

Much Ado About Nothing: Notes on Nothing

According to David Bevington, “[t]he word ‘Nothing’ in the play’s title, pronounced rather like noting in the English of Elizabethan London and vicinity, suggests a pun on the idea of overhearing . . .”. Bevington goes on to say that in the play “[o]verhearings are constant and are essential to the process of both misunderstanding . . . and clarification.” (113). And so in the play we ought to be on the lookout for eavesdropping, word play, misunderstandings, jumping to conclusions and the risks and consequences involved, but also keep in mind that by overhearing someone’s conversation with another person we might find out what they really think and feel, especially if that person has been masking their feelings in conversation with us. On the other hand, if someone sees through the mask, they might just pretend to be divulging true feelings in an effort to hide them.

When I mentioned the play on words in the title to SIR Artistic Director Rodrigo Beilfuss, he remarked: “I love that noting vs nothing wordplay — in a play very much about wordplay. Ah, Shakespeare. He was rather good, eh?”

Indeed, Shakespeare was “rather good”! Shakespeare’s wordplay has a brilliance that is hard to capture and even harder to explain. Below is an excerpt from the Folger Library’s Introduction to *Much Ado About Nothing* that captures and explains the spirit of the play’s “brilliant repartee” better than I can, so this section of the Introduction is included below.

Shakespearean Wordplay (from The Folger Library Introduction to *Much Ado About Nothing*)

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Shakespeare plays with language so often and so variously that the entire play can be read and heard as brilliant repartee: witty punning, elaboration of commonplaces, highly figured verbal structures. In the play’s opening scene, the Messenger delivers his report of the just-ended war in elaborate verbal figures. He reports that Claudio “hath borne himself beyond the promise of his age, doing in the figure of a lamb the feats of a lion,” thus contrasting Claudio’s lamblike youth and apparent helplessness with his lionlike ferocity in battle. He then uses figured language to report Claudio’s uncle’s reception of the news of Claudio’s valor: “there appears much joy in him, even so much that joy could not show itself modest enough without a badge of bitterness.” (Badge here means “sign” and bitterness means “anguish of heart, suffering.”) These words are such a complicated way of saying “He was so happy he wept” that Leonato is forced to ask for clarification: “Did he break out into tears?” The Messenger’s response, “In great measure,” leads in turn to Leonato’s punning response: “A kind overflow of kindness,” where kind means both “natural” and “warmhearted” and kindness means both “kinship” and “affection.”

Every major character in *Much Ado About Nothing* has his or her own way of playing with, elaborating, or misusing language. Two of the more intriguing characters are Beatrice and Benedick, whose linguistic tendencies define them for the other characters. Beatrice, in the prejudice of the time, is seen as “shrewish” or “curst” because of her “sharp tongue.” Her first line in the play is to ask whether “Signior Mountanto” (i.e., Benedick) has returned from the war, jabbing at Benedick by naming him with the fencing term montant (an upward blow or thrust).

More typical of her wordplay is her response to the Messenger's "I see, lady, the gentleman is not in your books." The Messenger is, of course, using the phrase "in your books" figuratively, to mean "in your favor"; she takes the phrase literally and replies "No. An [i.e., if] he were, I would burn my study [i.e., library]." A few lines earlier we find her again taking a figurative phrase and interpreting it literally: when the Messenger describes Benedick as a man "stuffed with all honorable virtues," she responds "It is so indeed. He is no less than a stuffed man, but for the stuffing—well, we are all mortal." In the fourth scene of the play, when her uncle says to her "Well, niece, I hope to see you one day fitted with a husband," she builds an elaborate response by taking literally the more-or-less figurative biblical passage which reads that "the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground" (Genesis 2:7). Combining a literal reading of this verse with the line in the marriage liturgy in which the woman promises to "obey" and "serve" the man she marries, Beatrice responds as follows to Leonato's wish that she find a husband: "Not till God make men of some other metal 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?" It is to such language that the male characters in the play respond: "By my troth . . . , thou wilt never get thee a husband if thou be so shrewd of thy tongue."

