Much Ado About Nothing

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Don Pedro, Prince of Aragon
Benedick, of Padua, a lord, companion of Don Pedro
Claudio, of Florence, a lord, companion of Don Pedro
Balthasar, attendant on Don Pedro, a singer
Don John, the bastard brother of Don Pedro
Borachio, follower of Don John
Conrad, follower of Don John
Leonato, governor of Messina
Hero, his daughter
Beatrice, an orphan, his niece
Antonio, an old man, brother of Leonato
Margaret, waiting-gentlewoman attendant on Hero
Ursula, waiting-gentlewoman attendant on Hero
Friar Francis
Dogberry, the Constable charge of the Watch
Verges, the Headborough, Dogberry's partner
A Sexton
Watchmen
A Boy, serving Benedick
Attendants and messengers

THIS PLAY, with its gaily self-deprecating title, seems virtually to inaugurate a genre. It is the forerunner of Restoration stage comedy, of the eighteenth-and nineteenth-century “comedy of manners,” and of what has come to be called “screwball comedy,” the bantering, witty, sophisticated romantic plots that emerged in the films of the 1930s and 1940s, which philosopher and critic Stanley Cavell has termed “comedies of remarriage”—comedies like Bringing Up Baby (1938), The Philadelphia Story (1940), and Adam's Rib (1949). Its urbane pair of lovers, Beatrice and Benedick (note that her name means “one who blesses,” and his name means “one who is blessed”), anticipate the glib and genteel barbs of the disillusioned pairs who populate stage and screen, waiting, like their Shakespearean forerunners, to be offered a chance to be, for once, unashamedly romantic. But as the play begins, both Beatrice and Benedick hold themselves aloof, apparently, from love, keeping their distance from emotion and from each other, even as they observe, with mingled indulgence and affectionate disdain, the nascent courtship between their closest friends, Claudio, a young soldier, and Hero, Beatrice's cousin.

The interest of Much Ado lies as much in its ebullient characters as it does in its plot, but the basic design of the play is worth recounting: Soldiers returning from the wars are greeted by those who have stayed at home, waiting to hear about their exploits, and their safety. The soldiers arrive at the house of Leonato, the governor of Messina, where

Leonato resides with his elderly brother Antonio, his daughter Hero, and his niece Beatrice, and are invited to stay for a month as Leonato's guests. The ranking officer of the group, Don Pedro, Prince of Aragon, has a bastard brother, Don John, from whom he has been estranged for reasons the play never specifies, and with whom he has just been reconciled. Don John is a classic malcontent, jealous of Pedro and of those he prefers and admires, especially his protégé Claudio, a young Florentine. Among the returning soldiers is Benedick of Padua, a witty and worldly sophisticate, who appears to have had some previous relationship with Beatrice. Beatrice and Benedick are tense, touchy, and witty with each other, in marked contrast to the conventional romantic pair, the naïve and trusting Hero and the equally naïve Claudio, who is young enough to be described later by Benedick as "my lord Lackbeard" (5.1.182). This is part of a common mode of "flyting," or exchange of insults, in the play: Beatrice calls Benedick "Signor Montanto" (1.1.25) (i.e., "Mr. Thrust-and-parry," or "Duel-man") and "the Prince's jester" (2.1.117), while Benedick in turn dubs her "my dear lady Disdain" (1.1.97) and "my lady Tongue" (2.1.239). With the real wars over, or in abeyance, with few casualties and "none of name," or title (1.1.6), the "kind of merry war" that is described as already in existence between Beatrice and Benedick takes over center stage (and is not concluded until play's end, when Benedick will declare, "Peace! I will stop your mouth"—with a kiss (5.4.96).

The two romantic couples follow very different itineraries in their love: Hero and Claudio are quickly betrothed, though not without a hint of trouble to come, since Don Pedro, undertaking the embassy of proposing for the shy and tongue-tied Claudio at a masked ball, is so visibly successful that Claudio, vulnerable and suggestible, is led to believe falsely that "the Prince woos for himself" (2.1.152). Although this mistake is quickly corrected, it comes back in a more malign and dangerous guise when Claudio is falsely convinced that he has witnessed Hero dallying with another man in her chamber window, and publicly denounces her in the church where they are to wed. ("Give not this rotten orange to your friend," he tells her father [4.1.30].) Hero swoons, is thought to be dead, and is concealed by a sympathetic friar, only to be "resurrected" as a muffled and silent figure, the new bride that a chastened Claudio has agreed to marry, sight unseen, as penance for his apparent murder by slander of the innocent Hero. The false scenario of Hero's supposed dalliance, staged by others at the behest of a Don John jealous of Claudio's success, is revealed by the hapless but surprisingly effective detective work of the play's "low" and comic characters, Dogberry, the master constable, and his equally bumbling colleagues on the night watch.

Meantime, Beatrice and Benedick are gulled by their friends into admitting that the "merry war" between them conceals a depth of love and passion. Abandoning defensive repartee for a private acknowledgment of their mutual affection, they then find themselves embroiled in a minitragedy, as the love match between Hero and Claudio turns into a scene of denunciation and death. At this point, significantly in terms of larger patterns of Shakespearean development, Benedick is called upon to choose between his allegiance to his soldier friends—Don Pedro continues to support Claudio in the belief that Hero has been unfaithful, and that her fate, while tragic, was deserved—and his commitment to Beatrice. A palpable turning point, and one that often elicits gasps

