

COMPOSITION DATE, SOURCES, CONTEXT, TITLE

See the introduction to the Oxford edition.

“To note”: To observe or mark carefully, to give heed or attention to, to notice closely; to observe, perceive; to set down as having a certain (good or bad) character; to denote or signify sth.; to point at, indicate by pointing; to affix to sb. the stigma or accusation (of some fault), to mark or brand (with some disgrace or defect), to stigmatize. (*OED*)

“Nothing is a double entendre, ‘an O-thing’ [...] was Elizabethan slang for ‘vagina’, evidently derived from the pun of a woman having ‘nothing’ between her legs.” (*Wikipedia*)

THEMES AND ISSUES

Symmetry and doubles — Gender: the battle of the sexes — Appearances v. reality; masks and misconceptions; fashion — Language, wit and humour — Courtship, love and marriage; “wooing and bedding” (Zitner) — Masque, music and dance — Social hierarchy — Legitimacy (social, sexual, discursive, epistemological).

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

(Dis)continuity of the play

- “The story observes the three unities (place, time, and action) established by ancient Greek and Renaissance thinkers and writers: (1) it takes place in one locale, (2) it lasts about a single day, and (3) it has one main story (although some view one or the other of the two love stories as a subplot).” **Cummings**
- “[Claudio, Hero, Don John] and their affairs seem no more than necessary episodes in a plot whose main purpose is to give life to Bea. and Ben., and the emotional and intellectual experience they convey.” “The chances are that [B&B’s] experience may reflect even more clearly than the [nominal] main plot some moral paradigm Shakespeare wished to convey.” “Hero is little more than a passive figure upon whom events play.” **Mulryne** “B&B’s courtship surely criticizes the younger pair’s, and vice versa.”
- Arden**
- “The emphasis in Shak.’s composition seems to have been on contrasts between adjacent scenes or incidents.” “Scenes and the incidents that comprise them are primarily sequences of expectations generated by the narrative and then satisfied by it.” **OUP** “Evil in this play is muted by having been built by committee, and is thus a mirror image of the clumsy but ultimately providential collaboration of Dogb. and his men.” **Arden**
- “The function of the Watch in the action is both to provide reassurance that all will be well and at the same time to withhold the vital information that will make all well until after the crisis of the church scene.” **Meres**
- « Le côté “fleur bleue” de *MAAN* plaira toujours, et explique à notre avis la popularité de la pièce, et la réticence dédaigneuse des critiques. » « Il est frappant de constater l’étroite ressemblance entre la trame de l’intrigue B&B et l’un des schémas de base des romans sentimentaux populaires vendus dans les gares

et les supermarchés. » **Leray**

- « [Les] passages en vers ont trait essentiellement à la première intrigue amoureuse, celle de Claudio et Hero. » « Si [...] Hero se maintient dans le même registre d'un bout à l'autre, c'est pour qu'on ne perde pas la justesse de ton indispensable à la comédie. Grâce à elle, les travers de tous les autres éclatent tour à tour. » **Dubu** "Most of the first, or 'comic' half, leading up to the church scene of 4.1, is in prose, and the remainder of the play, dealing with more sombre matters, is in verse." **Arden** "The play is one of the few in the Shakespeare canon where the majority of the text is written in prose." **Wikipedia**
- "The play is punctuated and structured by songs, perhaps not surprisingly, given its many meditations on the harmonies and dissonances of human connection. Much of this music is more disconcerting than decorative in the content of its lyrics." **Arden**

A tragicomedy?

- "Don John is a character sketch for [another] villain that Shakespeare later created[:] Iago of Othello. [...] *MA* is built on a lot of the raucous misunderstandings that anchor his earlier work *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The misunderstandings that are such a source of comedy here, become the tragic stuff of Othello." **Shmoop**
- "While the tragedies focus characteristically upon the interior consciousness of an individual [...] the comedies are most notably occupied with *relationships*, with the interactions of a number of briefly-created personalities." **Mulryne**
- "[With 3.2,] we move at once from a world of carefree gaiety [...] into a world that is cold and purposeful." "No other comedy embraces anything like such a range of emotional states, from the wholly carefree to the desperately grieved." "We may properly speak of *MA* as the 'gayest' of Shak.'s comedies; it is certainly [...] not the 'happiest'." **Mulryne** « Moins que du "mélange des genres", notre comédie présente selon nous une juxtaposition, une coexistence des genres. » **Dubu** "The ending [...] gives a sense of the persistent quality of the play's problems." **Arden**
- "When Bea. chillingly challenges Ben. to 'kill Claudio!' she is also challenging the playwright to recognise his options in ending the play, inviting him to be consistent to the moral vision of the play which has presented Claudio as reprehensible and untrusting." **White**

