

BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE | DIRECTOR JAMES EVANS

# MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

A HANDY GUIDE TO BLUFFING YOUR WAY THROUGH



## SPEED READ

A quick flick through  
Much Ado About Nothing

When Don Pedro, Prince of Aragon, arrives back from battle he and his men are ready to make love, not war.

There is Claudio, in love with Governor Leonato's daughter, named Hero. And there's our actual hero, Benedick, in love with his bachelor lifestyle.

Benedick and Beatrice have a tempestuous friendship. So, while Claudio and Hero agree to marry, Benedick and Beatrice trade barbs that make the battlefield look benign.

Little do Benedick and Beatrice know, however, that their friends are doing more than penning vows and planning seating arrangements. The others are plotting to make Benedick and Beatrice fall in love with each other by talking up Benedick's alleged love for Beatrice within earshot of her, and vice versa.

Don John, the prince's illegitimate brother, meanwhile, is dreaming up a more sinister conspiracy. He and his follower (Borachio) trick Claudio into thinking that Hero cheated on him on the night before their nuptials.

Claudio denounces Hero mid-wedding ceremony. Hero faints. And then plays dead as her priest suggests. After some prodding from Beatrice, Benedick swears to avenge Hero's death by challenging Claudio to a duel.

It's only when bumbling constable Dogberry and co overhear Borachio's boasting that Don John's plan is uncovered. Claudio agrees to marry Hero's cousin as penance – only she turns out to be our revived Hero.

Benedick and Bea have caught the love bug by now, and they marry alongside Claudio and Hero.

## LOVERS AND FIGHTERS

Much Ado About Nothing  
character lowdown

### BEATRICE

Whip smart Beatrice runs rings around all the menfolk but saves her sharpest cracks for Benedick.

### BENEDICK

The playboy at the centre of our tale has sworn never to marry. But for some infuriating reason, he can't get Beatrice out of his system...

### DON PEDRO

Buoyed by military victory, the Prince of Aragon is kicking back and enjoying some down time with his troops in Messina.

### DON JOHN

A bastard in every sense of the word, Don Pedro's half-brother wants to burst everyone's loved-up bubble.

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**HERO**

A noble young lady who doesn't have a bad bone in her body. Becomes the unwitting pawn in a deadly game played by Don John.

**CLAUDIO**

Benedick's buddy may be a skilled soldier, but he's clumsy in the ways of love.

**BORACHIO**

Don John's sidekick has a thirst for grog, an eye for the ladies, and a taste for trouble. With those personality traits, what could possibly go wrong?

**MARGARET**

Hero's lady-in-waiting has a pure heart and a dirty mind.

**DOGERRY**

In his own opinion, Dogberry is a shrewd police officer who cannot be made a fool of. In everyone else's opinion, he is the exact opposite.

**LEONATO**

Not to be trifled with, the Governor of Messina is Hero's father and Beatrice's uncle.

**ANTONIO**

Leonato's brother (sister in our production) puts family first and will defend their honour above all else.

**LIGHT AND SHADOWS**

Bell Shakespeare founder John Bell once described *Much Ado About Nothing* as Shakespeare's "sunniest comedy". It's hard to argue with that assessment, given the romcom hijinks between Beatrice and Benedick, and the tomfoolery of Dogberry and his blundering watchmen. But even in his lightest moments, Shakespeare can't entirely resist the darkness.

Set in the wake of military combat, *Much Ado About Nothing* includes Don John's vicious vendetta, Hero's faked death, and Benedick's deadly challenge to Claudio. While the audience has a ball, there's a real sense of jeopardy and danger for the characters.

Setting comedy on a knife's edge was one of Shakespeare's specialities. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* he got laughs by sending naïve young lovers into a pitch-black forest at night. In *Twelfth Night*, the comedy is set up by twin siblings mistakenly grieving over one another and concludes with Malvolio's mental torture and public humiliation. And that's to say nothing of Shakespeare's darkest comedy of all, *The Merchant of Venice*.

**"QUOTE UNQUOTE"**

Shakespeare was really on his game when he wrote *Much Ado About Nothing*. The play is brimming with some absolute killer one liners and wisecracks – many of them delivered by Beatrice and Benedick. Here's a few to get you in the mood:

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"I wish my horse had the speed of your tongue."

Benedick pays a back-handed compliment to Beatrice's smart-arsery.

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"He that hath a beard is more than a youth, and he that hath no beard is less than a man. And he that is more than a youth is not for me, and he that is less than a man, I am not for him."

Explaining her aversion to marriage, Beatrice takes the scenic route.

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"For which of my bad parts didst thou first fall in love with me?"

Benedick employs an unorthodox approach to fish for compliments from Beatrice.

“I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest.”

Even as Beatrice finally admits her affections for Benedick, she can't help but refer to her previous reluctance.

*Much Ado's* hapless cop Dogberry was named after an English fruit that looks edible but tastes disgusting. Perhaps Shakespeare was alluding to his character's cocky demeanour, which thinly veils his total ineptitude.

*Much Ado About Nothing* has lit up the silver screen too. A star-studded movie cast in 1993 included Sir Kenneth Branagh, Dame Emma Thompson, Denzel Washington, Michael Keaton, Keanu Reeves, Kate Beckinsale, Ben Elton and Brian Blessed – to name just a few. Twenty years later, Joss Whedon directed an altogether more stylish black-and-white movie version.

“When I said I would die a bachelor, I did not think I should live till I were married.”

Serial singleton Benedick uses a flimsy excuse to explain his change of heart.

It's widely believed that Shakespeare wrote the part of Dogberry for one of the finest comic actors of his generation, Will Kempe. It's also possible that Dogberry was Kempe's final role for Shakespeare's troupe, before he left suddenly in 1599. (Kempe's persistent habit of improvisation may have hastened his departure!)

*Much Ado About Nothing* was given the rock n' roll treatment in the 2016 Off-Broadway musical adaptation *These Paper Bullets!* Green Day's Billie Joe Armstrong penned the songs, performed by a fictional 1960s group The Quartos.

### SAY WHAT?

Post-show conversation starters to make you look smart

### THAT WAS THEN

*Much Ado About Nothing* may be set in high society, but its sense of humour is in the gutter. Even the title of the play was a dirty joke. The Elizabethans often described a certain part of the female anatomy as “no-thing”.

### THIS IS NOW

In recent years, some true giants of the stage have stepped into the shoes of Beatrice and Benedick: Vanessa Redgrave and James Earl Jones. Catherine Tate and David Tennant. Zoe Wanamaker and Simon Russell Beale. The list goes on.

Guide by Andy McLean  
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