from the audience, comes when he offers his services to her in a sincere attempt to assist her in her grief, and is startled by what she asks of him, expressed in a terse, two-word command: “Kill Claudio” (4.1.287). After a moment of reflection, he determines to do her will and challenge Claudio to a duel, even at the cost of alienating Don Pedro. The revelation of the true state of affairs by the man Borachio, who acted the part of Hero's lover at the window, at the behest of Don John, and was unmasked by the bumbling Watch (“What your wisdoms could not discover, these shallow fools have brought to light,” he confesses [5.1.217–218]), seems to come too late, as Borachio declares that “the lady is dead upon mine and my master's false accusation.” This sets the stage for the final reversal, as the bride Claudio has promised, in penance, to wed sight unseen is unmasked as the “former Hero, Hero that is dead!” (5.4.65), and the apparently incompatible Beatrice and Benedick are revealed to have written love sonnets to each other. Deferring the church wedding till after the end of the play (“let's have a dance ere we are married” [5.4.112–113]), and urging Don Pedro, this play's noble excluded figure, “Prince, thou art sad, get thee a wife, get thee a wife” (5.4.117), Benedick presides over the closing ceremonies onstage. Just as a messenger began the play, bringing news of the soldiers' return, so a messenger ends it, announcing the flight and subsequent capture of Don John, who is also, although for quite different reasons, excluded from the comic summing-up. The play ends with a call to dance —”Strike up, pipers”—the conventional close of comedy, but not one always actually present in a Shakespearean play. The notion of dancing as an emblem of harmony, both human and celestial, had been suggested by such works as Sir John Davies' “Orchestra, or A Poem of Dancing” (1596). In this case, dance offers a festive end to a play that, although formally a comedy, is full of dark moments, and often threatens to veer into tragedy.

Was there a quarrel between Don Pedro and Don John beyond the usual sibling (or legitimate/illegitimate) rivalry? And what did take place between Beatrice and Benedick before the play began? Beatrice herself explains lightly to Don Pedro that Benedick “lent” her his heart for a while, and that she “gave him use for it, a double heart for his single one,” his having “won it of [her], with false dice” (2.1.242–244). But, tantalizingly, their shared prehistory is never explained. Another question: Is Don Pedro actually proposing to Beatrice when, in a bantering moment, he offers her his hand in marriage (“Will you have me, lady?” [2.1.285])? Her response is both typical and indicative, tapping into the holiday/working-day dichotomy that underpins so much of Shakespearean comedy, and also into this play's own periodic consciousness of rank and status: “No my lord, unless I might have another for working days. Your grace is too costly to wear every day” (2.1.286–287). Questions like these have no answers—they are puzzles and trailing plot threads, embedded by the playwright, whether deliberately or inadvertently, into the text of the play. They hint at emotions and actions underneath the surface, and indeed this play, with its casual allusions to heartbreak, perpetual spinsterhood, fraternal rivalry, and unrequited love, partners the threatening plot elements (Hero's “death;” Benedick's duel) with a constant subtext of unarticulated pain and loss.

The contrast between two pairs of lovers, one unconventional, resistant, and highly skilled at verbal sparring, the other apparently compliant, conventional, and reticent, had been used with great success by Shakespeare in an earlier play, The Taming of the Shrew. In other romantic comedies, from A Midsummer Night's Dream to The Merchant of Venice and As You Like It, the two "high," or aristocratic, pairs are more like than unlike, despite some minor differences (Hermia and Lysander, Helena and Demetrius; Portia and Bassanio, Nerissa and Gratiano; Rosalind and Orlando, Celia and Oliver). But in Much Ado the initial emphasis is on dissimilarity. Beatrice and Benedick are perhaps a little older, and in any case more worldly—and more wordy—than the tongue-tied Hero and Claudio.

Benedick, unlike Claudio, is socially sophisticated and sexually experienced, prejudiced not against flirtation and lovemaking but against marriage. The first time the audience encounters him, he takes part in a ribald exchange with Don Pedro and old Leonato, Hero's father, that seems meant to establish his identity as a man attractive to women. Using a conventional form of address, Don Pedro says to Leonato "I think this is your daughter," to which Leonato playfully replies, "Her mother hath many times told me so." The anxiety of paternity often surfaces in Shakespearean banter, and will often—as in The Winter's Tale—resurface as a serious matter. But here, in the opening lines of a witty romantic comedy, the emphasis is on a backslapping boys-will-be-boys spirit, as Benedick quips boldly, "Were you in doubt, sir, that you asked her?" and Leonato, in reply, gives as good as he gets: "Signor Benedick, no; for then were you a child." Don Pedro then intervenes to make sure the audience understands what it is being told: "You have it full, Benedick. We may guess by this what you are, being a man" (1.1.89–90). Beatrice has a trace of lover's melancholy, and indeed there is a hint that she has been led on, in the past, to think that Benedick had some feelings for her. That the pair have met before is established early. Again, this is a kind of Shakespearean commonplace, seeming to underscore their rightness for each other even as the play begins. Berowne, in Love's Labour's Lost, like Benedick, is very ready to mock the spectacle of others in love, only to be caught, himself, composing and reading a love sonnet. But in the case of Beatrice and Benedick there has clearly been a sundering or a falling-away, one that has left both players tentative, proud, and perhaps also bruised. They will therefore affect an attitude more like Puck's "Lord, what fools these mortals be!" than make any true demonstration of their feelings—at least until hoodwinked by their friends, who lure each with the tantalizing notion that the other is, in fact, head over heels in love.
Much Ado About Nothing is indeed in many ways Shakespeare's great play about gossip. Everything is overheard, misheard, or constructed on purpose for eavesdropping. If Taming is one comparison for this play, another, less benign, is Othello, and in fact the three Shakespearean "jealousy" plays, Much Ado, Othello, and The Winter's Tale, are often, and fruitfully, compared. In this play, as we will see, the "Iago figure" is Don John, the malcontent bastard brother of Don Pedro, the Prince of Aragon. Here, as in the tragedy of Othello and the tragicomedy of The Winters Tale, a jealous man thinks he sees his beloved dallying with another man. But in this case the scene has been staged in order to deceive. Claudio is the victim, and his "crime" is a double one. From Don John's point of view he has—like Cassio in Othello—stolen away the affection and regard of the military commander, in this case, Don Pedro. The rival

whom Don John calls, with magnificent contempt, “the most exquisite Claudio” is—again like Cassio—a Florentine, a resident of one of the most elegant and mannered cities in Italy. “That young start-up hath all the glory of my overthrow,” John complains to Borachio (whose name means “the drunken one”). “If I can cross him any way, I bless myself every way” (1.3.52–53).

