

## MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING — AN INTRODUCTION

### COMPOSITION DATE, SOURCES, CONTEXT, TITLE

See the introduction to the Cambridge edition.

*To note:* To observe of 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*)

"Taken literally, the title implies that a great fuss ("much ado") is made of something which is insignificant ("nothing"), such as the unfounded claims of Hero's infidelity, and that Benedick and Beatrice are in love with each other. *Nothing* is also a double entendre: "an O-thing" (or "n othing" or "no thing") was Elizabethan slang for "vagina", derived from women having "nothing" between their legs. The title could also be understood as *Much Ado About Noting*: much of the action centers around interest in others and critique of others, written messages, spying, and eavesdropping. This attention is mentioned directly several times, particularly concerning "seeming", "fashion", and outward impressions." (*Wikipedia*)

But one can also remember the "wooden O" for the theatre itself (*Henry V*, 1599?), introducing the theme of the *theatrum mundi*.

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".)

### 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).

#### Woe from wit in the *theatrum mundi*

### (DIS)CONTINUITY OF THE PLAY; A TRAGI-COMEDY? THE NOT-SO-MERRY WAR OF THE SEXES

Who are the protagonists? Tradition sees them in B. & B., even though the synopsis of the play seems to point to Claudio & Hero. Are there two plots, or a plot and a sub-plot? If so, what's the exact connection between them?

Traditional components of a comedy: a young couple (or several) in love, leading to a wedding (or several) after they overcome obstacles. No clear distinction between low and high comedy: here, many sex jokes and innuendos, and recurring references to cuckolding + the almost slapstick gulling scenes in the orchard. See below: the masque.

But also some darker moments, esp. Hero's denunciation and (faked) death, or Benedick's decision to challenge Claudio to a duel.

What happened between B. & B.? We know that something did, although we don't know exactly what. It may give a much more sombre tone to their "merry war". Different views of them: if Bea. is a shrew who's finally tamed, then it is not so happy, even by the time's standards perhaps. Also for Claudio: is he a naïve young man who's deceived by villains, or a self-righteous nobleman mainly interested in Hero's fortune, or even a cur / rake / knave whom we can hardly like?

### THE PLAY AS MASQUERADE; THE SOCIAL CRITIQUE

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>.

Even outside of the ball scene, all the characters are wearing a mask and playing a role, if only by following social rules (etiquette); this is expressed already in 1.1.76: "you embrace your charge too willingly".

The *theatrum mundi* according to Epictetus: "Remember that you are an actor in a drama of such sort as the Author chooses — if short, then in a short one; if long, then in a long one. If it be his pleasure that you should enact a poor man, or a cripple, or a ruler, or a private citizen, see that you act it well. For this is your business — to act well the given part, but to choose it belongs to another." (*Enchiridion*, xvii; tr. Th. Higginson, 1948). Playing the role one has been assigned by fate is one's duty; one should neither overreach nor shirk that duty.

See the social stratification: from Don Pedro to Ursula and Margaret; the Watch, with Dogberry aping his betters and insisting that he is a gentleman (and owns two gowns). OUP edition: "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.”

#### LANGUAGE AND ITS USES

Euphuism: John Lyly, *Euphues, the Anatomy of Wit*, 1578. Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier (Il Cortegiano)*, 1528.

Witty language is one way to play the social game, to create the mask one is expected to be wearing, but also one tool to escape one’s position in society: see Beatrice mainly (cf. also the clowns and fools in other plays). Also Don John, who is a malcontent and refuses to play along, thus being “not [a man] of many words”.

Language can also be used to lie or misrepresent things deliberately: see the villains’ plot, but also the gulling scenes, Benedick’s “custom” of being “a professed tyrant” to women, or Hero’s fake death.

#### A COMEDY OF ERRORS: THE PLAY AS EPISTEMOLOGY

This is what the most literal reading of the title indicates: nothing actually happened, even though it led to much confusion. Some people were led to believe that they had seen something which they hadn’t; what they saw or heard was not real fact but a fallacy.

Like many other plays by Shakespeare (cf. *Othello* e.g.), *MA* raises the epistemological question of how one can know anything for certain, given that language and the senses (or people) can’t be trusted and truth and reality (factual, emotional, etc.) are kept hidden. To be related to the Renaissance as “the age of reason”, the period when modern rationality and science were born? to the religious conflicts still at play (knowledge of reality through observation v. revealed truths)?

#### “WOE FROM WIT”

Title of a play by A. Griboyedov, 1823.

Being aware of the *theatrum mundi* as a curse. See *Hamlet* (between 1598–1601?), where Hamlet’s *crux* is arguably not procrastination due to an inherent inability to act but his overthinking things because he is laden down by philosophical questions: he is reluctant (or unable) to act before he’s certain of what he should do, i.e. before he’s reached the truth of the matter — assuming that one *can* tell what’s true.

The same goes with B. & B.: they are too intelligent for their own good. They see through the *theatrum mundi*, perhaps see the absurdity of vanity of it, which puts them apart from the common masquerade, leaving them without a place in society; contrary to Shak.’s truth-telling fools (Touchstone, Feste, etc.) and more like Jacques e.g. (*AYL*: 1599), they fall victims to this clairvoyance given by their wit (= intelligence) and resort to wit (= spiritual humour) as a coping mechanism. Only when they accept to play the game (marrying, i.e. playing the role of husband and wife, including running the risk of infidelity etc.) can they get back into the fold.

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One is tempted to think that the play is suffused with Shakespeare’s sense of his own plight as an intellectual (to use an obvious anachronism) and an “upstart crow” in a hierarchical society of conventions and artificiality.