

**A Guide to
MUCH ADO ABOUT
NOTHING**

by William Shakespeare



“The Shakespeare Handbooks open the plays up admirably. Excellent for all levels of reader – everybody will get something from them.” Simon Callow

The Shakespeare Handbooks

Guides available now:

- Antony and Cleopatra
- As You Like It
- The Comedy of Errors
- Hamlet
- Henry IV, Part 1
- Julius Caesar
- King Lear
- Macbeth
- Measure for Measure
- The Merchant of Venice
- A Midsummer Night's Dream
- Much Ado About Nothing
- Othello
- Romeo and Juliet
- The Tempest
- Twelfth Night
- The Winter's Tale

Further titles in preparation.

Setting the scene

Shakespeare wrote *Much Ado About Nothing* in 1598–9, when he was in his mid thirties. Having started his career as a novice actor ten years or so before, he was by now the principal playwright for London's leading theatre company; his achievements to date included *Richard II*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He and his fellow company members were soon to set up the renowned Globe Theatre on the south bank of the Thames.

Much Ado About Nothing seems to have been an immediate and continuing success with the theatre-going public. It was a favourite at the royal court, too, and King James I, who came to the throne in 1603, commissioned several private performances.

The play remained popular until, with civil war looming, the theatres were forced to shut down in 1642; they were to remain closed for nearly twenty years. By the time they reopened, tastes had changed radically. As happened with many other Shakespeare plays, characters and scenes were lifted from *Much Ado* and combined with parts of other plays, along with music and dancing, to create elaborate performances designed to appeal to a supposedly more refined public. Eventually, however, the original play became popular once more, and it has remained a firm favourite to this day.

Much Ado is a fast-paced comedy of wit and rivalry. Its language is sparkling and assured, and its plot, driven by eavesdropping, deception and misunderstanding, is masterfully controlled. But the play challenges us with hints of darkness, even tragedy, before giving us the happy conclusion that we desire:

“Shakespeare offers a play of light and dark, of romantic union wrested from fear and malice, and of social harmony soothing the savagery of psychic violence. Much Ado claims one of Shakespeare's most delightful heroines, his most dancing word-play, and the endearing spectacle of intellectual and social self-importances bested by the desire to love and be loved in return. It is undoubtedly the most socially and psychologically realistic of his comedies, in its portrait of the foibles and generousities of communal life.”

Claire McEachern, Introduction to the Arden Shakespeare edition of *Much Ado About Nothing*, 2006

The conflict comes to an end

The prince of Aragon, Don Pedro, has been dealing with an armed rebellion. He has succeeded in defeating the rebels, and the fighting is over.

Don Pedro is now on his way to Messina, a coastal city in the Aragonese territory of Sicily. While there, he plans to celebrate his victory and enjoy an extended stay at the home of Leonato, the governor of Messina.

Curtain up

Encouraging news

I, i

The governor of Messina, Leonato, is waiting outside his house with his daughter Hero and his niece Beatrice, anxious for news of the recent conflict.

A messenger from the victorious prince Don Pedro arrives to tell the governor that the prince and his companions are now on their way to Messina. Leonato is relieved to hear that casualties have been light:

Leonato: How many gentlemen have you lost in this action?¹

Messenger: But few of any sort, and none of name.²

Leonato: A victory is twice itself when the achiever brings home full numbers.

¹ *battle*

² *distinction, nobility*

As Leonato reads the letter brought by the messenger, he notices that a particular young man has been singled out for praise:

Leonato: I find here that Don Pedro hath bestowed much honour on a young Florentine called Claudio.

Messenger: Much deserved on his part, and equally remembered¹ by Don Pedro. He hath borne himself beyond the promise of his age,² doing, in the figure of a lamb, the feats of a lion ...

¹ *suitably acknowledged and rewarded*

² *he has shown more valour than would be expected of such a young man*

Leonato mentions that Claudio has an uncle in Messina. The messenger replies that he has already visited the man, who was overcome with pride to hear of his nephew's bravery. Such displays of emotion are a mark of good character, Leonato believes:

Leonato: Did he break out into tears?

Messenger: In great measure.

Leonato: A kind¹ overflow of kindness: there are no faces truer than those that are so washed. How much better is it to weep at joy than to joy at weeping!

