears of each. Ironically, these fears can be dispelled only by the virtuous deceptions practiced on them by their friends. Once Benedick is assured that Beatrice secretly loves him, masking her affection with scorn, he acquires the confidence he needs to make a commitment, and vice versa in her case. The beauty of the virtuous deceptions, moreover, is that they are so plausible—because, indeed, they are essentially true. Benedick overhears himself described as a person so satirical that Beatrice dare not reveal her affection, for fear of being repulsed (2.3). Beatrice learns that she is indeed called disdainful by her friends (3.1). Both lovers respond generously to these revelations, accepting the accusations as richly deserved and placing no blame on the other. As Beatrice proclaims to herself, “Contempt, farewell, and maiden pride, adieu!” The relief afforded by this honesty is genuine and lasting.

Because Claudio knows so little about Hero and is content with superficial expectations, he is vulnerable to a far uglier sort of deception. Claudio's first questions about Hero betray his romantically stereotyped attitudes and his willingness to let Don

Pedro and Hero's father, Leonato, arrange a financially advantageous match. Claudio treasures Hero's outward reputation for modesty, an appearance easily besmirched. When a false rumor suggests that Don Pedro is wooing the lady for himself, Claudio's response is predictably cliché-ridden: all's fair in love and war, you can't trust friends in an affair of the heart, and so farewell Hero. The rumor has a superficial plausibility about it, especially when the villainous Don John steps into the situation. Motivated in part by pure malice and the sport of ruining others' happiness, Don John speaks to the masked Claudio at the ball (2.1) as though he were speaking to Benedick and, in this guise, pretends to reveal the secret "fact" of Don Pedro's duplicity in love. (The device is precisely that used by Beatrice to put down Benedick in the same scene.) With this specious confirmation, Claudio leaps to a wrong conclusion, thereby judging both his friend and mistress to be false. He gives them no chance to speak in their own defense. To be sure, Hero's father and uncle have also believed in the false report and have welcomed the prospect of Don Pedro as Hero's husband. She herself raises no objection to the prospect of marriage with the older man. Don Pedro is, after all, a prince of presumably enormous wealth, power, and social status, well above that of Leonato and his well-to-do but bourgeois family; when he asks (perhaps as a pleasantry) if Beatrice will have him as her husband, her polite refusal seems tinged with a note of regret (2.1.303–21). These attractive features in Don Pedro tend to excuse the general willingness to accept the idea of him as a splendidly suitable husband for Hero. Even so, Claudio has revealed a lack of faith resulting from his slender knowledge of Hero and of himself.

The nearly tragic "demonstration" of Hero's infidelity follows the same course, because Claudio has not learned from his first experience. Once again, the villainous Don John first implants the insidious suggestion in Claudio's mind, then creates an illusion entirely plausible to the senses, and finally confirms it with Borachio's testimony. What Claudio and Don Pedro have actually seen is Margaret wooed at Hero's window, shrouded in the dark of night and seen from "afar off in the orchard." The power

of suggestion is enough to do the rest. Don John's method, and his pleasure in evil, are much like those of his later counterparts, Iago in *Othello* and Edmund in *King Lear*. Indeed, John is compared with the devil, who has power over mortals' frail senses but must rely on their complicity and acquiescence in evil. Claudio is once again led to denounce faithlessly the virtuous woman whose loyalty he no longer deserves. Yet his fault is typically human and is shared by Don Pedro. Providence gives him a second chance, through the ludicrous and bumbling intervention of Dogberry's night watch. These men overhear the plot of Don John as soon as it is announced to us, so that we know justice will eventually prevail, even though it will also be farcically delayed. Once again, misunderstanding has become "much ado about nothing," an escalating of recriminations based on a purely chimerical assumption that must eventually be deflated. The painful experience is not without value, for it tests the characters' spiritual worth in a crisis. Beatrice, like Friar Francis, shows herself to be a person of unshakable faith in goodness. Benedick, though puzzled and torn in his loyalties, also passes the test and proves himself worthy of Beatrice. Claudio is found wanting, and indeed is judged by many modern readers and audiences to be wholly inadequate, but Hero forgives and accepts him anyway. In her role as the granter of a merciful second chance, she foreshadows the beatifically symbolic nature of many of Shakespeare's later heroines.

