



Much Ado About Nothing by William Shakespeare

Teaching notes prepared
by Emma Catchpole



VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION
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Introduction

Usually classified as a romantic comedy, William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* is both a love story and a 'much darker and stranger play' (Dobson 2011). Posthumously published in 1623 as part of The First Folio, the play is a study in human behaviour, of psychological power and abuse; it is a critique of social structures; it hides some of the ugliness of human behaviour behind a veil of light comedy, ambiguity and fast-paced wit. And in the process of all of this, the plot of *Much Ado About Nothing* also just happens to include two budding romances built on the tenuous grounds of perception and deception, which has given actors over the centuries ample opportunity for interpretations, both comic and serious.

In exploring human emotion and psychology, Shakespeare draws ambiguous connections between love and loathing, desire and distrust, union and destruction, honesty and deception, trust and doubt, malice and forgiveness. Shakespeare's pairing of antithetical themes in *Much Ado About Nothing* highlights how people can be inconsistent in their approach to relationships and romantic unions, deceiving themselves as well as others.

Much Ado About Nothing also explores desire, and people's need for reciprocal love—how we respond when we believe we have attained love, and how we rail at our (sometimes perceived) rejection. Shakespeare's contrast of the relationship between Hero and Claudio with that of Beatrice and Benedick suggests that genuine affection only comes from seeing your partner as a whole person: flawed, the product of their environment or context, and with strengths and charms.

Harold Bloom described *Much Ado About Nothing* as 'the most amiably nihilistic play ever written', Beatrice and Benedick as 'Nietzscheans before Nietzsche' (Bloom 1998). Beatrice and Benedick do not simply revile marriage for the sake of being contrarians; such a justification would be disappointing in otherwise complex and interesting characters. They are older and they lack the social status of other characters such as Hero and Claudio; they see the absence of meaning in life and therefore in marriage, yet they enjoy the cut and thrust of their intelligent witticisms. They understand that marriage does not augment their enjoyment of life or contribute to some greater existential meaning. That Shakespeare's characters, at times unknowingly, make much ado about nothing perhaps reflects the playwright's view that life is ultimately pointless. Benedick's conclusive justification for requiting Beatrice's alleged love is that 'the world must be peopled' (II.iii.197), and the song 'Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more' exhorts the ladies merely to:

... be you blithe and bonny,
Converting all your sounds of woe,
Into hey nonny nonny (II.iii.51).

The title of the play is open to various interpretations. The most straightforward explanation—that much ado is made over allegations that hold nothing of the truth—suggests the play is a comment on people's rash judgment and disproportionate responses, particularly to gossip. This relates to the interpretation which replaces 'Nothing' in the title with 'Noting', a near homophone and colloquialism for 'noticing' or 'gossip', which connects the title to both pairs of lovers: Beatrice and Benedick base their conscious acceptance of their feelings on overheard misinformation, and Claudio is twice deceived by the snake-like whisperings of Don John. Bloom (1998)

comments that the play is ‘most appositely titled’ because of its reference to the ‘nothingness’ of life. But in Elizabethan slang, ‘nothing’ (empty space) refers to female genitalia; thus the title suggests a misogynist view that there is much ado about women (and the pursuit of their nothing), and that women are ‘nothing’. At the very least the title suggests ambiguities that support the various ways the play has been interpreted on stage, in film, or by literary critics.

The edition of *Much Ado About Nothing* referred to in the preparation of this Inside Stories guide is the 2014 Cambridge School Shakespeare. Its colourful visual stimuli, straightforward analysis, activities, and most notably its rejection of the convention of many classroom editions of Shakespeare—a modern language retelling of the script on each opposing page—make it an ideal edition. It highlights words and phrases relevant to students’ understanding of the play and the context, and it raises ideas and questions useful in classroom study. This Inside Stories guide aims to work alongside the many other available resources, while tailoring analysis, advice, activities and assessments for teachers of VCE English/EAL.

Ways into the text

Common themes in Shakespeare’s work include love, power, jealousy and vengeance. *Much Ado About Nothing* makes exploration of ideas and values accessible through its plot, but what makes it a truly wonderful text for VCE study is its scope for more detailed analysis and interpretation as well. The following are introductory activities for students of all skill levels, designed to be undertaken prior to reading and intended to assist students in commencing the play with confidence, by gaining a feel for the themes and values that actors of the play could highlight.

One of the best ways into the play, of course, is to watch either a live production or a film; Branagh’s 1993 film, with its depictions of the Sicilian setting, is delightful, but students should be aware that it is just another interpretation—the playscript is their text for study.

Building on prior knowledge of Shakespeare’s plays

Most students will have studied at least one of Shakespeare’s plays earlier in secondary school, and this prior learning could be a good place to start. As a class, conduct a teacher-led discussion on one or more of Shakespeare’s works already studied. Consider language, character types, themes, structure and interpretations. Initial questions could include:

- What type of play did we study? Comedy, tragedy, history? How did we know what genre it was?
- What types of characters were in the play and what happened to them?
- What were the main themes, and what values were revealed? Were some values obvious and others implied or hidden? Did we have different interpretations of its ideas?
- What techniques did we notice? For example, were there soliloquies and asides, metaphors, different language for characters of different status?

Ask similar questions about *Much Ado About Nothing*:

- If *Much Ado About Nothing* is classified as a romantic comedy, what are you expecting from the plot and the themes? How might different audiences interpret it differently?
- What do you anticipate will happen to the heroes and villains of the play?
- Based on what you know about Shakespeare and his plays, what do you expect from *Much Ado About Nothing*? Does it matter if you see a live production, a film, or just read the play?

The power and danger of gossip

Ask students to write answers anonymously (or complete an online survey) to questions such as:

- How would you define gossip and slander? What is the purpose of gossip? Why do some people love to gossip? Do you? Have you shared a secret with someone after promising not to? What were the repercussions of this? Do you always confirm the truth of gossip before spreading it?
- When reading information on social media, how do you know it is true? Do you always confirm the truth of information before sharing it via social media? Have you ever had an argument with someone because of gossip?

A selection of student responses could then be read to the class as a springboard into a discussion about the extent to which gossip is powerful and dangerous, and to what extent people value (and seek out) truth, both in their personal relationships and in the world at large. Teachers and students might also wish to discuss: how quickly a lie can spread and why misinformation often becomes viral; what love of gossip says about us on a psychological level; how gossip becomes slander; and how society normalises gossip and misinformation through the media.

#RelationshipGoals

Students choose three pairs of lovers from fiction and examine each character as an individual. Who are they? What are their personality traits? What aspects of their identity contribute to the formation of these personality traits? Examples of couples could include Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger, Homer and Marge Simpson, Tony Stark and Pepper Potts.

Then, students examine their relationships. Is there a 'leader', a 'carer'? Are they equal in intelligence (emotional, academic and practical), power, class, education? Is there a similarity or difference which draws them together? Is their relationship considered 'traditional/conventional'?

Finally, students should examine the purpose of each of these relationships. Is romance the only factor or are there social, sexual, familial, religious or economic influences? Are they positive relationships? Are these relationships indicative of who people should aspire to be and how they should aspire to behave? This information could be recorded in paragraphs or in a table.

After reading the play, students can then compare their chosen couples with Hero and Claudio, and Beatrice and Benedick. Are the romantic relationships in *Much Ado About Nothing* aspirational relationships? How do they compare with other relationships in fiction? In what ways have romantic relationships changed over time? In what ways is human nature consistent when it comes to relationships? How and why do people change their minds about a relationship as they mature?

Structure of the text

While the Hero-Claudio plot is based on a narrative trope recycled in many folk tales and epic poems (a common practice in Early Modern Theatre), the 'merry war betwixt Signor Benedick and [Beatrice]' (I.i.45) appears to be Shakespeare's own invention. These two relationships constitute two concurrent and interrelated plots, which make the 'plotting of *Much Ado about Nothing* intensely original ... allow[ing] two socially subordinate but more intelligent and principled persons to take the lead through the wise vitality of their love (just as the fools, too, play their part in the resolution).' (Everett 2007). The plot and the characters' actions should be mapped by students for them to use as a quick, easy revision reference (see **Further Activities**).

Plot

Introduction: In beginning *Much Ado About Nothing* mid-scene, Shakespeare ensures a direct introduction of name and context for the key characters. In the first ten lines, we learn that Don Pedro the Prince of Arragon has recently been victorious in battle, that he is en route to the play's setting, Messina, where he and his men will require the hospitality of the governor, Leonato, and he brings with him an 'honour[able] ... young Florentine' (I.i.8), Claudio. Similarly, Shakespeare shows the importance of Don John to the plot by introducing him and his context directly: Leonato is being kind and generous to accept him because, for some reason, he needed to be 'reconciled to the prince [his] brother' (I.i.114); we know that he is the Prince's 'bastard brother' so we get this initial hint about his untrustworthiness. Don John later expands on the fact that his relationships with Don Pedro and Claudio are less than amiable: 'I am a plain-dealing villain' (I.iii.23); 'if I can cross him any way, I bless myself every way' (I.iii.48). In the first scene there is much banter about whether women are trustworthy in the matter of their children's paternity, and by the third, the bastard Don John's envy and vengeful anger are established.

Other characters are introduced incidentally as the action progresses; for example, Borachio, whose allegiance to Don John is implied through his willingness to share news, and Ursula and Margaret, who are gentlewomen attending on Hero.

Romance blossoms and plots are hatched: Claudio first reveals to his comrades his affections for Hero, then Don Pedro takes it on himself to woo on Claudio's behalf. Though 'fair Hero is won' (II.i.227), Claudio does not learn this until after Don John undertakes his first attempt to thwart Claudio's marriage. Once the truth of the matter is resolved between Claudio and Don Pedro, the latter, undeterred by the attempted derailment of his previous plans, turns his attention to his next plot: 'undertak[ing] one of Hercules' labours ... to bring Signor Benedick and the Lady Beatrice into a mountain of affection' (II.i.275). Once again, Don John, with the assistance of Borachio and an unwitting Margaret, plots against his brother, his comrade and his hosts.