¹ *natural, instinctive*

Beatrice makes her feelings known

Beatrice asks the messenger whether her acquaintance Benedick is among those coming to Messina with the prince. She remarks that his talent is for gluttony rather than warfare:

Messenger: He hath done good service, lady, in these wars.

Beatrice: You had musty victual,¹ and he hath help² to eat it: he is a very valiant trencherman;³ he hath an excellent stomach.

¹ *stale food*

² *helped*

³ *hearty eater, man of good appetite*

Leonato assures the messenger that Beatrice's sarcasm should not be taken too seriously. When they are together, she and Benedick continually attempt to outdo one another with their cutting remarks, he explains. Beatrice claims that she always gets the better of him:

Leonato: You must not, sir, mistake my niece. There is a kind of merry war betwixt Signior Benedick and her: they never meet but there's a skirmish of wit between them.

Beatrice: Alas, he gets nothing by that. In our last conflict four of his five wits¹ went halting off,² and now is the whole man governed with one: so that if he have wit enough to keep himself warm, let him bear it for a difference between himself and his horse³ ...

¹ *the five wits were considered to be imagination, memory, common sense, fantasy and instinct*

² *limped away, unable to carry on*

³ *he should hold on to his one remaining wit, as it is the only thing that distinguishes him from a beast*

According to Beatrice, Benedick is fickle, continually shifting his loyalty from one friend to another:

Beatrice: Who is his companion now? He hath every month a new sworn brother.

Messenger: Is't possible?

Beatrice: Very easily possible: he wears his faith but as the fashion of his hat, it ever changes with the next block.¹

Messenger: I see, lady, the gentleman is not in your books.²

Beatrice: No; an³ he were, I would burn my study.

¹ *wooden mould for shaping hats, replaced whenever fashions change*

² *is not in your good books; does not meet with your approval*

³ *if*

Benedick's best friend, the messenger says, is Claudio, the young man commended in Don Pedro's letter for his bravery. Beatrice sympathises with him. Benedick's company will prove to be a disaster, she claims:

Beatrice: O Lord, he will hang upon him like a disease; he is sooner caught than the pestilence,¹ and the taker² runs presently³ mad. God help the noble Claudio!

¹ *the plague*

² *victim, infected individual*

³ *immediately*

... he is sooner caught than the pestilence, and the taker runs presently mad.

There are numerous mentions of the plague throughout Shakespeare's work. The plague was a constant source of anxiety, particularly for those who made their living from the theatre. When a severe epidemic occurred in London – defined as more than 30 deaths a week – the theatres were closed down by the authorities who believed, probably correctly, that large public assemblies helped to spread the disease. Unfortunately for the theatre companies, epidemics tended to happen during the summer, when the theatres – which had no lighting or heating – did most of their business.

It was not only in London that the plague cast its shadow. In Shakespeare's home town it had wiped out almost one in six of the population in the course of a few terrible months in 1564. The newborn Shakespeare was lucky to survive unscathed:

“Plague was a frequent and devastating occurrence in England throughout Shakespeare's lifetime. Those who contracted it could suffer from fevers, delirium, and painful plague sores, with a survival rate of just 50%. In 1564, the year Shakespeare was born, plague claimed over 200 people in Stratford-upon-Avon, including four children on his very street. The ominously brief and simple statement ‘hic incepit pestis’ (‘here begins the plague’) was written in the burial register at Stratford's Holy Trinity Church on the 11th of July; Shakespeare had been baptised there less than three months before ... The persistent presence and threat of this fearsome disease should not be forgotten when considering Shakespeare's life and works.”

Holly Kelsey, *Pestilence and Playwright*, 2016

The adversaries meet

Prince Don Pedro now arrives. Among his companions are Benedick and Claudio, his comrades-in-arms in the conflict that has just ended. Leonato greets the visitors warmly.

When Don Pedro is introduced to Hero, the governor's daughter, Leonato takes the opportunity to tease Benedick about his reputation as a libertine:

Don Pedro: ... I think this is your daughter.

Leonato: Her mother hath many times told me so.

Benedick: Were you in doubt, sir, that you asked her?

Leonato: Signior Benedick, no, for then were you a child.¹

Don Pedro: You have it full, Benedick; we may guess by this what you are, being a man.² Truly the lady fathers herself.³
Be happy, lady, for you are like an honourable father.