Benedick, too, uses wordplay centered in the double meanings of words (saying, for example, that Hero is "too low for a high praise, too brown for a fair praise, and too little for a great praise"). But his more characteristic wordplay is with metaphor—or, rather, with metaphoric figures. A true metaphor is a play on words in which one object or idea is expressed as if it were something else, something with which it shares common features. (Don John uses metaphor when he says "I have decreed not to sing in my cage," picturing his unfree state as that of a caged songbird.) Benedick's metaphoric figures begin as metaphors or similes but spin out into linguistic cartoons: "Prove that ever I lose more blood with love than I will get again with drinking," he boasts, "pick out mine eyes with a ballad-maker's pen and hang me up at the door of a brothel house for the sign of blind Cupid." With a few phrases, he sketches himself as first blinded, then turned into a signboard, and then hung outside a brothel. "If I [fall in love]," he again boasts, "hang me in a bottle like a cat and shoot at me, and he that hits me, let him be clapped on the shoulder and called Adam." Here the wordplay is built on a simile (i.e., he is to be like a cat in a bottle), but again the comparison image expands into an entire scenario in which Benedick is to be hung in a bottle, used for archery practice, hit by an arrow, and the winner congratulated. One of his metaphoric overstatements comes back to haunt him. Answering Don Pedro's quoting of the proverb "In time the savage bull doth bear the yoke," Benedick comically dooms himself by saying "The savage bull may, but if ever the sensible Benedick bear it, pluck off the bull's horns and set them in my forehead, and let me be vilely painted, and in such great letters as they write 'Here is good horse to hire' let them signify under my sign 'Here you may see Benedick the married man.'" The image produced here—the sensible Benedick wearing the bull's horns and advertising his married state—seems to be a challenge to Don Pedro that is later picked up in his tricking of Benedick and that is alluded to twice toward the end of the play. One of the play's high comic moments rests on Benedick's turning Claudio's taunts about the savage bull back on Claudio, using metaphoric language to shape a truly elegant riposte*:

PRINCE

Good morrow, Benedick. Why, what's the matter
That you have such a February face,
So full of frost, of storm, and cloudiness?

CLAUDIO

I think he thinks upon the savage bull.
Tush, fear not, man. We'll tip thy horns with gold,
And all Europa shall rejoice at thee,
As once Europa did at lusty Jove
When he would play the noble beast in love.

BENEDICK

Bull Jove, sir, had an amiable low,
And some such strange bull leapt your father's cow
And got a calf in that same noble feat
Much like to you, for you have just his bleat.

(5.4.41–52)

Because intricate wordplay—whether the intentional elaborations of Benedick and Beatrice or the unintentional confusions of Dogberry—is so central to the language structure of *Much Ado About Nothing*, one must read the dialogue with special attention to double meanings, elaborated metaphors, verbal confusions, and other forms of linguistic playfulness. Benedick's metaphoric conversational style is what leads Don Pedro to characterize Benedick as being “from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot . . . all mirth” (3.2.8–9). This style is also, no doubt, what lies behind Beatrice's taunting characterization of him as “the Prince's*riposte: a clever come-back or quick and sharp reply to an insult.

Shakespeare, William. *Much Ado About Nothing*, “Shakespearean Wordplay” from *The Folger Shakespeare*. Ed. Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine, Michael Poston, and Rebecca Niles. Folger Shakespeare Library, April 18, 2022. *Much Ado About Nothing* Introduction.

And speaking of Shakespearean insults and witty replies, Beatrice and Benedick have them down to an art form. In many ways they are very much alike. Neither of them intends to marry unless they find a perfect match, the ideal husband or wife. Both are intelligent and sarcastic. They carry on a witty and insulting banter on the surface, while deep down they are attracted to each other, but won't admit it.

Included below is the Shakespeare Insult Kit. It was found on the LitChartsBlog, but many versions of this chart have been used by teachers over the years and it appears in multiple sources including postings by multiple theatre groups. If you follow the directions you can have fun generating your own Shakespearean insults.

Shakespeare Insult Kit

To create a Shakespearean insult...

Combine one word from each of the three columns below,
prefaced with "Thou":

Column 1

artless
bawdy
beslubbering
bootless
churlish
cockered
clouted
craven
currish
dankish
dissembling
droning
errant
fawning
fobbing
froward
frothy
gleeking
goatish
gorbellied
impertinent
infectious
jarring
loggerheaded
lumpish
mammering
mangled

Column 2

base-court
bat-fowling
beef-witted
beetle-headed
boil-brained
clapper-clawed
clay-brained
common-kissing
crook-pated
dismal-dreaming
dizzy-eyed
doghearted
dread-bolted
earth-vexing
elf-skinned
fat-kidneyed
fen-sucked
flap-mouthed
fly-bitten
folly-fallen
fool-born
full-gorged
guts-griping
half-faced
hasty-witted
hedge-born
hell-hated