Crisis: At this point, the lovers are paired (though Beatrice and Benedick have not quite admitted their affections to anyone else), so now is either the time for a happy ending, or a crisis. Shakespeare chooses the latter: the humiliation of Hero (and therefore of Leonato) at the hands of a jealous Claudio, a 'dishonoured' (IV.i.58) Don Pedro and a cunning Don John. From this scene, Shakespeare could have turned his play to tragedy, and allows some of his characters to think that it has; however, comedy is much better suited to his plans for Benedick and Beatrice, and provides a more palatable avenue to express his views and values, particularly about marriage.

Resolution: In order to still have its happy ending, *Much Ado About Nothing* needs: a revelation of the truth; a remorseful Claudio; a forgiving Leonato (and, we assume, Hero); an open declaration of love from Beatrice and Benedick; and the capture and implied punishment of Don John. Given this is a more complex resolution than most romantic comedies of the time, it covers the better part of six scenes and involves almost the entire ensemble of characters. The resolution, however, feels a little thin to modern audiences, the main sticking point being that Claudio is forgiven. Hero is implicitly forgiven because her father is also let off the hook; perhaps it speaks to the love she has for Claudio that, had she been guilty of what he accused, Claudio's reaction would have been justified according to the values of their social context. Such is the challenge for a contemporary audience watching a play written four hundred years ago.

Styles of theatre and comedy

While all stories, even comedic ones, need some kind of complication and climax, Shakespeare certainly puts the drama in dramatic structure! He heightens the climax of *Much Ado About Nothing* to the point where it could have toppled into tragedy. This sets the play apart in the world of comedy, as the stakes are so high and dire circumstance so nearly realised; though it begins and ends with merry wit, there are dark issues explored as the life-threatening action of the play takes place.

In terms of his theatric style, Shakespeare utilised such a variety across his career, it is easier to speak of his thematic, rather than theatric style. Some theatric conventions of his time he adhered to and, more importantly, developed, such as his frequent use of soliloquies and asides (both of which we see in *Much Ado About Nothing*), and characters' awareness of the audience. Some of the other staples of classical theatre were also being rejected by many of his contemporaries, such as the Classical Unities. Shakespeare himself supported this and later in his career mocked the Unities in *The Tempest* (by simultaneously using the Unities and having Prospero make conspicuous mention of them) and then in *A Winter's Tale* outright rejecting the Unity of Time. *Much Ado About Nothing* takes place within the same household and grounds, but the stage itself does not represent a single location. Despite rejecting the Unity of Place, the theatres of the time had not replaced the basis for their foundation: scenery and props were still scant, and so Shakespeare often implies exact location with character lines and movement (for example, the dressing of Hero for her wedding in Act III, scene iv).

Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies bring to the stage stories people know and care about. It was (and often still is) common practice for lead characters to be upper class citizens, with servants being relegated to secondary characters. These plays about nobility were enjoyed by a wide cross-section of Elizabethan society because, at their core, they are not 'wealthy people's stories', they are human stories which explore the human condition. This is why their themes remain relevant today even though the characters' motivations, and the humour derived from characters of low status, may seem dated.

Roman influence

Shakespeare's comedies are heavily influenced by Roman comedy, not only in plot and style but also characterisation. Just as the Roman comedic playwrights had their *adulescens*, a young lover, *Much Ado About Nothing* has Claudio, an ostensible hero whose ability to behave rationally is hindered not, as in the Roman comedies, by his love of the *virgo*, but instead by his own feelings of inadequacy. Hero, our *virgo*, is given more stage time than some of her Roman counterparts, but she is similarly a background character in her scenes; more a prop than a contributor of vital dialogue. Shakespeare has Don Pedro take on the role of *senex*; much like the Roman father figures, Don Pedro offers advice to the *adulescens*, in this case even insisting on wooing on his behalf. While it could be argued that Leonato is Shakespeare's *leno* (in Roman theatre, a brothel owner or slave dealer), as he is Hero's keeper, he is less effectual and acts less as a hindrance to the romantic coupling of the *adulescens* and *virgo* than would his Roman counterpart. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, this romantic 'blocking' role is taken on by the *parasitus*, a self-interested character who is begrudgingly dependent on another for their status and wellbeing; this, of course, is Don John.

An interesting way in which *Much Ado About Nothing* breaks away from the Roman character archetypes is not so much in the character types themselves, but in their prominence. Benedick is not an *adulescens*: he is not the youth desperately seeking approval from some father-figure, and his actions are not dictated by his outward displays of affection for his lover. Similarly, Beatrice is neither *virgo* nor *meretrix* (one who is either young and foolishly in love, or older and manipulative). Shakespeare brings the less noble archetypes to the fore; he has them command the stage and their love propels the plot. Benedick is *servus callidus*; in Roman comedy this is a witty slave and ally to the *adulescens*, in Messina he is loyal to the Prince and 'sworn brother' (I.i.53) to Claudio. Benedick's *servus callidus* keeps the other characters entertained through his propensity for puns and playful jibes. The female counterpart to the *servus callidus* is the *ancilla*, a clever and loyal maidservant who, like Beatrice caring for Hero, tends to her mistress and renders her assistance. Ursula also takes on this role, though to a lesser degree.

Perspective on the text

There are two broad ways of experiencing *Much Ado About Nothing*: as the romantic and as the cynic. One need not wholly subscribe to only one or the other; personally, I find myself the cynic for Hero and Claudio, and the romantic for Beatrice and Benedick. Beatrice and Benedick's love is so pure because it comes without the baggage of inheritance and class, and the false notions of romance which conceal obligation. Their cutting remarks have stripped each other and they have nothing left to hide. Beatrice gives as good as she gets when it comes to the sort of male banter Benedick engages in. Here is a couple who will argue, they will not grind their lives away under the deceptively heavy shade of pleasantries and a false concern for the other's feelings which in truth is used simply to avoid conflict; Benedick and Beatrice need not fear conflict, they thrive off it.

One interpretation of the way that both Beatrice and Benedick suddenly change upon hearing rumour of the other's affection could be that their transformation shows a weak susceptibility to trickery, but another is that they, of all the play's characters, are the most steadfast and reliable. They alone, with Friar Francis, stand by Hero when the other male characters gang up against her. This relationship, as Shakespeare portrays it, seems to value both their intellectual equality and the mature concessions and compromises we all need to make in order to more happily cohabit. Such changes are made both selflessly, with thought for our partner, and also as an investment in our future happiness, to better ourselves in gaining the other's affections.

Interpretations of the values and attitudes surrounding the relationship between Claudio and Hero are much more ambiguous. Given that 'Shakespeare takes shape through our interpretations' (Smith 2019), how do we interpret the easy susceptibility of the Count, the Prince and the Governor to the malignant trickery of the Prince's 'bastard brother'? One interpretation is that Claudio's behaviour is unforgivably unacceptable, especially for a contemporary #MeToo audience, so he gets off far too lightly. Another is that it is patriarchal social values that are at fault, and another that the fault lies with codes of masculinity in which male

bonding is cemented with misogynist jokes and banter. Or perhaps the shocking metaphorical ‘death’ of Hero is generated by the ‘comedy’ of mistaken perception, and we forgive the gentlemen their bad behaviour because the near-tragedy is a plot device, a structural necessity of the romantic comedy genre:

No reading of the play can excuse the brutality of [Claudio’s] treatment of Hero, but the conventional comic action does demand that he be forgiven. (Newman 1988)

However, as Newman goes on to suggest, Claudio still stands condemned, despite his weak excuses:

The play asserts that the sins of ignorance and credulity have consequences as dire as Don John’s sins of will. When he learns of his mistake, Claudio asks of Leonato ‘Impose me to what penance your invention/ Can lay upon my sin, yet sinned I not,/ But in mistaking’ (Vi.240).’ (Newman 1988, p. 118)

More troubling for a contemporary audience may be the idea that Hero’s so-called ‘honour’ has anything at all to do with her father, let alone that the father would believe other men above his own daughter, to the extent of entertaining the oxymoronic idea of ‘honour killing’: ‘Would the two princes lie, and Claudio lie, ... Hence from her, let her die’ (IV.i.145). ‘These hands shall tear her’ (IV.i.184), Leonato announces, and he challenges Claudio ‘to trial of a man’ (Vi.63) for having ‘wronged mine innocent child and me’ (Vi.63). The question for us is, why do these men—Leonato, Claudio, Don Pedro—attach their own sense of ‘honour’ to how a woman might choose to behave? Is it any of their business? The play’s answer seems to be that it doesn’t matter anyway, because it turns out they were ‘mistaken’.

Much Ado About Nothing is a story of privilege and power, and the marriage of Leonato’s daughter is as much an economic matter as a matter of the heart. In the play’s context, Hero’s options are limited; she must forgive Claudio (and therefore we do too), as it is his consent to marry her which affirms her innocence

and fulfils her father’s plans. Although male characters may characterise marriage as a yoke, for the female characters, marriage offers stability and safety—and additionally, for Beatrice, we like to think, intelligent companionship. The play’s ambiguities nevertheless prompt questions such as: Does it treat marriage with reverence or disdain? Does the play endorse or condemn patriarchal dominance of the female body? Does it smile or frown at trickery and deception? Does it covertly cheer gender equality and feminist values? Does it support or mock male group behaviour?

What values does the play express about the behaviour of the gentry—and that of the lower classes? The comedic genre demands that the privileged characters who have been gullible and foolish, Don Pedro, Leonato and Claudio, be exposed by the lower class characters, who in a sense are quite smart, and as the mistaken perceptions are all exposed it allows the gentlemen to be forgiven. ‘Comedies had a moral purpose: they mocked current follies and vices’ (Mullan 2016); it is possible to read Claudio and Don Pedro’s reprehensible behaviour as a mockery not only of their gullibility but also perhaps of male camaraderie and competition in general. ‘Shakespearean comedy is a world in which women’s desires and agency tend to triumph’ (Smith 2016); in the play’s terms, it is perhaps Hero and Beatrice who are the most laudable characters.