The pretended indifference of Beatrice and Benedick is juxtaposed to the all-too-susceptible naïveté of Claudio, who declares his inexperience and couples it with self-doubt. Claudio in effect asks himself, Could someone like Hero love me? Isn't it more likely that she is in love with, or in bed with, someone else, someone more impressive, or higher ranking, or sexier? He, too, acknowledges that he had been attracted, at an earlier moment, before the play begins, to the woman who will come to preoccupy his love musings and romantic fantasies:

I looked upon her with a soldier's eye,
That liked, but had a rougher task in hand
Than to drive liking to the name of love.
But now I am returned, and that war-thoughts
Have left their places vacant, in their rooms
Come thronging soft and delicate desires,
All prompting me how fair young Hero is,
Saying I liked her ere I went to wars.
Much Ado 1.1.246–253

War is a key theme here, war and its aftermath. The opening scene in Messina presents a society of women and older men (Leonato, his daughter Hero, and his niece Beatrice) from which the young men had departed to fight—a world, that is, waiting for the return of youth and love. The play thus begins with the onset of peace, with the news that few gentlemen have been lost in the late military action (“and none of name”) and that the youthful Claudio fought especially bravely, “beyond the promise of his age, doing in the figure of a lamb the feats of a lion” (1.1.12). Beatrice's apparently offhand inquiry about the health of Benedick (“I pray you, is Signor Montanto returned from the wars, or no?”) masks—or rather, reveals—a real anxiety about Benedick's safety and well-being. Shortly we will hear from Leonato that there is a “kind of merry war” between Beatrice and Benedick (1.1.49–50), so that the shift from martial war to merry war marks an explicit turning point. As is so often the case, the skills that were so apropos in war will prove of limited value in peacetime. Benedick and Claudio are established as best friends, most in each other's company, but the contrast between the “pleasant,” witty, and entertaining Benedick and the earnest and tongue-tied Claudio is soon to be made evident.

Benedick gives us a (rather unsympathetic) sense of what Claudio was like before he committed the folly of falling in love:

I do much wonder that one man, seeing how much another man is a fool when he dedicates his behaviours to love, will, after he hath laughed at such shallow follies in

others, become the argument of his own scorn by falling in love. And such a man is Claudio. I have known when there was no music with him but the drum and the fife, and now he had rather hear the tabor and the pipe. I have known when he would have walked ten mile afoot to see a good armour, and now will he lie ten nights awake carving the fashion of a new doublet. He was wont to speak plain and to the purpose, like an honest man and a soldier; and now is he turned orthography. His words are a very fantastical banquet, just so many strange dishes. May I be so converted, and see with these eyes? I cannot tell. I think not.
2.3.8–21

“Converted,” to an experienced watcher of Shakespearean comedy, is a clear tip-off, since it will be used by such wholehearted new lovers as Portia, speaking of herself, and Rosalind, speaking of the once-wicked, now reformed and romantic Oliver.
In Much Ado conversion becomes one of the dominant themes of the play, underscored by the refrain of Balthasar's song “Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more”: “Converting all your sounds of woe / Into hey nonny, nonny” (2.3.56ff.). Hero will be converted into “another Hero,” Margaret converted into Hero, Benedick and Beatrice into lovers, tragedy converted into romance and comedy. Benedick is wrong, of course, to think that he will not so easily “convert” to the condition of a lover, and so indeed is Beatrice, who proclaims her own resistance. As Margaret the waiting-gentlewoman says to her, in a phrase quite similar to Benedick's, “[H]ow you may be converted I know not, but methinks you look with your eyes, as other women do” (3.4.75–77). Indeed, Benedick, who teases Claudio about lacking a manly beard, will soon go for a shave, the better to look like a lover. “[T]he barber's man has been seen with him,” reports Claudio, laughing, to Don Pedro and Leonato, “and the old ornament of his cheek hath already stuffed tennis balls” (3.2.37–39). The sudden similarity to the “Lackbeard” Claudio is underscored by Leonato: “Indeed, he looks younger than he did by the loss of a beard” (3.2.40–41).

Beatrice is the wittiest speaker in the play, but there is also a certain pathos in her character, produced not only by the hint of a former relationship with Benedick, but also by the conventionality of Leonato, who tells her she will never get a husband “if thou be so shrewd of thy tongue” (2.1.17), and of Antonio, who says she is “too curst.” Their remarks underscore her position as an unmarried woman dependent upon the hospitality of her uncle. This is the same position that Rosalind in As You Like It occupies at the court of her uncle, Duke Frederick, but there marriage is not the constant topic of conversation— and, of course, Rosalind manages to make her escape, together with her cousin Celia. In Much Ado About Nothing Beatrice and Hero are the young women of the household, and it is expected that they will marry—indeed, that marriage will be their vocation. “Well, niece, I hope to see you one day fitted with a husband,” says Leonato, and Beatrice's reply is brisk: “Not till God make men of some other mettle than earth. Would it not grieve a woman to be overmastered with a piece of valiant dust?—to make an account of her life to a clod of wayward marl?” (2.1.50–53). Still, there is a good deal of ambiguity between irreverence and yearning in her request to be shown where the bachelors sit in heaven, and particularly in her exclamation once Claudio and Hero are betrothed: “Good lord, for alliance! Thus goes everyone to the

world but I, and I am sunburnt. I may sit in a corner and cry 'Heigh-ho' for a husband' " (2.1.278–280). Hero, not incidentally, is her father's heir, a point inquired after, obliquely, by Claudio when he is thinking of wooing her ("Hath Leonato any son, my lord?" Don Pedro: "No child but Hero. She's his only heir. / Dost thou affect her, Claudio?"[1.1.242–244]). Beatrice is not an heiress. While it would be anachronistic to say that she lives by her wits—and indeed, as we have already seen, her wittiness is the source of unease to the men in her household—her position is more precarious than Hero's. When she says, with however much irony in her tone, "Thus goes everyone to the world but I," we can sense for a moment the limitations that she will confront if she does not marry and leave her uncle's house. This is a sentiment that is, again, worn lightly in the early part of the play. It will return, more vividly and painfully, after the humiliation of Hero, when Beatrice longs to revenge her cousin and must instead enlist Benedick's aid to fight with Claudio: "O God that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the market place" (4.1.303–304). It is worth noting that in other Shakespearean comedies of this period the heroine does become a man, at least for a little while. Portia, Rosalind, and Viola all cross-dress, assuming male costumes and names in order to perform some act of rescue, release, or revenge. But Beatrice has this option only in the wishful form of a condition contrary to fact. Much Ado About Nothing is a play that engages topics like male bonding and female disempowerment, for all the powerful figures in Messina are men. There are no mothers, and the marriage of Hero, no matter that it becomes a love match, is initially arranged as a suitable contract undertaken, by proxy, between Leonato, the governor of Messina, and the powerful Prince of Aragon, Don Pedro.