Column 3

apple-john
baggage
barnacle
bladder
boar-pig
bugbear
bum-bailey
canker-blossom
clack-dish
clotpole
coxcomb
codpiece
death-token
dewberry
flap-dragon
flax-wench
flirt-gill
foot-licker
fustilarian
giglet
gudgeon
haggard
harpy
hedge-pig
horn-beast
hugger-mugger
joithead

Time Line of Shakespeare's Life

1564 William Shakespeare is born to Mary and John Shakespeare.

1582 William Shakespeare marries Anne Hathaway; he is 18 and she is 26.

1583 Daughter, Susanna Shakespeare, is born.

1585 Twins, Judith and Hamnet, are born.

1589-94 Shakespeare's first plays, *Titus Andronicus*, *The Comedy of Errors*, and *Henry (circa) VI* are written.

1592 Shakespeare makes a name for himself as an actor and arouses resentment from rival dramatists.

1593 Shakespeare begins writing the Sonnets (he writes a total of 154).

1594 Shakespeare acts in several plays before Queen Elizabeth. His acting company, The Lord Chamberlain's Men, is formed.

1596 Shakespeare's only son, Hamnet, dies.

1597 Shakespeare's name first appears on printed plays. He purchases New Place, a large house that enables him to acquire a coat of arms and use the term *gentleman* after his name.

1598 A critic announces Shakespeare as the best author of both tragedy and comedy for the stage.

1599 Shakespeare becomes a stockholder in the new Globe Theatre.

1599-1608 The peak of Shakespeare's career. He writes many famous plays, including *Much Ado about Nothing*, *As You Like It*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Twelfth Night*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*.

1603 Queen Elizabeth I dies, and James VI ascends the throne. Shakespeare's acting troupe establishes royal patronage and becomes The King's Men.

1610 After writing at least 37 plays, Shakespeare retires to his home in Stratford.

(circa)

1613 The Globe Theatre burns to the ground during a production of *Henry VIII*. It is eventually rebuilt on the same grounds.

1664 The clergy finally have their way; the Globe Theatre is torn down

Much Ado About Nothing (Entire Play)

The Synopsis below is from the Folger Shakespeare Library Site which provides remarkable resources for ELA teachers and their students. For some fun with Shakespeare, teachers and students may want to try PRATTLE, a free online game by Folger Shakespeare Library similar to WORDLE. PRATTLE uses words from Shakespeare's plays and allows you to see quotations from the plays where the word was used after solving for the word.

Synopsis:

The primary plot of *Much Ado About Nothing* turns on the courtship and scandal involving young Hero and her suitor, Claudio, but the witty war of words between Claudio's friend Benedick and Hero's cousin Beatrice often takes center stage.

Set in Messina, the play begins as Don Pedro's army returns after a victory. Benedick, a gentleman soldier, resumes a verbal duel with Beatrice, the niece of Messina's governor, Leonato. Count Claudio is smitten by Leonato's daughter, Hero. After Don Pedro woos her in disguise for Claudio, the two young lovers plan to marry in a week. To fill in the time until the wedding, Don Pedro and the others set about tricking Benedick and Beatrice into falling in love with each other. Meanwhile, Don Pedro's disgruntled brother, Don John, plots to ruin Hero and halt her wedding. Claudio believes Don John's deception, is convinced Hero has a lover, and, at the wedding, brutally rejects her.

With Hero in hiding and falsely reported dead, Beatrice persuades Benedick to fight Claudio. Tragedy is averted when the bumbling city watch, having discovered Don John's treachery, arrives and clears Hero's name. With Claudio forgiven, both couples are ready to get married.

A note on Characters (and Gender) in the Shakespeare in the Ruins production of *Much Ado about Nothing*

In the SIR production two characters are women that in the original production were men. Shakespeare's plays do not contain many roles for women compared to the number of men. The women are often very important characters in the plays such as Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*, Rosalind in *As You Like It*, and Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Because women were not allowed to perform on the stage in Elizabethan times, it is not surprising that the number of female roles was limited. In a modern production gender equity and opportunity is available for actors of all genders. In our production, directed by Ann Hodges, the character of the Governor of Messina, Leonato has been replaced by the widow of the governor, Lady Leonata. Typical of female Italian names, her name now ends in "a". The villain of the play, Don John has been replaced by the embittered sister of the prince, Donna Joan, who has been ousted as ruler by her brother, Don Pedro. In the original play Don John was deposed presumably because he was thought not to be the legitimate heir to the throne. There may well be a question of gender inequality behind the deposition of the princess in the SIR production. We will have to watch closely.