Much Ado comes perhaps closer to potentially tragic action than Shakespeare's other festive comedies, though *The Merchant of Venice* is another, and so are late romances like *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale* that *Much Ado* can be said to anticipate in the serious matter of slander against a virtuous heroine. Most strikingly, Claudio's failure is unnervingly like that of *Othello*. The fact that both men are too easily persuaded to reject and humiliate the innocent women they love suggests a deep inadequacy in each. The tempters (Don John, Iago) cannot alone be blamed; the male lovers themselves are too prone to believe the worst of women. In Claudio we can see a vulnerability in the very way he looks at courtship and marriage. As Benedick jests, Claudio talks almost as though he wants to buy Hero (1.1.172). Certainly his

attitude is acquisitive and superficial; as the conquering hero returned from the wars, he is ready to settle down into married respectability, and he needs a socially eligible wife. He desires Hero for her beauty, for her wealth and family connections, and above all for her modesty and her reputation for virginal purity. These are attributes easily impugned by false appearances, and in his too-quick rejection of Hero we see in Claudio a deep cynicism about women. He fears the betrayal and loss of masculine self-esteem that a woman can inflict on him by sexual infidelity. To Claudio, Hero is a saint one moment and a whore the next.

Nor is he the only man to demean her (and women) thus. Don Pedro, his patron and older friend, is no less ready to believe Don John's lies, even though Don Pedro has been deceived by his brother before and should know better. Hero's father collapses in shame when he hears his daughter publicly accused of promiscuity, for Leonato's own reputation is on the line: as a father in a patriarchal society, his responsibility is to guarantee the chastity of his daughter to the younger man who proposes to receive her. Leonato's first assumption is that she must be guilty if other men say so; even he is altogether ready to believe the worst of women. Virtually the whole male world of Messina is victimized by its own fear of womanly perfidy—a fear that seems to arise from male lack of self-assurance and a deep inner conviction of being unloved. Benedick is much to be commended for his skepticism about the slanderous attacks on Hero; in no way does he better prove his worthiness of being Beatrice's husband than in his defense of a traduced and innocent woman. Yet Benedick, too, suffers to such a degree from his own male insecurity that he nearly gives up Beatrice at the very end of the play, even as she is nearly ready to give up him. Despite their self-awareness, these lovers must be rescued from their autonomous self-defensiveness by one more intervention on the part of their friends. Benedick and Beatrice are not wholly unlike Claudio and Hero after all. Both pairs of lovers are saved from their own worst selves by a harmonizing force that works its will through strange and improbable means—even through Constable Dogberry and his watch.

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING ON STAGE



Much Ado About Nothing has been popular onstage throughout virtually all of its history. According to the quarto of 1600 it was "sundry times publicly acted" by the Lord Chamberlain's men, and the play was performed at court in 1613 for the Princess Elizabeth and Frederick, Elector Palatine. Contemporary allusions in Shakespeare's day indicate that it was more highly regarded than Ben Jonson's writing in a similar vein, that is, in the social comedy of satirical wit. Leonard Digges, for example, while praising Jonson's sophisticated playwriting, admits Shakespeare's greater popularity: "let but Beatrice / And Benedick be seen; lo, in a trice, / The cockpit, galleries, boxes, all are full."

Restoration and eighteenth-century audiences, who tended to prefer comedy of manners to romance, felt comfortable with Shakespeare's play. *Much Ado* in fact became, more so than any other play Shakespeare wrote, a model for later English comedy: the agreeably sharp battle of the sexes between Benedick and Beatrice reemerges in William Congreve's *The Way of the World* (1700), Richard Sheridan's *The Rivals* (1775), Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), George Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman* (1905), and others.

Restoration and eighteenth-century dramatists did undertake to adapt the play, to be sure. William Davenant's *The Law Against Lovers*, at the theater in Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, in 1662, combined *Much Ado* with *Measure for Measure* by making Beatrice a ward of Lord Angelo and Benedick his brother. In this extraordinary situation, the two lovers are soon required to abandon their contest of wits and conspire instead

to free Claudio (the Claudio of *Measure for Measure*) and his beloved Juliet, here Beatrice's cousin, from jail. Diarist Samuel Pepys saw the play and especially liked the dancing of the little girl, that is, Beatrice's younger sister Viola (from *Twelfth Night*), who sang a song written by Benedick and danced a saraband with castanets. In 1721 John Rich restored Shakespeare's text for a production at Lincoln's Inn Fields, but the newly restored text did not capture the stage. Charles Johnson's *Love in a Forest*, at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, in 1723, included parts of *Much Ado* (especially Benedick's role) in a version of *As You Like It*, and the Reverend James Miller's *The Universal Passion* (Drury Lane, 1737) combined *Much Ado* with Molière's *La Princesse d'Elide*.

