

There is truth in the title of the play “Much Ado About Nothing.” Indeed, the title implies the play’s great fuss and fretting, turmoil and unrest, controversy and quarrel, worry and confusion. In short: the making of mountains out of molehills. In this sparkling comedy of wit Shakespeare’s characters are caught up in the business of other people’s business. In fact, “nothing” in Elizabethan English was pronounced “noting” which today holds the same connotation of perceiving, observing and interpreting. Much of the play’s action results in the characters eavesdropping, spying and generally taking note of the other characters, resulting in the play’s major theme of insecurity. The relationship between Hero and Claudio is created in a false name (she was wooed by Don Pedro, not Claudio) and is very quickly nearly undone by Don John’s whispering. Benedick and Beatrice, who are otherwise at war with one another, are warily led into their relationship by the little white lies of their friends. These unstable beginnings to love and the scheming that surrounds them creates insecure relationships and opportunities to create much ado about, in the end, nothing.

The script abounds with double entendres and plays on words that mirror and incite the dizzying mix-up of meanings, people and intentions. Beatrice is the first character to use such a double meaning when she retorts Benedick “gets nothing by that” (1.1.55). She is challenging his wit and ultimately calling him witless. Shakespeare plays on the word “marry”, using it as a mild oath or curse, serving to insinuate “to marry”, being merry and the Virgin Mary, to whose standard most women in the play are held. Much of the language is sexualized, using the indirect nature of double-entendres to build upon the play’s use of suggestion and gossip to fuel action.

Such fuel can be found when Claudio and Leonato are feeding false gossip to Benedick, who eagerly eats it up:

Claudio: You talk of a sheet of paper; I remember a pretty jest your daughter told us of.
Leonato: Oh, when [Beatrice] had writ it and was reading over it [Hero] found
“Benedick” and “Beatrice” between the sheet? (2.3.133-134)

Don Pedro’s unnerving mix of sexualized and violent language hints at the war and heartache between the sexes that is to come: “in her bosom I’ll unclasp my heart / And take her hearing prisoner with the force / And strong encounter of my amorous tale.” (1.1.286-288). These sexual suggestions, double entendres and numerous play on words in the text eventually take enough note with the characters to furrow out the their hidden desires for love.

This business of noting is present within the contexts of romantic relationships, and conducted mainly by the men. When Claudio asks Benedick, “didst thou note the daughter of Signior Leonato?” (1.1.140-141) he is not only asking Benedick if he saw her, but if he perceives her as worthy. Claudio then asks Don Pedro, “Hath Leonato any son, my Lord?” (1.1.257). Here he is inquiring after Hero’s dowry and his potential social status from marrying her. Claudio consistently moves throughout the play only by the other men’s approval, or disapproval, of his life. He is the play’s most fickle character, and certainly the most insecure. Don Pedro notes over his matchmaking plot, Benedick notes over the fraud of women, Don John notes on the happiness of others, and Claudio notes on his inability to prove Hero’s fidelity. His insecurity is shared by these other men. The “much ado” in this play is the men’s deep fear of female infidelity. It is through their noting and observing of other’s relationships that they create the fuel for the play and their own molehill mountains. None of the male characters are immune- even Leonato quickly turns against his own daughter, believing she is the fraudulent and quickly announces that: “death is the fairest cover for her shame” (4.1.113). He would sooner believe

the “honorable” Princes and their allegations than his own daughter who, surely, he should know better than those men. In the noting eyes of the men, Hero has made a cuckold not only out of Claudio but her own father.