Much Ado About Nothing explores gender politics in ways that could be familiar and/or shocking for a contemporary audience. The views and values it embodies—about class and status; sexuality and companionship; constructions of masculinity and femininity; sin, atonement and forgiveness; trust and deception; desire and shame; and about what constitutes a lasting companionable relationship—will give students lots of opportunity to explore the values it expresses, and to discuss different interpretations.

Characters

The ensemble of *Much Ado About Nothing* is made up of characters who take on multiple roles within the plot (necessary when the plot contains so many deceptions for such varying purposes). Our lovers, Beatrice, Benedick, Claudio and Hero, are much more than simpering, wistful romantics; they are also deceivers, enablers and comics through whom Shakespeare explores personal and social values. Our villains, twice thwarted, progress the plot by blocking a marriage, and enable us to see how the other characters (high-born and low) behave in challenging situations—some act honourably, but the villains are not the only ones whose actions we find reprehensible: without the use (or abuse) of Claudio, Don Pedro and Margaret, our villains would be ineffectual. And in the highly gendered world of this play, it is the men of the gentry whose attitudes and actions seem most to be condemned as selfish, ignorant, buffoonish, and reprehensible.

Shakespeare's characters give life to language that sparkles with wit, humour and insight, and to the explicit and implied values expressed in the play about privilege, sexuality, deception, masculinity and femininity, virtue and vice, transgression, mercy and forgiveness, society and relationships.

Beatrice

Beatrice is one half of arguably Shakespeare's most celebrated couple. Initially a sworn bachelorette, she takes great pleasure in puns and cutting quips, especially when directed at Benedick, but we sense that no one is fooled by her apparent disdain for him.

In describing her humour, she says 'I was born to speak all mirth and no matter' (II.i.251). Through the character of Beatrice, Shakespeare explores the conflict between who we truly are and the person we present to the world. Through Beatrice's limited revelations about her history with Benedick, Shakespeare reveals to us why Beatrice is such a 'pleasant spirited lady' (II.i.258); Beatrice was indeed hurt by Benedick—'once before he won [my heart] of me, with false dice, therefore your grace may well say I have lost it' (II.i.212)—but refuses to be defined or burdened by it, 'lest [she] should prove the mother of fools' (II.i.215).

Beatrice's story could be one of sorrow; she appears to be an orphan, cared for by her uncle, with no prospect of marriage as she is without fortune and spurns her suitors. Despite what would have been regarded at the time as dire circumstances, Beatrice is witty, carefree and confident. There is more to her personality than being born under a 'star [that] danced' (II.i.254).

Beatrice's confidence and strength come from her intellect. In the context of the play, where Beatrice and Hero both live under the care of Leonato, it appears that women possess neither personal autonomy nor physical power; Hero, however, is fair—beautiful, according to Claudio, and virtuous, according to Don Pedro—and Beatrice is witty, a characteristic perceived as negative only by Benedick, who is generally the object of her banter. Beatrice's confidence is evidenced by her intellectual word play, her ability to joke in ways that men do.

In some ways Beatrice is more of a guardian to her cousin Hero than is Leonato. It is Beatrice who defends Hero's honour and uses her newly requited lover to seek vengeance for Claudio's slanderous accusations, and it is Beatrice whose faith in Hero never wavers. In Act II when the family discusses the rumoured intentions of Don Pedro to marry Hero, and Beatrice jokes about why she herself wouldn't get married, she shows concern for her cousin—she entreats her cousin to 'be ruled by [her] father' (II.i.38) only if she finds the prince handsome.

Indeed, Beatrice is well versed in how to deal with powerful men. When Don Pedro asks Beatrice if she would have him as a husband, she responds with care for his ego, stating that she would be unworthy to have such a man as he; 'your grace is too costly to wear every day' (II.i.250). When trading barbs with Benedick, Beatrice holds her own, never cowering to someone who, according to the convention of the time, should have had all the power in their banter.

Benedick

Benedick, who describes himself as a 'professed tyrant' (I.i.124) to women and equates marriage with 'thrust[ing] thy neck into a yoke' (I.i.148), is perhaps a 'confirmed bachelor' because he lacks the means to support a wife. As a member of Don Pedro's army, he appears to be as loyal as he is witty; even early in the play he makes perceptive remarks—for instance, that music draws 'souls out of men's bodies' (II.iii.51)—which, despite a witty ambiguity, show a more serious side. By the end of

the play, we see him as lover and loyal friend, wit-cracker and earnest gentleman, and, as the only male character apart from the Friar who stood up for Hero, a truly honourable and dependable man.

Benedick baulks at the accusation that ‘he is the prince’s jester’ (II.i.103), yet his witty banter is his trademark characteristic. But by Act IV, we see him being much more serious. He is not so much an inconsistent character, as a man who, like Beatrice, is capable of change, one who is not so bound by his former protestations against marriage (and, indeed, against Beatrice) that he will sacrifice future pleasure for consistency with past declarations. Westlund (1984) describes the protagonists’ change of heart as ‘a classic instance of reparation based on acknowledgement of guilt and a chance to repair the wrong’, in this case, the wrongs being their treatment and rejection of both each other and marriage. Harold Bloom (1988) celebrates Beatrice and Benedick’s transformation, because ‘they have changed altogether into the strongest version of their own selves.’

Claudio

Claudio is highly praised by the other characters, being first introduced to the audience as one who ‘hath borne himself beyond the promise of his age, doing in the figure of a lamb the feats of a lion’ (I.i.11); the ‘right noble Claudio’ (I.i.61) is cherished by the prince, Don Pedro, as his ‘right hand’ (I.iii.36). Despite this high, and we assume much deserved praise, Claudio is another of Shakespeare’s studies in the inferiority complex (starting with *Richard III* and also seen in *Othello* and *Macbeth*, among others). Claudio doubts himself from the outset; like his love interest, Hero, Claudio stands silently by as the prince, Leonato, Benedick and Beatrice have a lively conversation. When he does speak, Shakespeare fills his dialogue with as many questions as statements. Claudio questions Hero’s modesty and his own worthiness, revealing his views of marriage—that his wife should be faithful to him and he should be worthy of keeping her thus.

When Don Pedro decrees that he will ‘tell fair Hero [he is] Claudio, and in her bosom unclasp [his] heart ... and the conclusion is, she shall be [Claudio’s]’ (I.i.248), the scene ends before Claudio can respond. He makes no clear show of needing or requesting the prince’s assistance in obtaining Hero’s affection, and is given no opportunity to either protest or accept. Don Pedro’s power is such that he requires neither permission nor approval, and as leader of a group of soldiers, he is never contradicted. Claudio silently

acquiesces, and it is this decision of Don Pedro’s which gives rise to the first deception of Claudio—Don John merely seizes on the opportunity presented to him. Lacking self-confidence, Claudio is quick to believe that ‘the prince woos for himself’ (II.i.130) despite their soldierly bond and the prince’s earlier assurances that he would merely play the part to help him. It is not so much that he feels Hero could not love him, but that he feels the prince has found him unworthy of her, and therefore taken Hero for himself. Because Claudio could not possibly compete with a prince (and his loyalty to Don Pedro would not allow it), he instantly abandons his hopes for Hero. Claudio’s inferiority complex may also help the audience to accept his credulity at Hero’s supposed pre-wedding unfaithfulness, even though during their (albeit brief) engagement she has shown no indication whatsoever of being not a maid or of loving anyone but Claudio.

Hero

Leonato’s daughter is, early in the plot, betrothed to Claudio, only to then be rejected by him at her wedding for being (allegedly) a whore, ‘an approvèd wanton’ (IV.i.39). For modern audiences, this part of the plot may be problematic, but we need to see the purpose of the character in ‘the world of the text’. Although Don John is maliciously provocative when he sneers ‘Leonato’s Hero, your Hero, every man’s Hero’ (III.ii.78), this line also serves to emphasise that the character represents the ideal of a heroine. Her characteristics are that she is a dutiful daughter, she has a wealthy father, and, most importantly, she is a virgin. Hero shows some capacity for wit as she dances with Don Pedro in Act II, scene i, and again in the gulling of Beatrice in Act III, scene i, although in this she pales in comparison to Beatrice. Hero’s value to the play is in what she represents: a woman desired for both her beauty and her wealth, and therefore an object of male possessiveness, jealousy and envy. For the predominantly male audiences of Elizabethan England, a female character being a metaphor and a plot device is not only accepted, it is expected. According to the values of the time, a beautiful virgin with a wealthy father is the ideal heroine. Of course, a contemporary audience bringing a feminist understanding to the values expressed through the character of Hero may find her insipid.

- Shakespeare’s character Beatrice breaks the mould of this version of femininity. What is implied about the male objectification of the female by these two contrasting female characters?

Don John

Born to unmarried parents himself, this character offends the values of Shakespeare's audience even before he sets out to 'build mischief'—an illegitimate son, having no right of inheritance, was expected to be envious and scheming. Don John openly discloses what he is: 'I am a plain-dealing villain' (I.3.23). His purpose in thwarting the marriage of Claudio and Hero is to take pleasure in maligning his brother Don Pedro as well as in destroying the young couple. He is fuelled by envy and self-pity at being illegitimate; in the style of a classic sociopath, he cares not for the wellbeing of others who, in his view, enjoy and are supported by the social structures that keep him in an inferior position because of the circumstances of his birth. Don John is, in a sense, powerless, despite being the son of a king. And so, he takes a perverse pleasure in his power to bring about this microcosm of anarchy. As a tool in framing the plot, this character blocks the socially acceptable union of a young couple. Metaphorically, as a stereotype of the bastard, he is cast as the villainous destroyer of the sacred institution of marriage. Dogberry, at the seemingly farcical trial of Borachio and Conrade, succinctly and clearly summarises the truth in his command 'Write down, Prince John a villain' (IV.ii.34).