How can a play that was first performed over 420 years ago still be relevant to a modern audience?

Director Ann Hodges in an interview says "the more I have been digging into the play, the more I feel this is the perfect comedy to be doing right now, because it is all about disinformation and misinformation — misinformation is obviously incorrect, it's like that game of telephone . . . But disinformation is purposeful, deliberately twisted, with the intent to harm and create chaos. We have examples of both in the play, which is all about gossip and the dangers of the manipulation of information. This is a great comedy that I hope will provide joy and entertainment, but it also carries this exploration of the dangers of purposefully spreading inaccurate information with the intent to cause harm to each other" (Shakespeare in the Ruins Newsletter, Summer 2022). In the days before social media, gossip, slander, and deception were thriving. The means of spreading misinformation and disinformation were different, but cruelty, manipulation and injustice were flourishing. Again, director, Ann Hodges explains how "Shakespeare remains alive and vibrant": "I think that to keep Shakespeare alive we have to go deeper, and to remind ourselves about all of humanity — and unlike what happened in Shakespeare's time, we must include humans who don't look like William Shakespeare, and include women of course . . . To me what's really important is to question every single choice we are making, and to explore how the stories shift over time and what they tell us about the complexity of the whole human condition." In the same newsletter interview Ann Hodges indicates "this isn't going to be Elizabethan gowns: we want the freedom of really looking at this story." (Shakespeare in the Ruins Newsletter, Summer 2022). So, get ready for something timeless and modern. And even though Shakespeare wrote this play over 400 years ago, the issues of sexism, cruelty, and social inequity are still obviously and painfully relevant today.

A Note on Setting

Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* was originally set in the bustling seaport of Messina, long before Italy was a unified country. Italy was not fully unified until 1871. Messina in Shakespeare's play is a city state in Sicily ruled by the Prince of Aragon. It is one of the regions which, once unified with Castile in 1469 through the marriage of Ferdinand II of Castile, will become part Spain. Aragon ruled Messina off and on for several centuries, but Shakespeare's play is considered to be set in the 1400 or 1500's; that is, sometime before the first performances of Shakespeare's play which took place 1598-1600. For an interesting look at the question of setting in the play see the Royal Shakespeare Company <rsc.org.uk>. Search for: *Much Ado About Nothing* staging and setting.

Our director, Ann Hodges, has chosen to set the play in an "alternative 1950's Italy", the birthplace of modern celebrity, tabloid culture and the paparazzi. Gossip and sensationalism, cruel public shaming, and brutal sexism are at the heart of the play. Such actions were cruel in 1600, cruel in 1950s Italy, and cruel today. Technology changes over the centuries, but human injustice remains. How often do we build ourselves up by putting others down? How often do we condemn others who are innocent based on false accusations? Although it is a romantic comedy, some of the subject matter is not particularly light. While we may laugh at the malapropisms of a character like Dogberry, and be amused when Benedick and Beatrice are tricked into revealing their feelings for each other, we also share in feelings of dismay when we see the cruelty, lies, and dirty gossip to which people may sink in the effort to hurt others.

Characters

House of Leonata:

Leonata	Widow of Governor of Messina
Hero	Leonata's daughter
Beatrice	Leonata's niece
Friar Antonio	Leonata's brother and spiritual advisor
Margaret	Waiting gentlewoman to Hero

The Visitors:

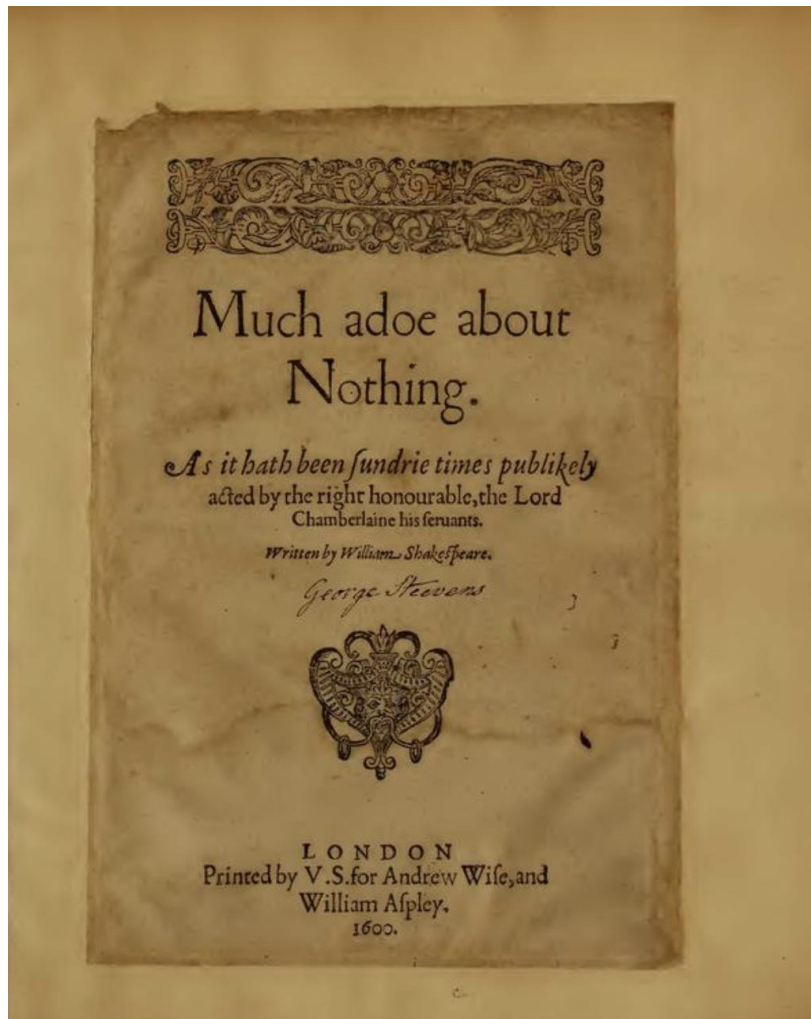
Don Pedro	Prince of Aragon
Donna Joan	Don Pedro's recently demoted sister, formerly Princess Joan
Benedick	Friend to Don Pedro and Claudio
Claudio	Friend to Don Pedro and Benedick
Borachio	Confidante to Donna Joan, photographer

Others:

Dogberry	Constable in charge of the Watch
Verges	Dogberry's partner
Seacoal	Member of the Watch
Oatcake	Member of the Watch
Conrade	Paparazzi photographer, acquaintance of Borachio
Sexton	A librarian
Balthasar	A musician

Musicians, paparazzi, reporters, attendants

Below is the first published Quarto Edition of *Much Ado about Nothing*. The various editions are available online from the University of Victoria as well as many other universities. It is fun to take a look at the archaic spelling and printing. Note that the letter “s” looks more like an “f” without the cross bar sometimes, unless it is at the beginning of a word. Shakespeare looks like Shakefpeare and Andrew Wise looks more like Andrew Wife. This was an imitation of an Italian script that was popular at the time with a long history from Roman times, and also used in Germany. It is referred to as the “long s”.



Before the Play...

1. Here are some questions to talk about in pairs or small groups, or to write about in a journal, and then to share in class if you're comfortable:

- Do you think a double standard still exists when it comes to males and females? In what areas?

- What makes you jealous? How do you respond to jealousy?

- How do you feel when someone disappoints you? How do you let the person know he or she has disappointed you?

- Have you ever pretended to dislike someone when you really like them? Why? How did that work out?

- What does it mean to forgive? Are there boundaries to what can be forgiven?

- What is the difference between misinformation and disinformation? What are some of their possible repercussions? Can you think of any examples from our world today?

- What is slander? What are some of the possible harms that it can cause?

- Imagine that someone you love is slandered and dishonoured. What would or could you do to make it right?

After the Play...

1. Reflect on the experience of the theatre production. Was it what you expected? Were the characters as you imagined they would be? What do you think of some of the changes made by the director (ie, gender, time, and place)? Why do you think the director might have made these changes? If you had a chance to act in this production, which character(s) would you have liked to play? Why? If you were directing, would you have done anything differently?

2. Some general topics for discussion:

- What are some of the major issues with which Shakespeare confronts his audience? In what ways are these issues still relevant today?
- Explore the closeness of love and hate in this play. In what ways does love win?
- What do you think of the comic relief in the play? Is it necessary? Why or why not?
- What do you think of the outcome for the two main couples: Beatrice and Benedick, and Hero and Claudio? If you had written this play, would either of these outcomes be different?
- Thinking about the title, do you think “Nothing” or “Noting” makes more sense?

3. Write a review and send it to Shakespeare in the Ruins.

Email it to admin@sirmb.ca

Or snail mail it to them at 300-393 Portage Avenue, Unit Y, Winnipeg, MB R3B 3H6