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# MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

**An analysis of the play by Shakespeare**

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CLAUDIO, DECEIVED BY DON JOHN, ACCUSES HERO
*A painting by Marcus Stone, c. 1861*

The main plot in *Much Ado About Nothing* is the same as the story of *Ariodante and Ginevra* in Ariosto; but the secondary circumstances and development are very different. The mode in which the innocent Hero before the altar at the moment of the wedding, and in the presence of her family and many witnesses, is put to shame by the most degrading charge, false indeed, yet clothed with every appearance of truth, is a grand piece of theatrical effect in the true and justifiable sense. The impression would have been too tragical had not Shakespeare carefully softened it in order to prepare for a fortunate catastrophe.

The discovery of the plot against Hero has been already partly made, though not by the persons interested; and the poet has contrived, by means of the blundering simplicity of a couple of constables and watchmen, to convert the arrest and examination of the guilty individuals into scenes full of the most delightful amusement. There is

also a second piece of theatrical effect not inferior to the first, where Claudio, now convinced of his error, and in obedience to the penance laid on his fault, thinking to give his hand to a relation of his injured bride, whom he supposes dead, discovers on her unmasking, Hero herself. The extraordinary success of this play in Shakespeare's own time, and long afterward, is, however, to be ascribed more particularly to the parts of Benedick and Beatrice, two fun-loving cynics, who incessantly attack each other with all the resources of raillery. Avowed rebels to love, they are both entangled in its net by a merry plot of their friends to make them believe that each is the object of the secret passion of the other. Objection has been made to the same artifice being twice used in entrapping them; the drollery, however, lies in the very symmetry of deception. Their friends attribute the whole effect to their own device; but the exclusive direction of their raillery against each other is in itself a proof of a growing inclination. Their wit and vivacity does not even abandon them in the avowal of love; and their behavior only assumes a serious appearance for the purpose of defending the slandered Hero. This is exceedingly well imagined; the lovers of jesting must fix a point beyond which they are not to indulge their humor, if they would not be mistaken for buffoons by trade.

*Much Ado About Nothing* was first printed and acted in 1600, this edition not being divided into acts, as in the folio. The variations in the text are, however, extremely light, the folio being evidently printed from a playhouse copy. Ariosto had made of this story a tale of chivalry; Spenser, in his *Faerie Queene*, a lesson of high and solemn morality; Bandello an interesting love-romance. It remained for Shakespeare to surround the main incidents with those accessories which he could nowhere borrow, and to make of it such a comedy as no other man had made--a comedy not of manners or sentiment, but of life viewed under its profoundest aspects, whether of the grave or the ludicrous.

This play was also acted under the title of *Benedick and Beatrice;* for these characters absorb most of the acting interest. But they cannot be separated from it without being liable to misconstruction. The character of Beatrice cannot be properly understood, except in

connection with the injuries done to Hero, and it is in this relation that she appears in her real character and no longer under a mask. The poet Campbell has pronounced her "an odious woman;" for she is not at heart what at first she seems to be--a jesting, jibing, sarcastic young woman, one who has no faith in valor, and is not minded to be subdued by courtesy; who prefers a "skirmish of wit" to "making account of her life to a clod of wayward marl." This is not the real Beatrice, who is in fact a high-spirited, imaginative girl, one who, with all her wit, has an abundance of womanly sensibility, and is by no means in a gay humor when she says, "I may sit in a corner and cry heigh ho! for a husband." While seated in

> The bleached bower,
> Where honeysuckles, ripen'd by the sun,
> Forbid the sun to enter,

without any outburst of passion she hears her cousin say of her--

> Disdain and scorn ride sparking in her eyes,
> Misprising what they look on; and her wit
> Values itself so highly that to her
> All matter else seems weak; she cannot love,
> Nor take no shape nor project of affection,
> She is so self-endear'd.

And why is she so calm under this bitter reproach? Why does she show no resentment against her cousin for this cruel representation? It is because she knows she has been playfully wearing a mask to hide the real strength of her sympathies. But now,

> Contempt, farewell! and maiden pride, adieu!

She is no longer a thing of mere negations, a fashionable, brilliant woman of the world. It is hard to believe that it is the same Beatrice we encounter, who, when her cousin's wedding "looks not like a nuptial," and poor innocent Hero is deserted by her lover and father, alone has the courage to say--

Oh! on my soul, my cousin is belied!

It is the injury done to Hero which wrings from Beatrice the avowal of her love for Benedick, and it is surely no reproach to her that she would have her lover peril his life against the false accuser of her cousin. She has thrown off her maidenly disguise, and the earnestness of her soul will now have vent. The conventional Beatrice is now the actual Beatrice, and the same process is repeated in the character of Benedick. When he asks, "Would you have me speak after my custom as being a professed tyrant to the sex?" and when Beatrice says, "I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow, than a man swear he loves me," each knows that the other is acting, and each is in the other's thoughts. It is but a playful echo of the past when Benedick says, "I take thee for pity" and Beatrice "yields upon great persuasion."



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- Much Ado About Nothing - The story of Shakespeare's play retold by Charles Lamb.
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