The language that Beatrice and Benedick speak to each other is often prose, not verse—a prose made lively, witty, limber, and now suddenly the natural speech of aristocrats. Their "low" counterparts, the constables Dogberry and Verges and the foolish members of the Watch, will also play with language, far less comfortably, and will often let it play with them. Like other rustic Shakespearean literalists—think of the gravedigger in Hamlet—they take figurative language at face value, so that one of the Watch, hearing the courtly phrase "seest thou not what a deformed thief this fashion is?" (3.3.108–109), immediately imagines a desperate character called Deformed, a "vile thief this seven year," and the specter of the imaginary thief Deformed will continue to haunt their later and more serious conversations. Don John's plot almost succeeds because of the failure of transparency in language (the confused verbiage of the Watch so frustrates Leonato that he fails to heed what they say). For Beatrice and Benedick and for Dogberry and the Watch, wordplay and the pitfalls of language will almost lead to disaster, and will tend to hold truth at a distance.

In marked and deliberate contrast to these wordsmiths and wordmongers are the play's taciturn or silent characters. Of these the most obdurate is Don John, who characterizes himself at once as a man "not of many words" as he somewhat grudgingly acknowledges Leonato's hospitality (1.1.127). Beatrice, playfully imagining the perfect male ideal, remarks: "He were an excellent man that were made just in the midway between him [Don John] and Benedick. The one is too like an image and says nothing, and the other too like my lady's eldest son, evermore tattling" (2.1.6–9). Don John's

silence is emblematic of his malign reserve—we may think ahead to Iago's "From this time forth I never will speak word" (Othello 5.2.310)—but the attractive young lovers, Claudio and Hero, are silent, too, and their silence is potentially dangerous, not (like the scheming Don John's) to others, but to themselves. As we have seen, in the structure of the play they are the conventional, well-bred opposites to the more extravagant Beatrice and Benedick, and whereas Beatrice and Benedick speak all the time, these two can hardly bring themselves to speak at all. It is Don Pedro, not Claudio, who does the wooing, which is what first gives rise to the false notion that it is he, not Claudio, who intends to marry Hero. When the betrothal is announced, neither of the principals can speak, and this gives rise to a charming little scene with, as always, ominous undertones. "His grace hath made the match, and all grace say amen to it," says Leonato, the father (2.1.264–265). A silence ensues, in which Beatrice nudges Claudio —"Speak, Count, 'tis your cue"—and then Hero—"Speak, cousin" (2.1.266, 271). Finally, after an uncomfortable and risible moment of continued silence, amusing to the audience both on and off the stage, Hero whispers in Claudio's ear. We never hear what she says. "Silence is the perfectest herald of joy" is Claudio's explanation (2.1.267), and this might be true, except that, without language to interpret and intercede, mistakes are made, misinterpretations and false "noting" take place, and tragedy looms behind the scenes. This is a frequent theme in Shakespeare—we can think most obviously about Cordelia's dangerous decision, in that other play about "nothing," to "[l]ove and be silent" (Lear 1.1. 59–60). While there is no direct relation between the surly taciturnity of Don John and the blushing silence of the young lovers, their thematic connection is clear. As so often in Shakespeare, the problem is not one of a wicked external diabolus ex machina but of the exploitation of existing internal weaknesses. Don John is a catalyst, or, perhaps more symbolically, a personification of the problems that are bound to arise between two innocent, inexperienced, and silent lovers in a world that depends upon language.

But if Claudio and Hero must learn to speak for themselves, Beatrice and Benedick have to learn to stop talking—at least once in a while. Don Pedro speculates about what is likely to happen after the trick is played upon them and they overhear their friends gossiping about how each is the secret beloved of the other: "That's the scene that I would see, which will be merely a dumb show" (2.3.193–194). They will be struck dumb, jolted out of their customary prattle. When Claudio finally makes his terrible accusation in the church, and Hero swoons, Benedick will admit: "I am so attired in wonder, / I know not what to say" (4.1.143-144).

This is a major turning point for him, a moment when language—his usual language—will not serve him, or insulate him from painful events. As speech is his and Beatrice's natural condition, so speechlessness—whether from astonishment, horror, or love—is the condition to which they may be converted. Language can always, if temporarily, be stopped by a kiss.

The title phrase has had a celebrity virtually independent of the play itself, but its relevance to the dramatic action and language is far more direct than the phrase might at first suggest. A fuss about a trifle. "Big deal" might be our modern counterpart. But

“nothing” in the English Renaissance had a wide range of meanings, all of them specific and pertinent. “Nothing” meant a thing or person not worth mentioning—as Don John will say, with hidden intent, that Hero's misdeeds are “[n]ot to be named, … not to be spoke of” (4.1.94), which is literally true, since in fact they don't exist. “Nothing” could mean someone of little worth, like the foolish Watch headed by Dogberry. “Nothing,” paradoxically, also could mean “everything” or “all,” since its sign was the full or empty circle, and in this play whose most characteristic mode of language is paradox, much ado is indeed made about everything. Perhaps most surprising to a modern audience—though not to an audience that knows its Hamlet and King Lear—is the fact that “nothing” was a slang term for the female sexual organs.