The play as social critique

- "*MA* closes with a dance. [...] We, as we visualise each actor taking his part in the graceful, *orderly* steps, his every movement perfectly allied to his fellows' movements and the whole governed by music, can without difficulty appreciate the dance as symbol of order. [...] As marriage itself is a symbol of order, society's divinely-sanctioned means of controlling and directing sexual relations." **Mulryne** "The conclusion [...] certainly lacks (*pace* those who see the dance as a powerful symbol of restored social cohesion) the affirmative unity of *As You Like It* or *Twelfth Night*." **Meres** "While *MA*, like any comedy, performs a ritual of social renewal, this also includes the renewal of less than desirable aspects of the human creature." **Arden**
- "Unlike the romantic comedies, *MA* neither dispels nor masks class divisions by incorporating them in an idealized community. [...] In the play 'degree' is divisive and burdensome." **OUP**
- "It is clear that Shakespeare had the customs of the *mariage de convenance* much in mind when writing Claudio's part. [...] We ought to adjust our more romantically inclined notions until we can feel with an Elizabethan audience on these points." **Mulryne** "Claudio exemplifies the social style of Honour. [...] Claudio loves honour, not only more [than Hero], but almost exclusively." **OUP**
- "The amusement afforded by Dogberry and Verges and their fellows lies largely in their total incomprehension of the task to which they are assigned." **Mulryne**

- “Don John’s malice [...] is associated with sickness and poison [...]; appropriately, since an attitude inimical to the health of society is fitly imagined as inimical to the health of the body.” **Mulryne**
- “The Hero-Claudio courtship is initiated by Don Pedro, who also proposes the deception to unite B&B.” **OUP**
- “While Don John is the play’s villain, he is also the bastard brother of the play’s highest ranking figure. This fact is ideologically significant because it locates the ‘natural’ origins of social disruption in those who do not legitimately occupy a place in the traditional social order.” **Howard** « Les résonances du mot *bastard* débordent du cadre de la filiation et montrent que Shak. en a fait le véritable sujet du *much ado* et le thème sous-jacent de toute la pièce. » **Nothus**

The war of the sexes

- “There is no suggestion that a change in the social status of women is desirable. In *MA* there is sympathetic insight into the way women suffer in a world where men control all the property and make all the rules, but no advocacy of change. [...] Marriage is the only career for a woman, so that almost any husband is better than none.” **Meres** “The raising of class issues here would have blurred the focus on gender issues that are evidently Shak.’s primary concern.” **OUP**
- “Bea.’s ostentatious flouting of conventional sexual roles is often only a concession to them at another level, and instead of challenging Messina’s masculine ethos, she participates in its assumptions and values.” **Cook** « Shak. présente [en Bea.] un personnage à la fois dans et en dehors du système de valeurs et du complexe d’attitudes associées à la femme dans la société patriarcale. Il souligne cette ambiguïté en la situant entre le rire et les larmes. » **Nothus**
- “Evidently Bea. thinks the barrier between them is Ben.’s commitment to the all-absorbing [male] cults of war, comradeship, and honour.” **OUP**
- “Ben. is not so much older than Claudio as to be free of the adolescent fears, so evident in his misogynistic fear, that lead to false idealisms.” **OUP** “Her ritual death has purged Hero of intemperate Venus’s sexuality, and she returns as Dian in her orb. [...] Hero remains dead in her resurrection, as she is reappropriated to the mode of perception that killed her.” **Cook**
- « Ce ne sont ni Don Pedro, ni Claudio qui établissent le règne d’Amour à Messine, mais les héroïnes, Hero qui catalyse l’amour de Bea., Bea. qui sauve l’amour d’Hero. » « Un motif itératif d’*Ado* est la soumission d’un dieu ou d’un demi-dieu à une femme, l’obéissance de la force à la séduction. » **Gardette**
- “One of the reasons Bea. is perceived to be ‘an excellent wife for Ben.’ is that she talks so much like the men in the play (in the play’s original staging, Bea.’s verbal masculinity would have been underscored by the fact of a boy actor playing the role.” “Most of the Renaissance writings against women share the assumption about the link between verbal dexterity and sexual licence, and thus emphasize the threat of female loquaciousness to the security of patrilineal identity. [...] What is perhaps most surprising about Bea.’s relation to convention is that her flirtation with verbal prowess never seems to compromise her sexual reputation.” **Arden**