The thick vein of anxiety of being made a cuckold (a married man with an adulterous wife) from women is voiced most fervently by Benedick, the self-proclaimed tyrant to women (it should be noted that “cuckold” derives from the Old French for “cuckoo”, which in Modern English means “crazy”). The play’s first voice of doubt toward female fidelity is Benedick’s questioning of Hero’s legitimacy:

Don Pedro (to Leonato): ...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? (1.1.90-92)

As Benedick mocks Claudio for wanting to marry, he characteristically questions all men’s willingness to turn husband and therefore cuckold. He staunchly insists that “all women shall pardon [him]” and that he “shall live a bachelor” (1.1.212, 215). In his eyes all married men are inevitable cuckolds and at all costs he will uphold his dignity by avoiding marriage and women: “the savage bull [may] bear the yoke, but if ever the sensible Benedick wear [the yoke of marriage], pluck off the bull’s horns and set them in my forehead!” (1.1.229-231). He cannot prove honesty in any relationship and perceives duplicity everywhere. He admits that by his “two faiths and troths” he speaks his mind, indirectly admitting that even he can hold dual allegiances. Even Beatrice jokes of the cuckoldry of men with Leonato. Leonato warns her that “by being too curst, God will send you no horns” and Beatrice heartily agrees “Just, if he send me no husband...” (2.1.22-23) by which she means, no husband for her to cuckold.

This insistent anxiety over female infidelity backfires and turns the men into the fickle and inconsistent sex instead of the alleged women. Balthasar’s song in Act 2, Scene 3 is a

turning point for this theme where for the first time we hear of men being unreliable and possibly unfaithful:

Sigh no more ladies, sigh no more
Men were deceivers ever,
One foot in sea and one on shore,
To one thing constant never.
Then sigh not so, but let them go,
And be you blithe and bonny,
Converting all your sounds of woe
Into hey, nonny, nonny.
Sing no more ditties, sing no moe
Of dumps, so dull and heavy.
The fraud of men was ever so,
Since summer first was leavy.
Then sigh not so, but let them go,
And be you blithe and bonny,
Converting all your sounds of woe
Into hey, nonny, nonny.

Balthasar's song exposes the men: Claudio is spineless, Benedick is a flirt, Don Pedro a militant who thinks he knows best and Don John treacherous and conniving. These men show more vacillating emotion and belief than any of the women who they accuse of deceiving them. Once beguiled into believing that Beatrice has been hiding her love from him behind sharp words, Benedick is surprisingly easy to sway. Benedick airily justifies his change of mind by rhetorically asking, "Doth not the appetite alter?" (2.3.222) and excuses his quick shift of opinion because "the world must be peopled" (2.3.226). His fall into love is quickly concluded and he exclaims that that he will be "horribly in love with her!" (2.3.119). The others recognize his change of heart and Leonato mocks him by saying "methinks you are sadder!" (3.2.15) However, Claudio's quick shifts and inconsistencies are less humorous. Claudio courts Hero, gives her up as lost to Don Pedro, receives her to court her again, rejects her as unfaithful, repents and eventually marries her. Far from comedic, Claudio's dance around decision is simply pathetic and he suffers a bruised reputation for it. Don Pedro's waverings are more startling, and

probably the most disappointing. He is a Prince and the leader of an army. He should be worldly and staid. He is experienced and should know that there are many sides to every story, that not everything is as it seems. His unwillingness to hear of Hero's possible innocence is chilling. As a Prince and military commander he should be far less swayed by public or familiar opinion, quick to consider many possibilities, and slow to convict- especially when the life and reputation of a young woman are hanging in the balance. Instead he is taken in just as quickly as Claudio when Hero is slandered. Don Pedro is limited by his black and white militant view of interaction and decision. Unfortunately for him there can be no question of another man's word and trusts that the scene he witnesses is "very full of proof" (5.1.106). Upon confrontation he is rooted to his evidence and cuts off Leonato: "I will not hear you" (5.1.108). Don Pedro has created much ado in his cupid's game and is a sore loser.

The great irony of the play is that it is the men, who are insecure over female infidelity, who are responsible for the self-generated web of deception they find themselves in. It is the men who are the ones turning themselves into fools, not the women they so fear and distrust. Luckily for the audience, such fuss over other people's business was never so comically portrayed. The plots and ploys created and undone by the foolhardy men in the play prove that "man is a giddy thing" (5.4.108). Indeed, even a merry acronym for the play spells M.A.A.N.

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