Don Pedro

A prince, a brother, a commander, a 'love-god' (II.i.292): Don Pedro takes on each of his roles with a zealous confidence that derives from his privilege and position of authority. He sees himself not only as Claudio's commander, but also as a romantic guide, perhaps ignoring or simply not considering the wishes of his subjects. The first deception of the play, his 'wooing' of Hero, is carried out at his own insistence; he clearly is not opposed to using disguise and misinformation to achieve his goals—which he would no doubt regard as honourable.

When he believes that Claudio has only narrowly escaped being married to a 'rotten orange' (IV.i.27), a 'common stale' (IV.i.59), Don Pedro supports Claudio's public shaming of Hero as he likewise feels 'dishonoured' to have supported (indeed, secured) their union. Yet just as he had shamed Hero, so too does he feel remorseful at having done so unjustly: 'to satisfy [Leonato]/ I would bend under any heavy weight' (Vi.243). Like Claudio,

Don Pedro is accepted, in the context of the play, as a victim of Don John's 'treachery' (Vi.218) and therefore forgiven for his trespasses against Hero's honour (which, in this value system, is Leonato's honour too). His remorse, like Claudio's and Leonato's, is sufficient to let him off the hook.

Leonato

As Hero's father and the Governor of Messina, Leonato should be a protector and guardian, but this is a role he neglects when Hero is first accused at the wedding. Leonato is described by Don Pedro as 'honourable' (I.i.83) and a 'dear friend' (I.i.109)—and Benedick in an aside about this 'white-bearded fellow' claims that 'knavery cannot sure hide himself in such reverence' (2.iii.107)—yet he is quick to believe Don Pedro that his daughter 'knows the heat of a luxurious bed' (IV.i.36), and to condemn her: 'Do not live, Hero, do not ope thine eyes' (IV.i.116). He betrays his daughter in this way because of the idea that her sexuality, her 'shame', somehow shames him—as the father of the accused woman, Leonato is also impugned, and his standing with Don Pedro matters more to him than his fathering role. He does firmly resile from this view soon after, but then casts himself as the victim of Don John's malignant deception.

Dogberry, Verges and the watchmen

The lower class characters, who speak in prose laced with malapropisms and errors, are used by Shakespeare as comic interlude, but also to expose the hidden vices of the 'gentlemen' who speak in poetic language. In their farcical way, these bumbling representatives of authority reveal the truth, and draw our attention to 'deformed' social and personal values among the high-born men that deserve to be corrected. Dogberry and the comic characters, despite their foolishness, represent values of honesty and truth, in contrast to the deceptions and dishonourable behaviour of the gentry. Their language could lead to misunderstanding, but in fact brings clarity; they are, in their own foolish way, 'honest neighbours'.

Issues and themes

What explicit or implied views and values does Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* express? It is obvious from the opening scene that social and personal values about relations between men and women will be a central focus—the play opens 'by bringing together two distinct gendered worlds, when the returning soldiers under Don Pedro's command billet in Messina, home to old men and young women' (Smith 2019). From there, the play continues balancing a festive with a war-like spirit, revealing male characters who seem unduly focused on their relationships with each other. Hero's father and putative lover, along with the latter's army commander, all betray her out of various forms of male pride or self-centredness. Benedick and Beatrice stand out as the ones who ultimately challenge the weaknesses of the other characters—we see that theirs is a mature love match based on honesty and equality. In the process of sorting out the two socially-sanctioned heterosexual relationships (and overcoming the evil that nearly 'deformed' them), we also see that every character is deceptive, and is deceived, in one way or another.

Power, autonomy and deception

The ways in which individuals control others and allow themselves to be controlled is central to the plot of *Much Ado About Nothing*, allowing it to become more than a comic tale of perilous love with an eventual happy ending. In Messina, Shakespeare creates a microcosm of humanity, allowing the household of Leonato to represent any society, then as much as now. Within it, there are various forms of control which keep, or at least attempt to keep, people's behaviour in check.

Don John is introduced to the reader from the outset as a 'bastard' (though this stigma is not revealed to the audience until Act IV) with no legitimate claims on power or fortune, thus, he is only allowed 'freedom' in so far as Don Pedro allows it. Freedom, Don John argues, does not exist if one is under another's 'controlment' (I.iii.15), and so social status maintains one brother's power over another. It is not only Don John who experiences the weight of Don Pedro's authority. Because of his royal role, other characters show deference to Don Pedro: Claudio silently acquiesces to Don Pedro's plan to woo Hero in disguise, while Leonato not only invites Don Pedro and company into his home, he initially values

his loyalty to Don Pedro above his own daughter, instantly believing the gossip about her. Don Pedro seems completely unaware of all this, taking his power over others for granted, as those with power are often wont to do. Only Beatrice stands up to him; she, who generally 'mocks all her wooers out of suit' (II.i.264), politely declines his proposal.

Deception is a handy plot device, but also a serious theme throughout *Much Ado About Nothing*, as motivations for deceiving people can be virtuous or vicious. When Don John deceives, he does so to bring about chaos in the characters' lives; when Don Pedro deceives Hero, and later Benedick and Beatrice, it is to bring about happy unions. Similarly, the deceptive 'death' of Hero is another male ploy not to punish Claudio, but to 'protect' her (or to 'protect' the 'honour' of the men who own her). Indeed, there are so many deceptions in the play, that the characters expect and fear malicious deceit, and readily forgive what is considered benevolent deceit. Either way, deceit is used as a means of control in the world of *Much Ado About Nothing*, Shakespeare by extension encouraging us to question the ways in which we, too, are deceived.

Social norms play a large role in controlling how men and women view marriage and each other. The generally accepted paradigm in respect of marriage is one of male dominance and entitlement; married women of the time had few rights. Anthony (1994) comments: 'If something so important to individual happiness as lifelong sexual pairing is "nothing", then the play figures an alarming conformity to oppressive institutions vested in elderly male authority, property rights—and proprietorial rights over women.' Marriage is accepted as the norm by all characters except Beatrice and Benedick, who, rather than seeing marriage as a mutually beneficial arrangement which provides financial security and social stability, look upon such unions as restrictive and soul denying. They initially play with the idea that to be wed is to be snared, with Benedick adding that infidelity is virtually guaranteed from at least one party, leading to the breakdown in trust in the relationship. Though several of the other men make many quips about cuckoldry (in most cases, using humour to conceal and cope with their fear and anxiety), they continue to speak of love and uphold the ideal of marriage. Thus, they see women simultaneously as worthy to be pursued, but also potential 'wantons', 'Venuses', 'pampered animals' (IV.i.54). This contradiction is explored by Westlund (1988):

Claudio preserves Hero, 'the sweetest lady', in an isolated state ... He idealises her, and in doing so he denies her sexuality. When her sexuality emerges, it proves intolerable and persecutory. He feels deceived and manipulated by her. He cannot ... conceive of Hero as a whole person.

This inconsistent approach to women does not just damage men's perception of women, it controls women's behaviour. They are expected to make exaggerated pantomimes of their virginity, their honour, through demure dumb show. Hero does not speak to, and barely in front of, Claudio (excepting her whispers in his ear in Act II, scene i, unheard by the audience) until their failed wedding. She has done all in her power to show modesty by tapering her wit, something which occasionally shines through, such as when she dances with the masked Don Pedro and during her gulling of Beatrice. Her efforts to embody a subservient femininity, however, are all for nought: Don John slanders her anyway, knowing how gullible men can be when a woman is deemed 'disloyal' (III.ii.76), a word 'too good to paint out her wickedness' (III.ii.80).

Forgiveness

The fact that so many deceptions, transgressions and downright brutish behaviours are forgiven in the play—or excused—may be troubling to a contemporary audience, but the play must have a resolution consistent with the values of its context. The act of forgiveness propels much of the plot right from the very first scene: Don John's presence in Messina is reliant on the fact that his brother has recently forgiven a past transgression, a point Leonato declares publicly and of which Conrade urges Don John to be mindful. If Don Pedro had not 'ta'en [Don John] newly into his grace', we would have no plot: without the presence of our villain, there is no complication, no climax and nothing to be resolved between Hero and Claudio.

Similarly, Claudio implicitly forgives Don John for the misinformation (that Don Pedro wooed Hero for himself) delivered in Act II, scene i. In the cases of Don Pedro and Claudio, it seems that despite the fact that they have both either been crossed or deceived by Don John, they scarcely question him in Act III, scene ii before deciding that, if Don John does indeed provide proof of his allegations, they will publicly shame Hero:

If I see anything tonight, why I should not marry her tomorrow ... where I should wed, there will I shame her. (III.ii.91)

The men accept without question Don John's maligning of Hero (though later they blame him for their own gullibility), which facilitates the momentum of Shakespeare's comedic plot.

Hero's forgiveness of Claudio (and Don Pedro) is also necessary for Shakespeare's plot, but of all the instances of forgiveness in the play, this is perhaps the hardest for a modern audience to swallow! When Leonato expresses (on behalf of both himself and his daughter, it seems) that Claudio and Don Pedro are innocent, his excuse is that they were deceived 'upon the error ... debated' (V.iv.3), that is, it's Don John's fault. In fact, Leonato implies that there is nothing to be forgiven, there is no transgression to be excused. For modern audiences, however, it is not just the men's accusations that are outrageous, it's the manner in which they deliver them. The error does not, as Leonato states, stand in *what* was said, but in *how*: Hero is publicly shamed at her wedding, and by extension Don Pedro shows no consideration for Leonato's family honour; they give more weight to an amorous exchange they 'saw afar off' (III.iii.123) and the word of a bastard (by definition untrustworthy) than to Hero's word, a woman who 'seem[ed] to [Claudio] as Dian in her orb' (IV.i.51). For a contemporary audience, the group of men forgive each other too readily, and Hero's compliance in her metaphorical 'death' for the honour of her father is morally shocking to us. Even Beatrice, who calls for Claudio's death, makes no further comment against him in Act V. However, Shakespeare's theatre was a place for men to gather, to be entertained and educated, and in analysing these scenes and wrestling to reconcile old contexts with new, we see that possibly 'two contesting storylines run through *Much Ado* and give it narrative torque. One impulse reinstates male bonds and is therefore, implicitly, anti-comic; the other educates men into accepting primary allegiances with women, and thus conforms to comic necessity.' (Smith 2019).