Hamlet teases Ophelia about the “nothing” that lies “between maids' legs” (3.2.106–108). The association survives in our modern word “naughty,” which is now conflated with “noughty.” In this play there is indeed much ado about Hero's virginity and her sexuality. She herself is embarrassed by sexual thoughts and sexual jokes, as she acknowledges when Margaret helps her dress for her (ill-fated) wedding day. Her shyness about things sexual makes her vulnerable to suggestion and to a practical joke, staged at the behest of the wicked Don John, that has potentially desperate consequences. As if all these “nothings” were not enough, “nothing” in Shakespeare's time was pronounced, we think, the same as “noting.” “Much ado about noting” is certainly an apt description of the play's events, and nonevents. To “note” was to observe or mark carefully, to give heed or attention to (something just about everyone in this play signally fails to do), but also to set down as having a certain good or bad character, to point at or indicate by pointing, to mark or brand with some disgrace or defect, and to stigmatize. All these are things that happen in the course of the play. Don John falsely points out what seems to be Hero's infidelity. Claudio denounces her in the church. She is stigmatized, publicly shamed. It is for this reason that Friar Francis—like the Friar Laurence of Romeo and Juliet who wanted to “dispose of” Juliet among a sisterhood of nuns—says that he will “conceal” Hero, if all else fails, “[a]s best befits her wounded reputation, / In some reclusive and religious life, / Out of all eyes, tongues, minds, and injuries” (4.1.240–242). In other words, the Friar will take her to a place where she cannot be “noted,” where “Rumour painted full of tongues”—that animated figure of malign gossip from 2 Henry IV-—cannot do her more damage.

Characters talk about “nothing” and “noting” throughout the play. In the first scene Claudio asks Benedick if he has “noted” Leonato's daughter, and Benedick, punning on the various senses of “noted her not,” but says he only “looked on her.” In the same scene Don Pedro says that if Benedick falls in love despite his vows to do otherwise, he will “prove a notable argument” (1.1.209), which is to say, a public laughingstock. In act 4, when Benedick admits to Beatrice, “I do love nothing in the world so well as you. Is not that strange?” (4.1.266–267), she answers, full of grief about her cousin Hero's humiliation, “As strange as the thing I know not. It were as possible for me to say I loved nothing so well as you, but believe me not, and yet I lie not. I confess nothing nor I deny nothing. I am sorry for my cousin” (4.1.268–271). Leonato, confronted with the self-confessed deceiver Borachio, demands, “Which is the villain? Let me see his eyes, / That when I note another man like him / I may avoid him” (5.1.243–245). The Friar

speaks of “noting” Hero's innocence in her face. Don Pedro, convinced—after the public denunciation—that Hero is dead, tells Leonato:

My heart is sorry for your daughter's death,
But on my honour she was charged with nothing
But what was true and very full of proof
5.1.105–107

The enjambed line (“she was charged with nothing / But what was true and very full of proof”) is richly ambiguous, allowing for the phrase “charged with nothing” to linger in the ear of the audience, before it is capped by the legal certitude of apparent “truth” and “proof.”

Probably the most significant verbal exchange on the topic of “nothing” and “noting,” however, occurs fairly early in the play, when Don Pedro and Claudio set out to fool Benedick into thinking that Beatrice is in love with him, another pretense that turns out to be true. Pedro tries to get his attendant Balthasar to sing a song, and Balthasar demurs:

Note this before my notes:
There's not a note of mine that's worth the noting.
2.3.49–50

Don Pedro seems to be struck—as if for the first time—by the possibility of wordplay here. “Why, these are very crochets that he speaks— / Note notes, forsooth, and nothing! (2.3.51–52). “Crochets” are whims and musical notes. Balthasar is punning on the whole question of whether “noting” is worth “nothing” or something—or, perhaps, everything. Ironically, the song he does sing is about infidelity, with its poignant caution:

Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more.
Men were deceivers ever.
2.3.56–57

But the men—Claudio and Don Pedro—do not note the song, which means nothing to them. They hear the sweet melody and do not heed the piquant words. As so often with onstage performances in Shakespeare's plays, whether the “Pyramus and Thisbe” play in A Midsummer Night's Dream or the songs of the owl and the cuckoo in Love's Labour's Lost, there is a discrepancy between what the offstage audience learns and what the onstage audience thinks it knows. The relevance of the inset performance is lost on the spectators for whom it is most germane.

It is not only the language but also the action of “noting” (noticing, slandering, singing) that dominates the stage for much of the play. Many scenes—and a few “unscenes,” or offstage scenes—are constructed so that they embody the structure of overhearing. Thus, for example, Leonato's elderly brother, Antonio, tells Leonato that a servant has overheard Don Pedro and Claudio talking in the orchard, and that Don Pedro said he loved Hero and would propose to her. This is a false rumor, as we learn. Don Pedro will

propose to Hero on Claudio's behalf, as a noble go-between. But Claudio, like Antonio, will be all too credulous in believing that “the Prince woos for himself.” Meantime, Borachio, the confederate of Don Pedro's malcontent brother Don John, is perfuming a “musty room” (the opposite of a fragrant orchard or garden), where he overhears the truth: Don Pedro will act as an emissary for Claudio. At the revels in Leonato's house, in act 2, scene 1, Claudio himself makes the same error as Antonio's servant. He observes Don Pedro talking to Hero, and is convinced that he himself has been betrayed by his friend.

No sooner is this danger allayed by correct information than a second and more insidious danger replaces it, for Claudio's mistake here—while indicative of his self-doubt as a lover—is inadvertent, whereas the mistake that he and Don Pedro make when they spy upon “Hero” in her chamber window is the result of a deliberate trap for the unwary. Don John has persuaded Borachio to enact an apparent seduction scene, tricking Margaret, Hero's waiting-gentlewoman, into wearing her mistress's clothes. What Claudio and Pedro think they see is the virginal Hero engaged in love-play with another man. It is important to bear in mind that this is an escalating series of errors, or false notings. The first is trivial, the second mortal. As so often in Shakespeare—recall the Nurse's two embassies to Juliet, the first comic, the second tragic, in Romeo and Juliet—a structural repetition conditions the response of both character and audience. When Hero is accused in the church, her own father, Leonato, believes that she is guilty, adducing as evidence what he himself has noted: “[S]he will not add to her damnation / A sin of perjury. She not denies it” (4.1.171–172). Since she does not speak—and Hero very frequently declines to speak—her father thinks he has noted that she is guilty. Hero falls to the floor in a swoon, and again there is false noting: many present, including Claudio and Don Pedro, are convinced that she is dead. This mistake sets up the possibility of Hero's quasi-miraculous “rebirth” in the final scene. And in that scene Hero becomes a literal emblem of “nothing,” a mysterious masked and unspeaking figure who could be anyone or no one. Claudio, suffused with guilt for having supposedly murdered his innocent beloved by slander, has agreed to take a new bride on faith. He is told he must marry her sight unseen—she is said to be Antonio's daughter, a figure heretofore unmentioned—without noting or seeing her face-to-face. In a version of the classical tale of Orpheus and Eurydice, but here with a happy ending, the faith of the lover revives his “dead” beloved.