“Woe From Wit”

- « C’est une grande folie de vouloir être sage tout seul. » **La Rochefoucauld**
- “Bea. is characterised as the embodiment of pride; her ‘disdain’ and ‘scorn’ distort and denature every experience that comes under her notice; her wit is [...] regardful of nothing but its own brilliance. Above all, she *cannot love* because the focus of her attention is herself.” “How total a ‘conversion’ this new attitude [in 4.1] represents for both of them [B&B] needs no emphasis; reciprocal affection has altogether taken the place of a self-regardful wit that had been their dominant, shared, characteristic.” “Don John represents in an extreme form [...] the proud self-centredness away from which B&B develop.” “Words

have been love's antagonists, and are now [in 5.4] at love's triumph silenced by a kiss." **Mulryne** "From hurt and self-concern Beatrice develops both targets and a mechanism of wit." **OUP**

- "[B&B] are experts in the exercise of their cleverness and rank amateurs in the exercise of their emotions." **Dennis**
- "The men of wit in the play are not only less successful than the fools in seeing truth, but are mocked by one fool's [Dogb.'s] aping of their witty pretensions." **Dennis**
- "It is the superior wit of B&B that marks them out as tempting victims for [...] a transformation which will, or so it is hoped, rob them of their wit." **Arden**

Language and its uses

- "Where a single word had been, on Bea.'s lips or Ben.'s, the impetus to an exuberant, fertile inventiveness, it is [after 3.2] the occasion for meticulous adjustment; language has grown unfruitful, open only to grudging dissection." "Ben. had been merely a voice, even if a magnificently active one, in the early scenes. Now [in 4.1] he is challenged to become 'a man'. [...] When he next appears, he is a new personality." **SNL16**
- "As the play develops [Claudio] becomes more and more Ben.'s anti-type: sober [...], level-headed [...], one who treats language in the most measured, respectful way." "[Dogb.'s] absurd adventures among words make him a sort of inverting mirror of the wit of B&B. Where these two *wilfully* mismanage words, Dogb. does so in total innocence." **Mulryne**
- "Bea.'s first words [...] have a tart, cryptic quality that sets her apart as distinctly an individual with private concerns, *with* a public group, but not *of* it. From then on she too is a social critic." **OUP** "[Bea.'s] speech is not characterized by excess or amplification — that would be Benedick — so much as by the darting, spare quip." **Arden**
- "... the latitude granted [Bea.] as an amusing 'original'." **OUP**
- "Dogb. and Verges exist almost outside of language, and this placement denies them any real social power. Constructed as God's naturals, these lower-class figures conveniently solve society's problems without ever threatening its central values or power relations or providing an alternative understanding of the social order." **Howard** "With all his stupidity Dogb. believes that he is a clever man; and by his fatuous pride in his wit he parodies unconsciously the pride of Ben. and Claudio. Thus his malapropisms, which result partly from his desire to display his vocabulary, are related in motive to the word-play of his betters." **Dennis** « Le thème de l'illégitimité irradie du côté d'une réflexion critique sur la langue. » « Shak. jou[e] la carte de la déformation bâtarde du langage. » **Nothus**
- « L'utilisation polémique du langage permet la libération du refoulé, entre autres les peurs inconscientes et les désirs inavoués de B&B. » **Leray** "Linguistic performance is the social equivalent of the performance in warfare that is both alluded to and conspicuously excluded from the play's action. Language is violence, and language is the alternative to violence: the play entertains both hypotheses and plays them off against each other." **Norton**
- See Figure 1

The play as masquerade

- "Social rituals are vulnerable to disruption and misunderstanding, and this vulnerability underscores the importance of consciously keeping up appearances, patrolling social perimeters, and fabricating civility." **Norton**
- "[B&B] open the play by 'acting the part' of love's antagonists; the self-centredness of their wit is much more a matter of conscious rôle-playing than of natural inclination. [...] Their real instincts are masked by an assumed persona. And not only is their first position a matter of playing a part; the means by