Confidence, inferiority and doubt

Shakespeare's plays often delve into the human psyche, and *Much Ado About Nothing* does not disappoint in this area. The play, which could have been a frivolous romantic comedy, instead uses plot, metaphor, language and character to contrast actions driven by self-confidence and self-doubt, ultimately showing that people are not always as others see them.

Don Pedro's unrivalled confidence stems from his royal authority and is wielded effortlessly until Act V, scene i, when he is forced to confront that his beliefs, and subsequent actions, were unjust. Here is a man who has never questioned himself, perhaps never had to reflect on his faults. When Don Pedro offers, nay, demands to woo Hero on Claudio's behalf, it is with the assumption that no one could do a better job than he, even when that 'job' is declaring their own love, something we would consider requires a level of sincerity. Shakespeare shows us what happens when such confidence, though well meaning, becomes arrogance and goes unchecked due to power and privilege.

Like his half-brother, Don John is a confident man, though his self-worth comes not from power or the platitudes of others; it is internal, and derives, we suspect, from his resentment. He despises Don Pedro for keeping him in his 'cage' (I.iii.25). Shakespeare does not bring the captured Don John back on stage at the end of Act V; he is never presented as cowering, begging for forgiveness. Shakespeare allows the character to remain as we have seen him thus far: bold, unwavering in his confidence, resolute—unforgiven and unredeemed.

Claudio does not see himself as others see him; he does not see a 'lion' (I.i.12), and though we do not know the psychological basis of his feelings of inadequacy, Shakespeare shows us how such people respond when challenged by those they perceive as their betters (as in the case of his belief that Don Pedro 'is enamoured on Hero' [II.i.121]); it is not really Don Pedro whom Claudio doubts, but himself. Shakespeare then goes further into this character study, showing how quickly the person with self-doubt turns on those he professes to love, and the venom with which he attacks someone perceived as even more lowly than himself. Shakespeare juxtaposes Claudio and Don John: one is honourable, but ineffective due to his feelings of inferiority, while the other is 'a plain-dealing villain' (I.iii.23), propelling the plot and controlling a world in which he theoretically has little to no power, because his self-assurance is all-consuming; he may be a bastard, but Don John is confident and unrelenting in his evildoing.

None of this is to say that the characters in *Much Ado About Nothing* are one dimensional; Beatrice and Benedick in particular are multi-faceted figures who change and evolve and, most importantly, are aware of this development in themselves. Benedick and Beatrice are as confident as they are cutting, yet unlike Don Pedro, they can be confronted with their faults and come to accept and change them because the deficiencies in their character are holding them back from potential happiness. The manner in which this pair display their confidence also changes, Shakespeare exploring the idea that confident actions may spring either from genuine confidence, or from wearing a 'mask': if we want to be perceived as confident, what better way than to act as such and with no regard for the feelings of others? Once Beatrice and Benedick are vulnerable to each other, they seem to have the sort of confidence that acts on behalf of others, with consideration for others, because it is more genuine, as opposed to existing just for show.

Much of the deception in the play is controlled by the confident and carried out against the doubtful and/or powerless. Don Pedro's intended deception of Hero (though unsuccessful) aims to utilise his power to secure her for his less powerful friend. Don John's subsequent deception of Claudio is initially successful because of his confidence in himself and apparent knowledge of Claudio's insecurities. Even the deception of Benedick and Beatrice preys upon their insecurities and is successful because their deceivers are confident in this knowledge and self-assured of the benevolent reasons for their trickery.

Inconsistency ('fashion') vs honesty and steadfastness

Beatrice is clearly affected by losing 'the heart of Signor Benedick' (II.i.209), choosing initially to blame his inconsistency for their incomplete courtship, which ended with 'four of his five wits ... halting off' (I.i.48), and pointing out that Benedick is as inconsistent in his male relationships as he is in romantic love: 'he hath every month a new sworn brother' (I.i.53). That she further chastises his fickle nature, claiming Benedick 'wears his faith but as the fashion of his hat, it ever changes with the next block' (I.i.55) is evidence of her belief that Benedick ended their courtship (not revealed until Act II) on a whim. That she is hurt by this is perhaps the reason for the ire Beatrice directs at Benedick, and that she feels annoyed that she is hurt is perhaps the cause of her merry disposition: she refuses to be dragged into the kind of despair often expected from unrequited lovers, choosing instead to live her life

with the kind of zeal not even Benedick could undo with his words. Nevertheless, through the course of Don Pedro's deceptions Shakespeare has Beatrice also appear capable of changing her position. Mere days after claiming she would 'burn [her] study' (I.i.58) should the changeable 'jester' (II.i.103) ever wheedle his way into her good books, Beatrice entreats the absent Benedick to 'love on, [she] will requite [him], taming [her] wild heart to [his] loving hand' (III.i.111), and ultimately she becomes steadfast in her love.

Beatrice and Benedick both make fanciful claims to anchor their beliefs that they will forever remain unmarried. Beatrice claims it will be a 'hot January' should she ever 'run mad' with the 'pestilence' that is Benedick (I.i.63-69). Shakespeare has Benedick unknowingly outdo her hyperbole with the quip that if he should ever fall in love, his friends should 'pick out [his] eyes with a ballad-maker's pen, and hang [him] up at the door of a brothel house for the sign of blind Cupid' (I.i.186). Not content to leave his protests there, Benedick continues that they should 'hang [him] in a bottle like a cat, and shoot at [him]' (I.i.191). One is reminded of another Shakespearean character: Benedick 'doth protest too much, methinks' (*Hamlet* III.ii).

Given these heroes find happiness when they change from being flippant and ironic to being straightforward and honest, it is fair to say that Shakespeare views such 'altered appetites' not as hypocrisy, but as positive, self-affirming change, a maturity which allows for two people to choose to be compatible with each other. Though they were led to this point by the deceptions of their friends and family, Beatrice and Benedick could not have come to the point of requited love without the humility needed to be honest—with themselves, and with others.

Language and style

Words as weaponry

'There is a kind of merry war betwixt Signor Benedick and [Beatrice] ... there's a skirmish of wit between them' (I.i.45). Leonato excuses Beatrice's unfeminine behaviour and sets the scene for the audience: Beatrice and Benedick are at war, a metaphorical gender war to parallel the more serious, actual war that has just ended. Their weapons of choice, witty remarks, often made to and in front of third parties. It seems the battle is less to degrade the other person's self-worth, and more to degrade their reputation as a clever wordsmith, which removes some of the sting from what would otherwise be considered an even more fractious relationship. Concerningly, if this is indeed a 'war' or battle, it is expected that there will be a winner and a loser; if this is the case, how does such a metaphor translate in *Much Ado About Nothing*? And what does this suggest about Shakespeare's views on marriage, love and sex? In general, Shakespeare has Beatrice and Benedick use their linguistic weapons lightly, their wit intended to do no real harm. He then contrasts this with other, much more serious abuses of language such as slander and lying.

Shakespeare shows that for some people, words are their only weapon. Don John has no political power, and so uses the weapons of rumour and suggestion in pursuit of his goals. Indeed, many of Shakespeare's great villains have themselves been wordsmiths and celebrated their ability to use language as a means of manipulation. Borachio refers to Don John's role in the plot against Hero's honour as 'poison' (II.ii.17); he must poison Claudio (and Don Pedro) into believing Hero is capable of disloyalty, so that when they see a woman at Hero's window (the scene which for the audience is mere hearsay), they do not question too closely, and accept that she is merely 'the semblance of a maid' (II.ii.29). The success of the plot requires Don John's poisonous words to be offered to Claudio and Don Pedro, and Borachio's actions to make them drink it. Despite Don Pedro's initial confidence in Hero ('I will not think it' [III.ii.87]), Claudio is already uncertain because of his low self-esteem; he responds to Don John's claims with questions ('Who Hero?' 'Disloyal?' 'May this be so?' [III.ii.77, 79 and 86]) which show the words are already taking effect.

Once Don John's words have taken hold (with the help of Borachio and an unwitting Margaret), Claudio's words acquire his poison. Though Claudio does

not use language as consciously or cleverly as Don John, Beatrice or Benedick, his words are no less cutting and almost spell the death and ruin of Hero.

When Beatrice, who has always relied on her wit as both sword and shield, is confronted with a situation which renders her voiceless, she is distraught. Despite the protestations of both herself and Hero, Leonato chooses to place more weight on the words of men. It is this which drives Beatrice to demand so much of Benedick. Her words about the men who slander Hero are blunt: if she were a man she would 'eat [Claudio's] heart in the market place' (IV.i.295). Wit, Shakespeare implies, can only achieve so much without action.

Innuendo, puns and malapropisms

Much of the linguistic comedy comes from innuendo and malapropisms; the mistaken or hidden identity of words. In addition to the entire play being littered with phallic puns, cuckoldry jokes, and insinuations of adultery, Shakespeare deliberately intertwines much of the verbal combat between Beatrice and Benedick with sexual innuendo, though never when they are directly sparring with each other. Sexual suggestion is made, particularly by Beatrice, only in the presence of those with whom she is most comfortable. That she does not use these jibes in front of Benedick suggests that subconsciously she is aware of her feelings for him, and so such remarks cut too close to the truth. It may also be indicative of the careful line Shakespeare trod when writing comedy: the need to make his audience laugh, without invoking the ire of the local authorities.

Shakespeare connects Beatrice, Benedick and sexual chemistry from the outset. Beatrice first refers to Benedick as 'Signor Mountanto' (I.i.23), using double entendre to nickname him a swordsman and one who 'mounts' or 'thrusts upwards'. There is also the possibility that Beatrice is referring to Benedick as a social climber, his relationship with the prince an effort to better his social standing. That Beatrice's first line (implying her first thought) is about Benedick is significant, and foreshadows the true depth of her affection for him.