¹ *at the time of her conception, you were not old enough to be a father*

² *Leonato has answered your question perfectly, and summed up your character*

³ *Hero's similarity to Leonato is ample evidence that he is her father*

Benedick remarks that Hero would not wish to resemble her grey-haired father too closely. As the others drift away, Beatrice addresses him mockingly. Benedick bemoans the fact that she seems to be the only woman who does not admire him – not, he adds, that he is particularly interested in female company:

Beatrice: I wonder¹ that you will still be talking, Signior Benedick: nobody marks you.²

Benedick: What, my dear Lady Disdain! Are you yet living?³

Beatrice: Is it possible disdain should die, while she hath such meet⁴ food to feed it as Signior Benedick? Courtesy itself must convert to disdain,⁵ if you come in her presence.

Benedick: Then is courtesy a turncoat.⁶ But it is certain I am loved of all ladies, only you excepted; and I would I could find in my heart that I had not a hard heart, for truly I love none.

¹ *I'm surprised*

² *is taking any notice of you*

³ *still alive*

⁴ *suitable, ideal*

⁵ *even the most polite of people must become scornful*

⁶ *traitor*

It is just as well that Benedick is not seeking to ensnare a woman in a relationship, declares Beatrice. She too finds the idea of romance unbearable:

Beatrice: ... I thank God and my cold blood, I am of your humour for that;¹ I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me.

¹ *my temperament is the same as yours in that respect*

“Much Ado About Nothing features the most obviously modern of Shakespeare’s courting couples, Beatrice and Benedick. They are the direct ancestors of the ‘rom-com’ couple ... Despite there being some examples of witty banter between young men and women in earlier Shakespeare plays and in some other 16th-century texts, Beatrice and Benedick are definitively new: they refuse to abide by the conventions of genteel decorum, they know their own minds (or think they do), they are not particularly respectful of authority ... Perhaps their banter is also a type of self-defence against the appearance of any emotional vulnerability.”

Penny Gay, *Benedick and Beatrice: the ‘merry war’ of courtship*, 2016

Don Pedro, having spoken briefly to Leonato, announces that he and his companions have been invited to stay in Messina, at the governor's house, for at least a month.

Leonato, confirming the invitation, turns to Don Pedro's illegitimate brother, Don John. There has been hostility between the prince and his brother, a taciturn, sullen individual, but now that the quarrel is over Don John is an honoured guest:

Leonato: Let me bid you welcome, my lord, being reconciled to the Prince your brother: I owe you all duty.

Don John: I thank you: I am not of many words, but I thank you.

Claudio is smitten

As the assembled company leaves for Leonato's house, Claudio takes Benedick aside. He wants his friend's opinion of Leonato's daughter Hero:

Claudio: Benedick, didst thou note the daughter of Signior Leonato?

Benedick: I noted her not,¹ but I looked on her.

Claudio: Is she not a modest young lady?

¹ *I did not pay particular attention to her*

To Claudio's frustration, Benedick refuses to take the subject seriously. She may be moderately attractive in her way, he suggests vaguely, but she does not live up to his idea of beauty:

Claudio: ... I pray thee speak in sober judgement.

Benedick: Why, i' faith, methinks she's too low¹ for a high praise, too brown² for a fair praise, and too little for a great praise: only this commendation I can afford her, that were she other than she is, she were unhandsome,³ and being no other but as she is,⁴ I do not like her.

¹ *short*

² *brown-haired, dark*

³ *she would be unattractive if she looked different*

⁴ *since she is the way she is*

Benedick is concerned that his friend has become infatuated, and may make a rash decision. He can think of at least one woman who is far more beautiful than Hero, although her temperament makes her company unbearable:

Claudio: In mine eye, she is the sweetest lady that ever I looked on.

Benedick: I can see yet¹ without spectacles, and I see no such matter: there's her cousin, an she were not possessed with a fury,² exceeds her as much in beauty as the first of May doth the last of December. But I hope you have no intent to turn husband, have you?

¹ *still*

² *if she were not possessed by a ferocious demon*

Don Pedro now comes out to ask the two men what they have been discussing so earnestly, and why they have not joined the company in Leonato's house. Ignoring Claudio's plea for secrecy, Benedick immediately reveals the truth; that his friend has fallen in love with Hero.