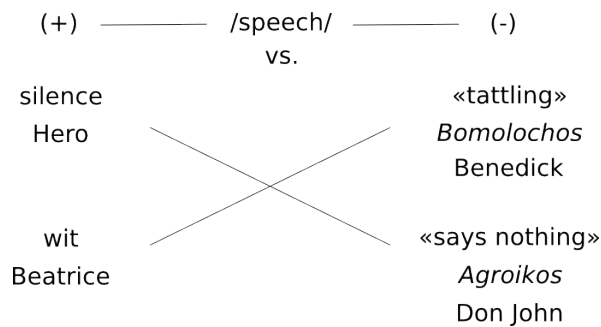


Figure 1: Semiotic square from **Costa**

which they are ‘converted’ from it directly involves acting, pretence.” “... the habit of certain characters of imagining themselves, or being imagined by others, as playing established roles.” **Arden Mulryne** « ... une comédie que jouent B&B, à la fois à soi, à l’autre et aux autres. » **Leray** “Since [B&B] are the intelligent characters in the play, their mistake can surely be interpreted as an *acte manqué*: falling in love is what they wished from the beginning.” **Laurent**

- “Both plots depend, at the level of dialogue, on the education of the eye.” **Mulryne** “The discussion of clothes and the use of images related to dress are very frequent in the play. [...] *MA* is a play very much concerned with appearances: with *ostentation* in its etymological sense of what is held out to be seen.” **Meres** “The play’s term for the social system in which all the characters — evil as well as virtuous — are involved is ‘fashion’.” **Norton**

- “[B&B’s] resolutions to open themselves to love [are] followed by physical illness (Ben.’s toothache, Bea.’s cold), which, whether real or feigned, suggests the anxiety such exposure produces.” **Cook** “While Shak. devotes many of the plot’s twists and turns to questions of the enigmatic, also at work is the horror of the conspicuous, of having one’s most intimate nature revealed in a society where social camouflage is of such supreme importance.” **Arden** “The Claudio/Hero plot and the Bea./Ben. plot are two ways in which Shak.’s comedy shows the saving necessity of illusion.” **Norton**

A comedy of errors: the play as epistemology

- “The intrinsic ‘language’ of *MA* springs from the near-omnipresence of mistakes and misconceptions of all kinds. [...] But we would have to add that it is characteristic of these mistakes to lead, immediately or ultimately, to fortunate ends.” **Mulryne** “What causes the characters to be so often deceived is one of the central critical questions that the play raises.” **Dennis**

- “This particular report [Borachio’s] is true; but it is characteristic of the Messina world that it came not directly, but from concealment.” **Mulryne** “The play is full of instances in which characters perceive each other indirectly, and hence often erroneously.” **Arden**

- “The play is built around the question of who knows what, and when.” **Arden** “Leonato depends on what he thinks he knows, that princes and counts are men of honour and women sexually unreliable.”

OUP

- “*MAAN* works on a distinction between two modes of perception: the mode of ‘wit,’ which relies on prudential reason and a practical evaluation of sensory evidence, and the mode of belief, which rejects reason and reliance on the senses for intuitive modes of understanding. The drama of the play resides in the protagonists’ moving from one way of seeing to the other.” “By rejecting objective appearances of disdain in the other [for] a subjective belief in the other’s devotion, [B&B] indirectly repudiate the skeptical reason that supported their disdain.” “In agreeing to marry any woman that Leonato chooses,

Claudio seems to be renouncing his reliance on self-sufficient intelligence. [...] And his not being allowed even to see the face of his wife before the marriage suggests symbolically the need to abandon external perception of the outer eye.” **Dennis**

Miscellaneous remarks

- “One could [...] demonstrate how every scene is enriched by visualisation. [...] Visual imagination is an essential adjunct to an adequate and balanced reading of *MA*.” **Mulryne**
- “Shak. insists on determinisms that trivialize human choices. Don John was born a bastard, Conrad under Saturn, Margaret below stairs, and Beatrice, dauntlessly happy, under a dancing star.” **OUP**
- “Claudio can be played as particularly young, impressionable and vulnerable, torn between Hero and hero-worship (of Ben. and his contempt for marriage).” **Arden**