Many of the puns around cuckoldry act as a shield against the male characters' fear of adultery and of female sexuality. Though the men of the play make frequent sexual references, the women are (albeit gently) chided for doing the same. Leonato warns Beatrice that she will 'never get ... a husband, if [she] be so shrewd of [her] tongue' (II.i.14) after she uses several puns and double entendres referring

to penises and sexual desire (in this, Leonato is wrong; it is Beatrice's witty tongue that endears her to Benedick). Beatrice counters Leonato with even more overtly sexual language. The idea that women making the same jokes as men is scandalous is reinforced even by the female characters. In Act III, scene iv, Hero, like her father, is shocked at a woman's use of sexual innuendo; in response to Margaret's suggestion that Hero's heart (and thus her bosom) will 'be heavier soon by the weight of a man' (III.iv.20) she exclaims 'fie upon thee, art not ashamed?' (III. iv.21). Margaret responds with the argument that sex is socially acceptable within the context of marriage, and 'bad thinking do not wrest true speaking' (III. iv.25), only a 'bad' mind can sully the natural state of (in the values of the time, hetero-) sexual marriage.

Though the malapropisms of Dogberry and Verges act as a comedic tool for Shakespeare, they also have a more socio-philosophical purpose. The unique vernacular of Dogberry, in particular, provides critics with many ways to interpret Shakespeare's views on language. Dogberry could be a metaphor for the misplaced emphasis on precision in language; despite his many malapropisms, his true meaning is, essentially, understood by his peers, and so 'correctness' is not essential to 'comprehension'. He is not, however, understood by Don Pedro, whose social status exceeds Dogberry's by such an extent that the chasm of linguistic knowledge between them prevents common comprehension. Thus, language is power and indicative of status; however, the play seems to suggest that this is unjust, given that it shows the real truth-tellers to be the linguistically compromised Dogberry and his offsideers.

Light words heavy with meaning

Throughout *Much Ado About Nothing*, Shakespeare contrasts phrases with their true, contrary meaning. Often the characters themselves are unaware of the meaning behind their words and the contrast exists for the audience to understand the themes of deception, miscommunication and perception. An early example of this is Don Pedro's greeting 'Good Signor Leonato, are you come to meet your trouble?' and Leonato's reply 'never came trouble to my house in the likeness of your grace' (I.i.71-73): both heavy with foreboding for the audience, but not for the characters themselves. Shakespeare phrases Leonato's reply with the additional layer of 'the likeness of your grace'; Don John, being Don Pedro's half brother, shares some resemblance to him and is the cause of much of the misadventure that befalls Leonato's household.

Shakespeare fashions much of the comedy of *Much Ado About Nothing* around characters making serious accusations at one another, but in a tone which suggests light, playful banter, for example, when Benedick suggests that Leonato's wife (the 'ghost character' of Innogen) was unfaithful and thus he cannot be sure he is the father of Hero. This light use of words contrasts the darker use of words in later acts by Don John, Claudio and Don Pedro.

Though many of the characters exchange light-hearted jibes, it is difficult to interpret the tone and true meaning of the lines spoken between Beatrice and Benedick. Beatrice's remarks are framed early as a 'merry war ... a skirmish of wit' (I.i.45); it seems that other characters regard Beatrice and Benedick's comments as harmless, though when Beatrice first addresses Benedick, questioning why he continues to interject in Leonato and Don Pedro's conversation, does she intend to be hurtful, hoping to silence him, but uses her usual tone of merriment? Or does Beatrice use cutting words merely as a means of getting Benedick's attention, intending no offence? Do Beatrice and Benedick themselves know what intention lies behind the insults they trade? As she dances with a masked (though not unknown) Benedick, Beatrice accuses him of being 'a very dull fool, only his gift is, in devising impossible slanders' (II.i.103). Beatrice hits the mark: not only is her allegation confirmed by Benedick's own actions, but it wounds him probably more than she knows. A major shift in Beatrice and Benedick's relationship occurs when they speak less 'about' each other, and more 'to' each other; an example of this can be seen in Act V, scene ii, lines 44-50:

Benedick: ... for which of my bad parts didst thou first fall in love with me?

Beatrice: For them all together, which maintained so politic a state of evil, that they will not admit any good part to intermingle with them: but for which of my good parts did you first suffer love for me?

Benedick: Suffer love! A good epithet: I do suffer love indeed, for I love thee against my will.

The wit remains, but it is gentle, indicative of their reciprocal love and respect; Benedick's line that he 'suffers love' has been set up by Beatrice because she does not fear his words, instead she enjoys the wordplay.

Close study

Act I, scene i, lines 71-118

Act I, scene i is, naturally, a scene of introductions, particularly of the gender politics that we are to watch being played out. Some characters, such as Claudio and Benedick, have been introduced to the audience but not yet presented on stage, thus, the concept of rumour, or 'noting', has been established in a very practical sense: we hear of people before meeting them. In addition, the audience is only given one perspective on these absent characters; according to the messenger's reports, Claudio is a hero (though young and lamb-like), and according to Beatrice's scornful remarks, Benedick is a fickle lady-killer. So when these men enter the stage, the audience's knowledge of them is already framed by these comments. Such is the role of rumour.

When Don Pedro and his company enter the stage, the dialogue sets the tone for the play; light and jovial with a sense of fun created by gentle teasing, and a good deal of male banter. This scene not only introduces characters to each other (and the audience), it introduces relationships: the banter between Leonato and Don Pedro suggests a long and loyal friendship; the casually delivered barbs traded between Beatrice and Benedick reveal the caustic nature of this so called 'merry war'; the friction between Don Pedro and Don John, as revealed by Leonato, foreshadows Don John's role as the villain. When Leonato pledges duty to Don John, it is only because he is 'reconciled to the prince'; here, Don John's power over Leonato only exists because Leonato chooses to give it, and it is reliant on Don John's behaviour towards Don Pedro.

This scene also introduces two types of women: the silent Hero, who is spoken about, but not to, and once the prince arrives on stage, does not speak herself, either; and in contrast, the bold, brash Beatrice, who disrupts Benedick's jest and spars with him as though they are the only two on stage. As they spar, no one else dares speak, and the battle is only ended because Benedick chooses to 'end with a jade's trick': walking away is a choice made on his terms, thus maintaining his sense of power. That Hero is silent seems to appeal to Claudio who, in the lines following her exit, praises her stereotypically feminine features of modesty and sweetness. In later scenes, it is revealed that Hero, though not as sharp as her cousin, is nevertheless capable of witty banter, but generally, she and Beatrice are presented as opposites: one

demure and kind, happily acquiescing to her father's desire that she marry, the other desiring to hold her independence, seeing marriage as a threat, and confident in meeting the challenges of verbal combat.

By having Benedick and Beatrice make such bold and uncompromising statements about love and marriage, Shakespeare sets the baseline for the strength of their relationship. From this position of 'truly [loving] none' and preferring to 'hear [a] dog bark at a crow' than hear professions of love, Shakespeare gradually brings the most unlikely of couples into mutual affection.

1. When Leonato pledges to 'owe all duty' to Don John, it is a show of Don John's status, but does Don John in fact wield any authority or power? Why does Leonato specifically welcome Don John?
2. Don Pedro likens Beatrice to 'an honourable father'—how does this foreshadow her role in later events? What views of women does Benedick reveal in this scene?
3. How does Shakespeare's language and structure in this scene create ambiguities or gaps that may affect different audience interpretations of the play?

Act III, scene i

The gulling of Beatrice differs from its companion scene, not only in its structure (Act II, scene iii is written in prose, while Hero, Ursula and Beatrice speak in free verse), but also in the style of the deception. While the men focus on Beatrice's virtues and Benedick's flaws, Hero and Ursula only briefly mention Benedick's honour and instead focus almost entirely on Beatrice's shortcomings; Beatrice is shocked and hurt that she is 'condemned for pride and scorn so much.' These differing approaches show that the deceivers tailor the false reports to their intended audience, and to the respective reasons for resistance to marriage (and to the gender of their target): Benedick fears (as do all men in the play) being the victim of adultery, and thinks he wouldn't make a suitable husband. Beatrice is wary of the trap of marriage; her independence is central to her identity, whereas marriage may involve submission to male control. It is only after Beatrice hears, from people she trusts, of Benedick's virtues and more importantly her own faults, that she vows to change, 'taming [her] wild heart to [Benedick's] loving hand'.

This issue of trust is important in this scene. Had Beatrice heard Benedick speak of her as 'disdainful', 'coy and wild', she would have dismissed him and his views; that these words are spoken by her beloved cousin, to whom Beatrice is unwaveringly kind and loyal, affects her in a way that makes the transformation of her views of love and marriage, and especially of Benedick, plausible. The deception by those trusted and loved, however, is a somewhat problematic theme of *Much Ado About Nothing*; when deception is carried out to harm or hinder, it is a crime. When it is committed out of a desire to bring about good, it is forgiven to the point that the concept of 'deception' is not mentioned and the forgiveness is implicit. Thus, Shakespeare implies, it is not acts themselves which are moral or immoral, but the intentions that motivate them.

Much of what is said in this scene connects with other moments in the play; for example, when Hero claims she will 'devise some honest slanders' as an attempt to curb Benedick's alleged affections, she notes that 'one doth not know how much an ill word may empoison liking', which is to be the undoing of Claudio's affections in the following scene. There are also subtle references to Benedick's social status which are consistent with other implications that Benedick is not a wealthy man; 'his excellence did earn' his 'excellent good name', meaning he was not born with honour and status, instead earning it through action.

1. Contrast Beatrice's response to the 'news' Benedick loves her with Benedick's response. What is Shakespeare implying about men and women?
2. Why has Shakespeare composed the gulling of Benedick in prose but written this scene in free verse?
3. Do Beatrice's views and values change during this scene, or is she merely free now to be more honest about her true feelings? In what specific ways can her changed behaviour in later scenes be linked to Act III, scene i?
4. Is deception and trickery morally acceptable if the deceiver has 'good intentions'? Is deception as a plot device humorous, and if so, why?