At first, Claudio is reluctant to admit that he is in love, but with the prince's encouragement he soon makes his feelings clear. Don Pedro strongly approves of the match, but Benedick remains unenthusiastic, and mocks his friends' solemn declarations:

Claudio: That I love her, I feel.

Don Pedro: That she is worthy, I know.

Benedick: That I neither feel how she should be loved, nor know how she should be worthy, is the opinion that fire cannot melt out of me; I will die in it at the stake.

Although Benedick does not hold a grudge against women in general, he does not intend to let himself become ensnared by a woman who, in time, will no doubt prove unfaithful. Indeed, the constant threat of infidelity makes marriage intolerable for both husband and wife, he claims, so it is safer to avoid it altogether.

Don Pedro believes that Benedick's attitude will change in time:

Benedick: That a woman conceived me, I thank her: that she brought me up, I likewise give her most humble thanks ... Because I will not do them the wrong to mistrust any,¹ I will do myself the right to trust none: and the fine² is, for the which I may go the finer,³ I will live a bachelor.

Don Pedro: I shall see thee, ere I die, look pale with love.

Benedick: With anger, with sickness, or with hunger, my lord, not with love ...

¹ *I will not insult any woman by putting her in a situation where I will mistrust her*

² *conclusion*

³ *which will leave me richer, and free to spend more money on fine clothes*

Don Pedro light-heartedly warns Benedick that his outspoken criticism of marriage will make him a figure of fun when he finally succumbs to love. Benedick remains steadfast. If he were ever to marry, he insists, he would deserve to be ridiculed in public: he is unworried, however, as he is confident that it will never happen.

An indirect approach

Benedick leaves for Leonato's house, and Claudio, alone with Don Pedro, reveals the strength of his feelings. He had been aware of Hero before leaving Messina for the recent war, but it is only since his return that the depth of his fondness for her has suddenly become clear. The prince is amused by the young man's poetic, extravagant language:

Claudio: ... now I am return'd, and that war-thoughts
Have left their places vacant, in their rooms¹
Come thronging soft and delicate desires,
All prompting me² how fair young Hero is,
Saying I lik'd her ere I went to wars.

Don Pedro: Thou wilt be like a lover presently,
And tire the hearer with a book of words.

¹ *in their place*

² *reminding me, making me realise*

Claudio admits that he wants the prince's help in proposing to Hero, and in obtaining Leonato's blessing for the marriage of his only child. Don Pedro mentions that there is to be a masked ball this evening, in celebration of the recent victory. He offers to approach both Hero and her father, and win them over to the idea of the marriage:

Don Pedro: ... I will assume thy part¹ in some disguise,
And tell fair Hero I am Claudio,
And in her bosom I'll unclasp my heart,²
And take her hearing prisoner with the force
And strong encounter of my amorous tale:
Then after to her father will I break,³
And the conclusion is, she shall be thine.

¹ *take on your role; pretend to be you*

² *open my heart, reveal my true feelings*

³ *broach the subject*

Eager to put the plan into practice, the two men leave to prepare for the ball.

A misunderstanding

I, ii

Leonato is in his house, busily organising the evening's festivities, when his brother Antonio arrives with some surprising news. A servant, he reports, has overheard part of a conversation between Don Pedro and Claudio. However, the man has misinterpreted the prince's plan:

Antonio: The prince and Count Claudio, walking in a thick-pleached¹ alley in mine orchard, were thus much overheard by a man of mine: the prince discovered² to Claudio that he loved my niece your daughter, and meant to acknowledge³ it this night in a dance ...

¹ *lined with dense, intertwined branches*

² *disclosed, revealed*

³ *declare, affirm*

It seems that Don Pedro, in short, intends to propose to young Hero. The servant is completely trustworthy, Antonio insists, but Leonato remains cautious. He is not sure whether the story is true, but decides that Hero should have her answer ready all the same:

Leonato: ... we will hold it¹ as a dream till it appear itself:² but I will acquaint my daughter withal,³ that she may be the better prepared for an answer, if peradventure this be true.⁴

¹ regard the idea

² materialises, proves genuine

³ with what you have told me

⁴ in case it turns out to be true

“Much Ado’s central plot device is the readiness of the characters to accept error and misinformation ... The theme of error and confusion is also enhanced by various other dramatic devices. Prominent is the repeated importance of overhearing, an act that lends itself to misinterpretation and error ... The very title of the play may contain a pun on this subject, for ‘nothing’ was probably pronounced like ‘noting’, which in Elizabethan English could mean ‘overhearing’ or ‘eavesdropping’.”