The church scene (4.1) is deftly placed in the play between two scenes involving the foolish constables. In the first of these two scenes, Dogberry and his men, having stumbled on Borachio and his crime, attempt to report to Leonato the plot to defame his daughter Hero, but Leonato is too impatient to listen—he will not “note” them—and the result is that both Leonato and Hero suffer. After the church scene, a long-suffering Sexton gets the truth out of Dogberry, and we learn that Don John has fled, so that the audience begins to see the possibility of a satisfactory resolution.

This potentially tragic scenario of noting and false noting, making something of “nothing,” has its counterpart in the comic gulling of those impervious sophisticates Beatrice and Benedick. As is not uncommon in Shakespearean plays about marriage,

the interval between betrothal and wedding is regarded as a carnival or play space, in which the time can be whiled away by popular jests and entertainments. (A useful comparison could be made here to A Midsummer Night's Dream, and indeed to Shakespeare's other play about the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta, the late tragicomedy The Two Noble Kinsmen, written with John Fletcher.) In this case Beatrice's and Benedick's friends determine to set them up, carefully staging little plays within the play in which each is made to overhear the news that the other is secretly in love. As their friends—and the audience—suspect, this has the immediate effect of making each capitulate to the feelings of love that have heretofore been denied or repressed. Indeed, the comic effect, drawn out in these highly successful scenes, is to make both Beatrice and Benedick exhibit the most extravagant and stereotypical signs of love—the very sentimentality that they have mocked in others. When Claudio and Don Pedro pretend to feel pity for the lovelorn Beatrice, they elicit, as soon as they have left the stage, this magnificent piece of combined sophistry and confession from the abashed—and delighted—Benedick:

This can be no trick. The conference was sadly borne. They have the truth of this from Hero. They seem to pity the lady. It seems her affections have their full bent. Love me! Why, it must be requited. I hear how I am censured. They say I will bear myself proudly if I perceive the love come from her. They say too that she will rather die than give any sign of affection. I did never think to marry. I must not seem proud. Happy are they that hear their detractions and can put them to mending. They say the lady is fair. 'Tis a truth, I can bear them witness. And virtuous—'tis so, I cannot reprove it. And wise, but for loving me. By my troth, it is no addition to her wit—nor no great argument of her folly, for I will be horribly in love with her. I may chance have some odd quirks and remnants of wit broken on me because I have railed so long against marriage; but doth not the appetite alter? A man loves the meat in his youth that he cannot endure in his age. Shall quips and sentences and these paper bullets of the brain awe a man from the career of his humour? No. The world must be peopled. When I said I would die a bachelor, I did not think I would live till I were married.

2.3.196–215

Benedick's charmingly self-regarding reverie is interrupted by Beatrice, come to fetch him in to dinner, and their subsequent conversation at cross-purposes, in which Benedick attempts to wring amorous meanings from the least promising fragments of dialogue (“Ha! Against my will I am sent to bid you come in to dinner.' There's a double meaning in that” [2.3.227–228]), has much of the flavor of Malvolio's reaction to the counterfeit letter in Twelfth Night, with the salutary difference that Benedick is ultimately wise enough to laugh at himself. The hyperbolic language here, suggesting that the lady will die of unrequited love, is balanced in the romantic plot between Claudio and Hero by the news of the death of the bride defamed at the altar. Both of the scenes of gulling and overhearing, set as affectionate traps for Beatrice and Benedick, are staged in a garden or orchard, itself the highly conventional setting for love and seduction in literature and myth. As Benedick rushes from the stage, he declares that he will take pity on her, love her, and above all, in a complete and joyful capitulation to stereotype: “I will go get her picture” (2.3.232).

We have seen that Beatrice and Benedick are in fact already in love with each other when their friends decide to provoke them into action by gossiping where they can be overheard. Are Hero and Claudio likewise already prone to the behavior that produces their near-tragedy? Is there anything other than a perfectly natural reticence in speech that renders Claudio and Hero vulnerable to the plot devised against them? Hero, like several other virginal heroines in the plays, begins as a dutiful daughter submissive to, and unquestioning of, her father's will. Leonato tells her that he thinks Don Pedro loves her, and she seems to prepare herself for marriage to the Prince. Then it turns out that Claudio is the actual suitor, and she accepts without question this change in plans for her future, submitting willingly to the new marriage. She is entirely accepting, and relatively passive, especially when compared to the more spirited Beatrice. Equally significantly, she is—again like a number of Shakespearean comic and even tragic daughters—shy and reluctant in sexual matters. When the waiting-gentlewoman Margaret (who will impersonate her in the chamber window, flirting with Borachio) makes the earthy suggestion that Hero will soon be heavier by the weight of a husband, her rebuke is immediate: Margaret should be ashamed to think such thoughts.
As for Claudio, Benedick's “my lord Lackbeard,” the young war hero whom we have heard speak of his earlier “liking” for Hero before he was distracted by the “rougher task” of battle, he is not automatically to be faulted for seeking a go-between to speak his words of love, a not uncommon practice in this period of arranged marriages. But it is more problematic, perhaps, that he should offer to leave Messina immediately after the marriage, choosing the company of Don Pedro over that of his new wife:

Don Pedro I do but stay till your marriage be consummate, and then go
I toward Aragon.
Claudio I'll bring you thither, my lord, if you'll vouchsafe me.
Don Pedro Nay, that would be as great a soil in the new gloss of your
marriage as to show a child his new coat and forbid him to
wear it.
3.2.1–6