Act III, scene ii, lines 59-100

Scene ii follows the deceiving of Beatrice, highlighting and contrasting the ways in which deception is used in the play. Don John first acknowledges that Don Pedro and Claudio may mistrust him: 'you may think I love you not', and then dangles before them the suggestion that their male honour will be threatened by what he will 'show' them. He then exploits Claudio's insecurities—'you shall see her chamber window entered ... it would better fit your honour to change your mind [about the wedding]'—and slips in a barbed remark about his brother's covert wooing of Hero in Act II, scene i: 'my brother ... hath help to effect your ensuing marriage: surely suit ill-spent.'

Once their attention is engaged, Don John can proceed more boldly, and directly discredit Hero as 'disloyal'. He knows that his words alone are not enough to convince Don Pedro, so Borachio's off-stage pantomime with Margaret is to be the evidence. Claudio, however, is already well on his way to being convinced, without evidence, of Hero's disloyalty—he had already blamed her when he was gullible enough to believe that 'the Prince woo[ed] for himself' (II.i.130). That he is so quick to condemn her and to plan retribution based on a lie—'where I should wed, there will I shame her'—is as offensive to a contemporary audience as it would have been to Shakespeare's audiences.

Claudio has doubted himself, Hero and his worthiness of her since the play's very first scene when he sought Don Pedro's approval for his choice of wife, and then responded to Don Pedro's praise with 'you speak to fetch me in, my lord' (I.i.165), as though either no woman may be worthy of him, or he may not be worthy of her. Claudio's feelings of inferiority dictate his responses again in Act II, scene i, when

he believes the prince has betrayed him. Thus the audience is positioned to accept that Claudio could so quickly abandon his love. The extent of Claudio's weakness is revealed when he, unlike the confident Don Pedro, never defends Hero. Every claim of Don John's is met by Claudio's fretful questioning. A more confident man might have questioned Don John, a confirmed villain, instead of Hero, or at least demanded to know how he came to believe these accusations. Claudio, however, is not a confident man.

The misogynist views held by these three male characters are exposed, and go unchallenged, in Don John's line 'Leonato's Hero, your Hero, every man's Hero', which implies both that Hero is owned (her ownership in the process of being transferred from father to husband, almost as if the marriage is between the two men), and that all women are deceitful.

1. Consider the different personalities in this scene; how does Don John go about simultaneously manipulating Don Pedro and Claudio, given that one is confident and the other so insecure?
2. Does this scene provide evidence that Claudio (and Don Pedro) are as much victims of Don John's slander as is Hero?
3. Borachio's pantomime that would 'let the issue show itself' may be visible in adaptations such as the 1993 film, but it isn't in the script. The scene that is supposed to provide evidence of Hero's misbehaving is not in the play. Does this absence of Don John's 'evidence' position the audience to more easily forgive Claudio and Don Pedro's credulity, or does it help us more readily to see how culpable they are?

Further activities

Students can access any number of summaries and other support materials for *Much Ado About Nothing*, but these will not always prove as useful as those which the students produce themselves. While students should take advantage of online resources and conduct research to supplement their classroom studies, they should always be encouraged to have confidence in their ability to analyse, and value the revision materials they produce.

Mapping the (complex!) plot, characters and techniques

Students map the plot, and note changes in characters' behaviour and instances where Shakespeare has used techniques to convey themes, views or values. Each point should be accompanied with scene references and, wherever possible, a quote that captures the idea or theme students are plotting at that point on the map. This activity can be undertaken as an individual or group task, in hard copy or utilising Google Docs or online Wiki-style services. To narrow the focus, map only points which relate to specific themes or characters.

'Yet sinned I not, but in mistaking'

This claim (Act V, scene i, line 241) is Claudio's effort to absolve himself of responsibility for Hero's 'death'. Though he and Don Pedro certainly feel guilty, they are swiftly forgiven because Don John is regarded as 'the author of all', while the two noblemen are 'mightily abused' (V.ii.75). Using Claudio's excuse as a starting point, discuss the values evident in the play in relation to virtue and vice (i.e. good or acceptable or valued behaviour vs unacceptable behaviour); honesty and lying; sin or transgression; accusation, guilt and remorse; responsibility and blame; mercy and forgiveness. First, define the key terms for the discussion (e.g. 'guilt', 'responsibility', etc.) and record definitions on a white board or screen so they can be easily referred to and amended as necessary over the course of the discussion. From there, the following questions can be used to help students' thinking around these ideas as they respond in the context of the characters and events of the play:

- If 'guilt' means 'committed a sin or crime', link the sins or crimes committed in the play to the characters who commit them.
- Is feeling 'guilty', or feeling remorse, enough to earn forgiveness?

- Draw a line with 'most reprehensible deception' at one end and 'least reprehensible deception' at the other. Place all the play's deception events along the line.
- Is it Don John's evil intent that marks him as the real villain, his lack of remorse, or his social status? Is he held more accountable for the deception and 'death' of Hero than Borachio? Explore why.
- Does Don John's guilt absolve Claudio and Don Pedro of any wrong doing?
- How responsible are Claudio and Don Pedro for Hero's slander and 'death'?
- To what extent are the values of the play's social context responsible for the treatment of Hero?

After discussing these issues, students should compose a written reflection on themes such as guilt, blame and responsibility, using evidence from the play. This is a good opportunity for students to practise embedding quotes and analysing evidence.

Thematic summaries – explicit and implied values

Thematic summaries prepared by students themselves are an invaluable tool for them to confirm their understanding of the text and are much easier to recall than study notes prepared by someone else. Thematic summaries ask students to explain a particular act or scene without reference to characters, setting or plot, thus forcing the focus to be on analysis of themes and author views and values, rather than retelling the story.

This can be scaffolded:

- **Foundation:** Teachers direct students to key scenes in the play and suggest themes on which they should focus.
- **Proficient:** Teachers direct students to key scenes and give the students full discretion as to which themes they include. Students working at this level should also be able to select quotes which support their analysis.
- **Advanced:** Students select scenes which they believe are thematically significant, compose their summaries with integrated quotes from the text, and analyse how the use of techniques supports the themes.

Students could then discuss: What values are implied about this in the play? What values do I have about this idea or theme?

Acting antithesis

In pairs or small groups (depending on the scene), perform the same scene twice, first as jovial and then as ominous or mean-spirited. After performing for the class, the group should lead a discussion with their peers which analyses how actor/director interpretation could influence audience understanding. The group should be prepared to respond to questions about their interpretations and be able to explain how their scene is an example of how easily the play turns from light to dark (and back again). Scenes could be selected by students or suggested by the teacher, e.g. I.i.71-118, I.iii, II.i.1-60, IV.i.1-102, Vi.108-221. Students who would prefer not to perform could take on a directorial role.

Split-page analysis

Each student rules a piece of paper (or a page from their exercise book) in half to create two columns. In the left-hand column, the student summarises an important plot point, one which relates to a theme, view or value (a more advanced version of this task is to write a quote which embodies the idea). They can then use the right-hand column to list questions which will help them explore this idea in more detail. This encourages students to converse with the text and helps them find their voice which ensures a deeper and more genuine understanding of the text.

For example (Pearsall 2014):

<p>Claudio shames Hero at their wedding; he accuses her of being unfaithful and demands that she respond to the claims. Don Pedro also accuses her. Leonato feels shamed by association. Hero faints.</p>	<p>Why doesn't Hero outright deny the claims? Beatrice is silent during this exchange—why doesn't she use her wit to defend Hero? What does Don Pedro mean by 'Nothing, unless you render her again'?</p>
<p>'Yet sinned I not, But in mistaking' (Vi.241)</p>	<p>Does Claudio genuinely think himself innocent? Does he regret shaming Hero to 'death'? If Hero's death hadn't been faked, would Claudio have been forgiven so quickly (if he hadn't gone to the monument and spoken of Hero's innocence and asked to be pardoned)? Is the mistake his only sin?</p>

Much ado about men

Although some women were in attendance at live performances, the comedies of early modern English theatre were written for the edification of young men. Emma Smith of Oxford University points out that ‘Even while they ultimately endorse male–female relationships, comedies are often preoccupied with male–male bonding’ (Smith 2016). Bearing in mind that theatre of this era was produced by men for men, students should consider how this information might influence the characterisation and plot, as well as the themes, and the way that Shakespeare expresses views and values in the play. Smith writes:

Don John is believed by the characters and by the plot because two contesting storylines run through *Much Ado* and give it narrative torque. One impulse reinstates male bonds and is therefore, implicitly, anti-comic; the other educates men into accepting primary allegiances with women, and thus conforms to comic necessity. (Smith 2019, p. 143).

To what extent would contemporary audiences view the play as Shakespeare’s audiences did? How do the values of our time affect the meaning we take away from the play, and our interpretations of it? Students could choose one scene from the play and compose a detailed analysis which focuses on these questions and ideas.

#HeroToo

In comparison to Beatrice, as her female counterpart, or Claudio as her love interest, Hero has very few lines. Indeed, a common criticism of *Much Ado About Nothing* is how little we hear from her. To rectify this, students could write a creative or reflective piece which explores Hero’s thoughts in a particular scene (or which refers to her thoughts over the course of the play). Students should carefully consider Shakespeare’s context and characterisation, and decide how true they want to be to the values expressed in the original. In their written explanation, they should explain their genre and style choices, and discuss how their text connects or contrasts with the original work.

Further discussion

- Which is the worst of Claudio’s and Don Pedro’s transgressions—that they lie about a lady’s virtue, that they dishonour an old prince who has extended his hospitality to them, or that they believe the word of a villain?
- Is Leonato a good father if he believes the word of his male guests when they malign his daughter?
- Beatrice wants to kill Claudio, and Benedick undertakes to do it for her—what does this tell us about them?
- What motivates the male behaviour that leads to femicide—is it rivalry, insecurity, sense of entitlement, a desire to control, or something else?
- In pairs, put Don John on trial. Develop arguments for the prosecution, and for the defence. Use quotes from the play where possible. This could also be done with Borachio and/or Margaret.
- Interpret the play as one which expresses feminist values—what evidence will you use?
- Listen to, or watch, creative responses to Shakespeare’s work, such as Erich Wolfgang Korngold’s ‘*Much Ado About Nothing*: Suite for violin (or cello) and piano’, Op. 11, (read about what the movements convey at: <<https://www.rockfordsymphony.com/>>), or the television series *Upstart Crow* (‘Sigh No More’, Episode 4 in Series 3, for instance). Then discuss ideas for creating a podcast or a computer game based on *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Key quotes

Beatrice, Act I, scene i, lines 55–56

he wears his faith but as the fashion of his hat,
it ever changes with the next block.