Still, Shakespeare's own play (or something considerably closer to it), as interpreted by David Garrick and Hannah Pritchard, did become very popular at Drury Lane in 1748 and in subsequent years, so much so that Garrick chose the play for his great Shakespeare pageant at Drury Lane in 1769, following his Stratford-upon-Avon Jubilee. "Every scene between them," wrote a contemporary observer of Garrick and Pritchard, "was a continual struggle for superiority; nor could the spectators determine to which of them the preference was due." Garrick played Benedick for the last time in May of 1776 during his final year on the stage.

Actor-manager John Philip Kemble followed Garrick in a succession of memorable Benedicks. In April of 1788 at Drury Lane he played opposite Elizabeth Farren's Beatrice in a benefit performance for his wife Priscilla (who played Hero). Kemble continued to have great success with the play, which he regularly revived throughout his stay at Drury Lane. With his move to Covent Garden in 1803 his brother Charles became the principal actor playing Benedick, beginning with a production in John Philip Kemble's inaugural year of management. In 1836 Charles played the role opposite the nineteen-year-old Helen Faucit, in what was billed as his farewell performance on the stage. (In fact, he revived the role one more time, returning to the stage for four performances in 1840 at the request of

Queen Victoria.) Faucit and then Ellen Terry starred as Beatrice, rescuing her from the shrewish interpretation common before that time; Faucit and Terry both favored a warmer, more animated, more buoyant mirth. Faucit played the role for a final time opposite Barry Sullivan at Stratford-upon-Avon in 1879 at the opening of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre. Terry was paired with a deliberate and polished Henry Irving at the Lyceum Theatre in 1882 and subsequently at the Imperial Theatre in Westminster (1903) with Oscar Asche, in a production designed and directed by her son, Edward Gordon Craig. Beatrice was, along with Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, the role for which Ellen Terry was best known and admired.

Nineteenth-century productions of *Much Ado* tended to be lavish. A contemporary account describes the stunning visual impression achieved by Charles Kean at the Princess's Theatre in 1838: "The opening view, the harbor of Messina, was quite a pictorial gem. The gradual illumination of the lighthouse and various mansions, in almost every window, the moon slowly rising and throwing silver light upon the deep blue waters of the Mediterranean, were managed with imposing reality. Then followed the masquerade, with its variegated lamps, bridge, gardens, and lake, seen through the arches of the palace." Henry Irving, in 1882, undertook to go even further. His scene opened on a classical structure of columns and yellow marble steps; the ballroom in Act 2 was done up in crimson and gold, with tapestries; the church scene had an ornamented canopied roof supported by massive pillars, iron gates, stained glass windows, a sumptuous altar, carved oak benches, hanging golden lamps, and statues of saints. Herbert Beerbohm Tree, at His Majesty's Theatre in 1905, provided Sicilian landscapes and Italian gardens to set off a dazzling orchestration of dances and masquerades.

Until the twentieth century, then, a common feature of production was the attempt to entertain through spectacle while focusing the comedy on the combat of wits between Benedick and Beatrice. Whether shrewish or good-natured in their badi-nage, these lovers were the center of the dramatic interest. More recent productions have tended to try something new by