It is impossible not to hear in these lines an echo of Juliet's great speech of sexual eagerness and desire as she waits for her own wedding night: “So tedious is this day / As is the night before some festival / To an impatient child that hath new robes / And may not wear them” (Romeo and Juliet 3.2.28–31). The juxtaposition is telling. Juliet, a virginal bride, is far more articulate in her longing than the young soldier Claudio, whose prince and captain voices the passion that he himself does not express, and may not fully acknowledge. The preference, however brief and ceremonial, for male bonding and homosociality over marriage and the wedding bed is indicative of something about Claudio, about his own degree of self-understanding. His histrionic outburst in the church, where he denounces Hero in full view of the congregation, seems of a piece with his ambivalence and self-doubt. He is still looking at himself through others' eyes. This is, of course, why he is so vulnerable to Don John's suggestion, voiced in a temptation scene that closely prefigures Othello's temptation by Iago, save that in the scene with Claudio, Don Pedro is also present. “[T]he lady is disloyal,” Don John

announces. “Go but with me tonight, you shall see her chamber window entered, even the night before her wedding day. If you love her then, tomorrow wed her. But it would better fit your honour to change your mind” (3.2.85–86, 93–97). John offers what in Othello will be called “ocular proof”: trust your eyes, not your heart. And Claudio answers in kind: “If I see anything tonight why I should not marry her, tomorrow, in the congregation where I should wed, there will I shame her” (3.2.103–105). And Don Pedro, who—we might think—should know better, is ready to second the attack: “And as I wooed for thee to obtain her, I will join with thee to disgrace her” (3.2.106–107). The scene that follows is the most dramatic of the play, and indeed one of the most dramatic in Shakespearean comedy. It begins with the formal language of a marriage ceremony, then quickly falls apart, becoming one of those broken ceremonies or maimed rites that mark key scenes in Shakespeare from the lists at Coventry in Richard II (“Stay, the King hath thrown his warder down”) to the Mousetrap play in Hamlet (“The king rises.” “Give o'er the play”):

Friar You come hither, my lord, to marry this lady?
Claudio No.
4.1.4–6

Although Leonato hastens to try to understand this as a mere syntactical nicety (“To be married to her. Friar, you come to marry her”), the full extent of the reversal is shortly manifest:
Claudio Will you with free and unconstrainèd soul Give me this maid, your daughter?
Leonato As freely, son, as God did give her me.
Claudio And what have I to give you back whose worth May counterpoise this rich and recious gift?
Don Pedro Nothing, unless you render her again.
Claudio Sweet Prince, you learn me noble thankfulness.

There, Leonato, take her back again. Give not this rotten orange to your friend. She's but the sign and semblance of her honour. Behold, how like a maid she blushes here! O, what authority and show of truth Can cunning sin cover itself withal! Comes not that blood as modest evidence To witness simple virtue? Would you not swear, All you that see her, that she were a maid, By these exterior shows? But she is none. She knows the heat of a luxurious bed. Her blush is guiltiness, not modesty.
4.1.22–40

“This looks not like a nuptial,” comments Benedick from his place in the congregation, and Beatrice, as shocked as he, replies, “ ‘True,' O God!” Now Don Pedro swears that he, too, saw Hero “[t]alk with a ruffian at her chamber window.” When Don Pedro refers to “vile encounters” between Hero and the man, Don John hastens to interpose, “[T]hey are / Not to be named, my lord, not to be spoke of” (4.1.93–94). Once again the determinedly reticent Don John speaks of not-speaking, in this case with an Iago-like twist, for these particular encounters cannot be named or described, since they did not in fact take place. Claudio's apostrophe to Hero, which will bring her to the point of

swooning, is a striking echo of an earlier moment of rejection and farewell. “O Hero! What a Hero hadst thou been,” he says in the church scene,
If half thy outward graces had been placed
About thy thoughts and counsels of thy heart!
But fare thee well, most foul, most fair, farewell.
4.1.98–101

But notice that we have heard this too-hasty and ill-informed rejection speech from him before, at the masked ball in act 2—the play's other great moment of onstage theatrical spectacle—when Claudio, wearing a visor that hides his identity, is persuaded that Don Pedro has approached Hero to make her his own wife, rather than as an embassy for his friend. Don John and Borachio plant this idea, and it instantly takes root:
Claudio 'Tis certain so, the Prince woos for himself 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 charm faith melteth into blood. This is an accident of hourly proof Which I mistrusted not. Farewell, therefore, Hero.
2.1.152–160

That all hearts in love should use their own tongues is a lesson he does not learn. In the ball scene he is quickly and hopelessly jealous. Again and again he “notes” wrongly; he makes much ado of nothing. It is interesting to recall that at the masked ball the only men who do not wear visors are Don John and Borachio, the two figures who are already falsifying themselves, without benefit of costume. And Claudio's visor, together with his silence, anticipates the masked figure of the unspeaking Hero in the second, far more subdued and penitent, wedding scene (5.4).

By this time only Claudio and Don Pedro, Hero's accusers, still remain in the dark. After her denunciation and swoon in the church, Friar Francis had led Hero offstage with the mystical injunction “Come, lady, die to live,” a phrase that prefigures the resurrection to come. Paradox is the chief rhetorical device of the play, and this resonant phrase is its perfect embodiment. If Claudio does not repent of his errors, the Friar counsels Hero, she will be placed in a nunnery. And how did the Friar know that Hero was in fact innocent? “By noting of the lady.” By observing her blushes and her anger. Much ado about noting. But eventually because of the revelations of the bumbling but vigilant watchmen, the others know that she is alive and has been unjustly accused.

The revelation or resurrection scene thus unfolds with the usual element of discrepant awareness: the audience in the theater and most of those onstage are aware that Hero is alive, but her husband-to-be and his best man are not. The fiction is that Claudio will marry the daughter of Antonio. “My brother hath a daughter, / Almost the copy of my child that's dead, / And she alone is heir to both of us,” Leonato had said to him. “Give her the right you should have giv'n her cousin, / And so dies my revenge” (5.1.272–276). Now, on the morning of this wedding, Leonato asks, “Are you yet determined / Today to marry with my brother's daughter?” and Claudio replies, “I'll hold my mind, were she an Ethiope” (5.4.36–38). The Friar—the same who presided at the first ceremony—will

make this marriage, and Antonio is sent to bring in the bride, who enters, like her attendants, masked. Thus in visual and formal terms this third ceremonial scene will incorporate elements from the previous two, the masked ball and the aborted wedding. And yet the mask is, in this case, almost a shroud, since Hero will revive, in her lover's eyes, from death:

Claudio Which is the lady I must seize upon?
Antonio This same is she, and I do give you her.
Claudio Why then, she's mine. Sweet, let me see your face.
Leonato No, that you shall not till you take her hand Before this Friar and swear to marry her.
Claudio [to hero] Give me your hand before this holy friar. I am your husband if you like of me.
Hero [unmasking] And when I lived I was your other wife; And when you loved, you were my other husband.
Claudio Another Hero!
Hero Nothing certainer. One Hero died defiled, but I do live, And surely as I live, I am a maid.
Don Pedro The former Hero, Hero that is dead!
Leonato She died, my lord, but whiles her slander lived.
Friar All this amazement can I qualify.
5.4.53–67

The Friar is prepared to tell the story, to “let wonder seem familiar” (5.4.70). But this remarkable romance moment of resurrection and remarriage, a moving spectacle upon the stage, is not permitted to stand uninterrupted. Instead the play turns back toward the familiar and witty terrain of comedy, as Benedick asks, “[W]hich is Beatrice?” He sees her remove her mask, demands to know if she loves him as his friends had sworn, and thus begins to unravel the second, and far more comic, of the play's deceptions:

Benedick They swore that you were almost sick for me.
Beatrice They swore that you were wellnigh dead for me.
Benedick 'Tis no such matter. Then you do not love me?
Beatrice No, truly, but in friendly recompense.
5.4.80–83

Before these proud and sensitive spirits can back away completely from their previous admissions, their friends produce the ocular proof. Claudio has taken from Benedick “a paper written in his hand, / A halting sonnet of his own pure brain, / Fashioned to Beatrice,” and Hero gleefully waves “another, / Writ in my cousin's hand, stol'n from her pocket, / Containing her affection unto Benedick” (5.4.86–90). The tables are now completely turned, as Claudio and Hero act (for the moment) the part of the experienced and settled lovers, and Beatrice and Benedick stand exposed in their pretense. “A miracle!” crows Benedick. “Here's our own hands against our hearts” (5.4.91).

It is not an accident that this final reversal is accomplished by means of writing, which tells the truth about their love while the witty speakers fib and spar. We have been vouchsafed a comical glimpse of Benedick trying to write his love poem: “I cannot show it in rhyme. I have tried. I can find out no rhyme to ‘lady' but ‘baby' an innocent rhyme; for ‘scorn,' ‘horn,' a hard rhyme; for ‘school,' ‘fool,' a babbling rhyme. Very ominous endings. No, I was not born under a rhyming planet, nor I cannot woo in festival terms” (5.2.30–35). And yet he does. Much Ado About Nothing is one of several Shakespeare plays to juxtapose overtly the spoken and the written, and in this play the latter is often called upon to stabilize or interpret the former. The penance Leonato had imposed on Claudio, for his slander of Hero in the sacred precincts of the church, was that he should “labour … in sad invention” and hang an epitaph upon Hero's tomb. The epitaph, beginning “Done to death by slanderous tongues,” ends with the conventional sentiment that poetry will make the dead live forever: “So the life that died with shame / Lives in death with glorious fame” (5.3.3, 7–8). Dogberry the constable, one of Shakespeare's most effective verbal clowns, the mouthpiece for some of the playwright's best malapropisms, relies on writing to pin down elusive fact, instructing the Sexton to “bring his pen and inkhorn to jail” and interjecting, throughout the important and revealing Sexton scene, instructions for translating words into text, as one by one the “malefactors” are charged with their crime: “Pray write down ‘Borachio.' … Write down ‘Master Gentleman Conrad.' … Write down that they hope they serve God…. Write down Prince John a villain” (4.2.11–36). The Sexton faithfully transcribes the testimony, or “examination,” given by the Watch, and takes it to show to Leonato. It is this written evidence that will convince Leonato of Hero's innocence and John's villainy. Dogberry, left alone onstage with the captured men, who vent their spleen by calling him an ass, is magnificent in his wish that the literate Sexton were still present to record this insult:

O that he were here to write me down an ass! But masters, remember that
I am an ass. Though it be not written down, yet forget not that I am an ass…. Bring him away. O that I had been writ down an ass!
4.2.68–78

That this is a favor the playwright has done for his character, even in the Sexton's absence, has long been a delight to audiences and readers. The role of Dogberry was originally played by Will Kemp, the same actor who played Bottom in A Midsummer Night's Dream, and we might imagine that spectators would make this connection. Dogberry/Kemp had already been “writ down an ass,” with equal insouciant triumph, in Shakespeare's earlier play.

In contrast to writing, speech is impossibly slippery and treacherous for Dogberry, who says “suspect” for “respect” (“Does thou not suspect my place? Dost thou not suspect my years?” [4.2.67–68]) and “auspicious” for “suspicious,” and who thinks it is a compliment when Leontato calls him and his partner “tedious” (“It pleases your worship to say so, but … if I were as tedious as a king I could find it in my heart to bestow it all of your worship” [3.5.17–20]). As he reports the crimes of Don John's men, it is striking that he describes all their offenses as versions of bad speech: “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" (5.1.202–205).

Dogberry has had his brilliant interpreters, and his fans. And directors have done what they could to showcase the romance of Claudio and Hero. But it is Beatrice and Benedick who unquestionably steal the show, and whose love represents an achieved maturity—shot through, it is fair to say, with genial folly— that differentiates them from all the others in the play. Even their gestures toward convention—the sonnets, the new suit of clothes, the trimmed beard, Benedick's pledge to "go get her picture"—are gently self-mocking, acknowledging the folly of their earlier stubbornness, and the great fun of being in love. This is a play that several times comes dangerously close to tragedy. Beatrice's command to her lover, "Kill Claudio," is a turning point in more ways than one, as actors and directors must struggle to retain the sincerity of the moment, at the same time that this earnest entreaty breaks the tone, and the frame, of all of their previous banter. They are adults, these two. They stand apart as whole people, timely and timeless, people we would probably like to know. We might notice that while Hero has a watchful father and uncle, and Claudio an offstage uncle (mentioned in the first scene) and the protective Don Pedro, Beatrice and Benedick have no parents, and Leonato has no influence over his niece. Beatrice and Benedick are simply their incomparable, and incomparably witty, selves, and for this generations of audiences have been grateful.