Reference key

- OUP**– Sheldon P. Zitner, introduction to the Oxford edition.
Arden– Claire McEachern, introduction to the Arden edition, 2006.
Mares– F. H. Mares, introduction to the Cambridge edition, 1988.
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Gardette– R. Gardette, « Un travail digne d’Hercule : le mariage des opposés », in *MAAN : Actes du colloque de Grenoble*, novembre 1991.
Leray– J. Leray, « La “merry war” dans *MAAN* : la séduction et ses dangers », *ibid.*
Nothus– Cl. Peltrault, « *Nothus* et bouts cousus : des formes de la bâtardise dans *MAAN* », *ibid.*
Dubu– J. Dubu, « Lyrisme et comédie dans *MAAN* », *ibid.*
Costa– R. Costa de Beauregard, “‘Knotting’ or ‘Je-ne-sais-quoi’: two readings of ‘Nothing’ in *MAAN*”, *ibid.*
Laurent– C. P. Laurent, “Inference and experience in *MAAN*”, *ibid.*

COMPLEMENTARY REFERENCES, REMARKS AND QUESTIONS

- Low comedy v. high comedy
- **The masque**: “a form of amateur dramatic entertainment, popular among the nobility in 16th- and 17th-century England, which consisted of dancing and acting performed by masked players.” (*OED*) See also <http://www.mith.umd.edu/comus/cegenre.htm>
- Who is Beatrice? Leonato’s “niece”, but apparently not Antonio’s daughter: his late wife’s niece? another brother’s / sister’s daughter? (To be compared to Don John’s being a “bastard brother”).
- **Euphuism**: John Lyly, *Euphues, the Anatomy of Wit*, 1578.

- **The malcontent** character type, and its link with melancholy (Don John).
- René Girard's mimetic desire.
- The Elizabethan stage: see Figure 2.

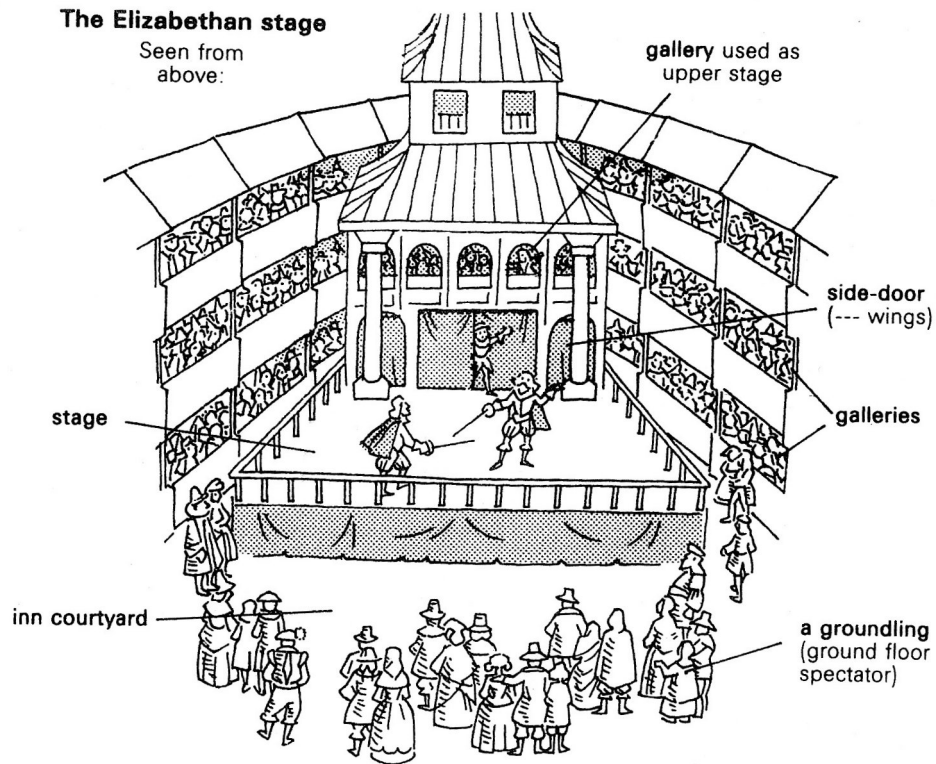


Figure 2: From F. Grellet, *An Introduction to English Literature*