providing an entirely different setting for the action and by looking afresh at the lovers in the context of the whole play. Renaissance decor has not disappeared, of course, as in the influential production directed by John Gielgud at Stratford-upon-Avon in 1949, later with Gielgud himself and Peggy Ashcroft in the chief roles during a revival in 1950. Other directors, however, have chosen for their locations the American Southwest of fast guns and frontier justice with Dogberry as a bumbling sheriff (directed by John Houseman and Jack Landau at Stratford, Connecticut, in 1957), the early Victorian era of crinolines, parasols, and tight lacing (directed by Douglas Seale, Stratford-upon-Avon in 1958), the Regency England of Wellington uniforms (Michael Langham, Stratford-upon-Avon, 1961), the turn-of-the-century Sicily of broiling sun and hot temperament (Franco Zeffirelli, National Theatre, 1965), the Edwardian England of bicycle-riding New Women (William Hutt, Stratford, Canada, 1971), and the small-town America of the post-Spanish-American War era of Teddy Roosevelt, gramophones, brass bands, high wing collars, and Keystone cops (A. J. Antoon, Delacorte Theater, New York, 1972). (Antoon's production, when it was shown subsequently on commercial television, landed at the bottom of the weekly Nielsen ratings and yet was seen on that occasion by more people than in all the play's previous theatrical history.) In 1976 at Stratford-upon-Avon, John Barton set the play in the Victorian India of the British Raj. Six years later Terry Hands, again at Stratford, returned the play close to its original setting by locating it in Caroline England, while in 1985, at the Folger Shakespeare Theater in Washington, D.C., the play was set on a Mediterranean cruise ship, the *SS Messina*, crewed by the watch. In 1987, in Stratford, Ontario, John Neville set the play in an English mansion in late Victorian England, and in 1990, in Stratford-upon-Avon, Bill Alexander returned the play to its Elizabethan origins. In 2002, Greg Doran set the play in Fascist Italy in his production in Stratford-upon-Avon for the RSC.

By relocating the play, modern directors have uncovered darker and more complex issues than those generally con-

fronted by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century productions. Zeffirelli sought to illuminate Hero's plight in the milieu of the Sicilian code of machismo and its fierce demands for female chastity. The British Raj in India provided Barton a world of class-conscious privilege and imperialist mentality in the context of which Claudio's self-centered caddishness and Don John's wanton cruelty seemed plausible and even predictable. Small-town America gave Antoon a more genial, if parochial, perspective on the lovers' tribulations, and the Keystone Cops, with their frantic slapstick chases in the idiom of silent film, were ultimately as ineffectual as the melodramatic Don John, whom they almost unintentionally managed to bring to ground. Regency England established a mood of carefree affluence that gave credibility to the plots and machinations of bored aristocrats. Hands's Caroline setting provided a world of aristocratic privilege where feeling was easily sacrificed to fashion; the superficial values of Messinan society were literally reflected in the mirrored floor and Plexiglas panels of Ralph Koltai's set. Neville's Victorian *Much Ado* highlighted and censured the aristocratic and patriarchal world on display, while Doran's stylish Fascist production focused on Mediterranean misogyny and a culture of *omertà*.

Occasionally these productions strained their audiences' credulity by making nonsense of the play's ceremonial language—what is one to make of “Your Grace” and “my lord” in frontier Texas?—and thus prompted arguments about the virtues and defects of “relevance” in the theater. But at their best such recent productions have done much to explore what is genuinely timeless in *Much Ado* and to discover the balance among its various parts, which earlier productions generally had ignored in favor of the star system of casting.

Staging requirements in the text itself call not only for balance but for juxtaposition. Overheard conversations are frequent, inviting the director to see a resemblance between innocent and vicious modes of deception. Because there is so much playacting and deception, the play calls attention to its own devices of illusion. (This must have been especially true

on the Elizabethan stage where, in the absence of scenery, the actors suggested concealment by hiding behind onstage pillars and the like; possibly Beatrice hid herself in her "pleached bower" in Act 3, scene 1, by means of a curtained wall, or discovery space, that is, a recessed area, at the rear of the stage.) Characters in the play are incessantly stage-managing scenes of mistaken impressions: Benedick's friends devise a conversation for him to overhear, and Beatrice's friends do the same for her, while Don John improvises a trap for Claudio at the masked ball and then stages a scene of infidelity at Hero's window. Masking is not only a device of plot; in the theater it is also a visual metaphor of the roles that characters adopt toward one another. The masked ball is more than a merry occasion; it becomes a pattern for the dancing partners that expresses through their movements the intricate and dangerous rituals of courtship. Dogberry and his watch are funny in part because they are so apart from this courtly world of dance and wit combat, inferior in intelligence and social grace and yet, paradoxically, able to offer the kind of humorous corrective that simplicity and artlessness alone can provide.