This is the first of many references in the play to fashion, which characters use as a symbol for how people change their attitudes just as they change their dress. Changing one’s attitudes can be viewed as either good or bad, depending on the context, the intent and the effect. Shakespeare explores the varied interpretations of this idea by having the characters transform or conceal their identities, expose (and merrily condemn) each other’s hypocrisies, and, eventually, transform their behaviour to become better people. Here, Beatrice accuses Benedick of being changeable, and inconsistent in his loyalty; however, if he were unable to let go of his previously tenacious attachment to bachelorhood (a release he himself

admits makes him a target for ridicule as a hypocrite), he would not have transformed into the only man in the world she would not ‘mock ... out of suit’ (II.i.264).

Benedick, Act I, scene i, lines 180-181

Because I will not do them the wrong to mistrust any, I will do myself the right to trust none:

Much Ado About Nothing frequently references characters’ negative opinions of marriage. Most of these revolve around losing autonomy or having an unfaithful wife (being ‘cuckolded’). The language here, ‘them’, ‘any’ and ‘none’, conveys an attitude that all women are ‘essentially’ untrustworthy, though ironically Benedick can also be read as refusing to generalise. This quote from Benedick, like many of his lines, has a light tone but the jest hides a deep-seated male fear. The male characters joke with each other about being made cuckold (an idea based on the assumption that a wife is the possession of her husband). But when Claudio believes he is the ‘victim’ of Hero’s actions, his violently aggressive response, and that other male characters support him, suggests there are issues for men here that are more than ‘nothing’. The play explores the idea that, despite women having little social, economic or political power, men fear female sexuality.

Don John, Act I, scene iii, lines 24-26

I had rather be a canker in a hedge, than a rose in his grace ... I am trusted with a muzzle ... therefore I have decreed not to sing in my cage. If I had my mouth, I would bite: if I had my liberty, I would do my liking.

Shakespeare presents Don John as temporarily cloistered from his true desires—he may have been ‘newly’ taken into his brother’s ‘grace’, but as Conrade says ‘it is impossible’ that he will stay there. Don John here shows his displeasure at being muzzled; like a vicious dog, he wants to be off the leash to implement his principal goal: the downfall of Don Pedro. Don John is a hostile nihilist, he isn’t interested in ‘apply[ing] moral medicine to ... mischief’. Having no other values or meaning in his life, he seeks to manipulate and do mischief to others. His villainy is born of the boredom, hate and resentment similar to that of a wild animal caged and prevented from behaving savagely: Shakespeare implies that the wild dog is never truly tamed, and pity on those who think otherwise, as do Don Pedro and Claudio when they trust him. Given the discord that Don John causes when he is ‘muzzled’, how much more destructive would he be if he acted with autonomy outside his ‘cage’?

Claudio, Act II, scene i, lines 131-138

Friendship is constant in all other things,
Save in the office and affairs of love:
Therefore all hearts in love use their own tongues.
Let every eye negotiate for itself,
And trust no agent: for beauty is a witch,
Against whose charms faith melteth into blood:

Beatrice and Benedick later in the play do ‘use their own tongues’ to express their ‘hearts in love’ (though only after others trick them into being more honest with each other). By contrast, Claudio has let the masked Don Pedro speak to Hero for him and now blames Hero’s beauty for his belief that Don Pedro has betrayed the bond of male friendship—thus he absolves the prince of duplicity, and condemns Hero instead. Prior to this scene at the masked ball, Claudio’s insecurities have been implied through language and structure; at this point, Claudio is clearly so susceptible to the deceptive words of the villain Don John because he lacks confidence in himself. He is a war hero, but behaves as though he thinks himself a fraud, and he angrily abandons his ‘faith’ in Hero despite the fact that she has as yet made no commitment to him.

Claudio, Act IV, scene i, lines 27-28

Give not this rotten orange to your friend,
She’s but the sign and semblance of her honour:

The metaphor of Hero as a ‘rotten orange’ harks back to Beatrice’s earlier pun that Claudio is bitter and yellow like a Seville orange, yellow being symbolic of jealousy in Shakespeare’s time. That she is allegedly ‘rotten’ implies Hero was once fresh and now Claudio’s view of her has changed from a fruit he desired for its purity to food which has spoiled and would harm anyone who ate it. That Hero is the ‘sign and semblance of her honour’ makes her, in Claudio’s opinion, worse, as she is allegedly ‘no maiden’ (IV.i.81) and has deceived him into believing otherwise. Claudio’s pride has been wounded, thus Hero is treated, not as a person, but as a thing, a piece of fruit to be handed about among male comrades. This exposes Claudio’s (and, by implication, men’s) fear of female infidelity that stems from his own feelings of inferiority, his rivalry with other men, and his sense of exclusive entitlement to the body of the woman.

Dogberry, Act V, scene i, lines 191-194

Marry, sir, they have committed false report, moreover they have spoken untruths, secondarily, they are slanders, sixth and lastly, they have belied a lady, thirdly they have verified unjust things, and to conclude, they are lying knaves.

In addition to the earlier malapropisms, Shakespeare continues his use of idiomatic language in Dogberry's speech, highlighting his views on the use of language. Shakespeare makes Dogberry's misunderstood terms blatantly simple to highlight the constable's complete ineptitude with the English language, yet Dogberry is both confident and absolutely correct in his accusations. His news is important, though he is not; as a character of low status, he seeks excuses to extend his time before the prince. He appears to misunderstand the term 'lastly' and he muddles the numbering of his sequence of points. His verbosity implies he feels important when he has the floor, and his repetition implies foolishness, but Shakespeare's view that such people are not as foolish as they seem shines through his bumbling speech because *he*, unlike some of the high-born characters, is honest and tells the truth.

Analytical text response

1. How does a modern context affect our interpretation of the Hero-Claudio relationship?
2. "I will assume thy part in some disguise,
And tell fair Hero I am Claudio" (Don Pedro)
'We accept the deceptions in the play because mostly the characters' intentions are benign.'
To what extent do you agree?
3. How does Shakespeare use comedy in *Much Ado About Nothing* to explore serious themes and values?
4. "... yet sinned I not,/ But in mistaking."
'Forgiveness is too freely given in *Much Ado About Nothing*.' Discuss.
5. '*Much Ado About Nothing* is a joyful play which celebrates human relationships.' Do you agree?
6. 'The women in *Much Ado About Nothing* are the true holders of power.' Discuss.
7. Does *Much Ado About Nothing* have anything relevant to say to contemporary audiences? Discuss with reference to the values expressed in Shakespeare's play.

8. 'Shakespeare's characters hide their insecurities behind innuendo and metaphor.'
Discuss with reference to at least three characters in *Much Ado About Nothing*.
9. 'Don John is the only example of authenticity in *Much Ado About Nothing*; all the other characters wear masks of some sort, at some time in the play.' Do you agree?
10. "I speak not like a dotard, nor a fool,/ As under privilege of age to brag" (Leonato)
'It is their privilege that makes the behaviour of characters in *Much Ado About Nothing* all the more reprehensible.' Discuss.

Creative text response

In their written explanation, students should—in addition to analysing style and structure and showing how the creative connects with the play—reference decision making around context: have they decided to be true to Shakespeare's characterisation, or made a conscious decision to break away from the original? What artistic reason did they have for doing so? In what ways did it enhance their piece? Above all, how does the creative response demonstrate understanding of the play?

1. Script and perform an interview with each of the couples one year after their wedding. What questions might a hungry journalist ask? What information might the characters want shared and what might they want to conceal?
2. Compose a monologue that explores the character of Dogberry. How self-aware is he? To what extent does he credit himself and the watch for thwarting Don John's plot? How has he come to know so much, and yet so little, about language?
3. Imagine that Don John's plotting is never revealed. Compose a series of short pieces (poetry, letters, diary entries) by Hero which explore her life after her broken engagement and public shaming.
4. During the masked ball, it is evident that many characters enjoy pretence and take even more pleasure in showing they are not fooled by the disguises of others. Compose an addition to Act II, scene i with dialogue between two characters who do not, in the original version, exchange words during the dance (e.g. Beatrice and Borachio) to further explore this concept of pretence.

5. Shakespeare reveals Claudio's first admission of his love for Hero; compose a scene in which Hero reveals to another character her love for Claudio. (Option: include how Hero felt about the rumour that Don Pedro was to woo her.)
6. Using the form of your choice, change the direction of one of the relationships (romantic, paternal, fraternal, platonic) in the play. For example, end Claudio and Benedick's friendship; have Benedick and Beatrice decide to remain friends but never marry, etc.
7. Beatrice and Benedick communicate through wit. Compose a scene which shows how their conversations have changed (if at all) now that they are married.
8. Imagine you are a contemporary actor about to perform in *Much Ado About Nothing* who disagrees with their character's actions; write your explanation of how you will structure your performance to address, justify, reconcile, ignore or transform these issues.
9. Write your own script, either for a play or for an episode in a television series, that explores the idea of slander or gossip interfering with an otherwise joyful human relationship. Will your script be a comedy?
10. Create a podcast in which two commentators discuss *Much Ado About Nothing*. The BBC series *In Our Time* or the 'Close Reading' talks in *LRB Readings* could provide a model. Written reflections would discuss how you decided what quotes to include and what to say about the play.
11. As your own creative response to the play, compose a ballad or a piece of music, or create a painting, explaining in your written reflection the interpretation of the play that is represented in your work.

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