Charles Boyce, *Shakespeare A to Z*, 1990

Lingering hostility

I, iii

Elsewhere in Leonato's house, the prince's brother Don John is in conversation with his companion Conrade. Unlike his brother, Don John is a surly, unfriendly individual; and at the moment he is in a particularly resentful mood. Conrade encourages him to raise his spirits, but Don John refuses to conceal his unhappiness. He will be himself, he insists, regardless of other people's feelings:

Don John: I cannot hide what I am: I must be sad when I have cause, and smile at no man's jests; eat when I have stomach,¹ and wait for no man's leisure;² sleep when I am drowsy, and tend on no man's business;³ laugh when I am merry, and claw no man in his humour.⁴

¹ *appetite*

² *never wait until others are ready*

³ *ignore anyone else who wishes to deal with me*

⁴ *not flatter anyone by showing sympathy*

It emerges that Don John played a part in the recent rebellion against Don Pedro. Conrade warns him that he will need to hide his bitterness if he is to benefit from the prince's goodwill:

Conrade: ... you must not make the full show of this till you may do it without controlment.¹ You have of late stood out² against your brother, and he hath ta'en you newly into his grace,³ where it is impossible you should take true root but⁴ by the fair weather that you make yourself.

¹ *you must not show your resentment until you are free to do so without restraint*

² *rebelled, plotted*

³ *recently taken you back into his favour*

⁴ *except*

Don John remains defiant: he refuses to make a dishonest show of benevolence or gratitude. He may have been pardoned, but he does not feel as if he has been given his freedom. Although he cannot express his anger openly, as he would like, it is still there:

Don John: I had rather be a canker¹ in a hedge than a rose in his grace ... in this, though I cannot be said to be a flattering honest man, it must not be denied but I am a plain-dealing villain. I am trusted with a muzzle and enfranchised with a clog² ... If I had my mouth³ I would bite; if I had my liberty I would do my liking; in the meantime, let me be that⁴ I am, and seek not to alter me.

¹ *wild rose*

² *like a dangerous dog, I am only trusted when wearing a muzzle, and only set free with a heavy weight around my leg*

³ *if my muzzle were removed*

⁴ *what*

Another of Don John's companions, Borachio, now enters. The evening's festivities are starting, he reports. He has been employed to perfume the rooms in Leonato's house, and this enabled him, unexpectedly, to overhear a surprising conversation between Don Pedro and Claudio.

Don John, who despises Claudio for his part in defeating the recent rebellion, senses a possible opportunity:

Borachio: Being entertained for a perfumer,¹ as I was smoking a musty room comes me² the prince and Claudio, hand in hand in sad conference.³ I whipped me behind the arras,⁴ and there heard it agreed upon that the prince should woo Hero for himself, and having obtained her, give her to Count Claudio.

Don John: Come, come, let us thither; this may prove food to my displeasure. That young start-up hath all the glory of my

overthrow.⁵ If I can cross him any way, I bless myself every way.

¹ *hired to freshen the rooms by burning bunches of sweet-smelling herbs*

² *towards me, into my presence*

³ *serious conversation*

⁴ *wall-hanging, tapestry*

⁵ *the young upstart has gained his honour by defeating me*

Don John sets off with his companions to join the party, determined to cause trouble for Claudio and disrupt his plans if he possibly can.

Shakespeare wrote *Much Ado About Nothing* in his mid thirties, during a period of intense activity and creativity. He had been an actor for several years, but by this time he had also become a hugely successful playwright. This success must have gone hand in hand with a hectic lifestyle:

“In the Elizabethan repertory system, Shakespeare might be expected to perform in six different plays on six consecutive days. Many times he would rehearse one play in the morning and perform in another that afternoon. On most days he probably played more than one character ... When he was not acting in plays he was writing them. Like actors, Elizabethan playwrights were encouraged to demonstrate their adaptability. In less than twenty-four months at the turn of the seventeenth century Shakespeare wrote Much Ado About Nothing, The Life of Henry the Fifth, The Tragedy of Julius Caesar, As You Like It, and The Tragedy of Hamlet Prince of Denmark, probably in that order, probably one right after the other. Even before he finished one play he had begun thinking about or even writing the next ...”

Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare*, 1989