

# MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING



A comedy by  
William  
Shakespeare

## Dramatic Stylistic Devices

Device	Definition
<b>Setting</b>	The setting plays an important part in the structure of the play.
<b>Verse v Prose</b>	Theatrical convention at the time was that unrhymed verse written in iambic pentameter (blank verse) was spoken by high status characters. It is used for scenes of high emotional intensity. Prose was used by low status or comic characters.
<b>Soliloquy/ Aside</b>	One character, alone on stage, sharing their inner thoughts and feelings, making an audience complicit, is a soliloquy. If other characters are present on stage, and the character still speaks directly to the audience, it is an aside.
<b>Rhyme</b>	Rhyming couplets emphasise key ideas, and signal an end
<b>Dramatic irony</b>	Audience knows more than characters.
<b>Antithesis</b>	People or things that oppose each other. It intensifies the sense of conflict: Christian v Jew; justice v mercy; love v hate; father v daughter; appearance v reality; greed v generosity.
<b>Hyperbole</b>	Overstatement or exaggeration
<b>Repetition</b>	Repetition contributes to atmosphere, creation of character, and dramatic impact.
<b>Humour</b>	Humorous scenes often contrast with a serious scene that precedes it.
<b>Scenes:</b>	Shakespeare often uses the structural device of changing scene at a moment of great tension.
<b>Foreshadowing</b>	Giving an advance hint of what is to come later in the story.
<b>Figurative language</b>	Phrases that go beyond the literal meaning to convey a message or additional meaning. There was little use of scenery at the time, so Shakespeare describes the world of the play to the audience through the character's use of figurative language, imagery and words.
<b>Motifs</b>	Recurrent images, ideas or symbols that develop or explain themes. Rings

## CONTEXT SPECIFIC TO *Much Ado about Nothing*

**Much Ado About Nothing** is a comedy by William Shakespeare thought to have been written in 1598 and 1599. The play was included in the First Folio, published in 1623.

**Folio:** A **folio** is a large book made by folding printed sheets of paper in half, with each sheet forming four pages

**Renaissance thought on relationships:** Shakespeare's attitude toward courtship and romance combines an awareness that the social realities surrounding courtship may take away the fun of romance. The need to marry for social betterment and to ensure inheritance, coupled with the importance of being a virgin, complicates romantic relationships. Although this play is a comedy ending in multiple marriages and is full of witty dialogue making for many comic moments, it also addresses more serious events, including some that border on tragedy.

**The courtly lover:** Playing the courtly lover was very popular in the Renaissance and involved the pose of a tortured lover who experienced unrequited love. He would praise and idealise his beloved.

### Public Shaming

Shame is a form of social punishment closely connected to loss of honour.

Even though Hero is ultimately found not guilty, her public shaming at the wedding ceremony is too terrible to be ignored. In a sense, this kind of humiliation causes more damage to her honour and her family name than would an act of unchaste behaviour. Shame is also what Don John hopes will cause Claudio to lose his place as Don Pedro's favourite: once Claudio is discovered to be engaged to a loose woman, Don John believes that Don Pedro will reject Claudio as he rejected Don John long ago.

### Noting

In Shakespeare's time, the "Nothing" of the title would have been pronounced "Noting." Thus, the play's title could read: "Much Ado About Noting." Indeed, many of the players participate in the actions of observing, listening, and writing, or noting. In order for a plot hinged on instances of deceit to work, the characters must note one another constantly.

### Entertainment

From the witty yet plaintive song that Balthasar sings about the deceitfulness of men to the masked ball and the music and dancing at the end of the play, the characters of *Much Ado About Nothing* spend much of their time engaging in elaborate spectacles and entertainments. The play's title encapsulates the sentiment of effervescent and light court entertainment: the two hours' traffic onstage will be entertaining, comic, and absorbing.

### Counterfeiting

The idea of counterfeiting, in the sense of presenting a false face to the world, appears frequently throughout the play. A particularly rich and complex example of counterfeiting occurs as Leonato, Claudio, and Don Pedro pretend that Beatrice is head over heels in love with Benedick so that the eavesdropping Benedick will overhear it and believe it. Luring Benedick into this trap, Leonato ironically dismisses the idea that perhaps Beatrice counterfeits her desire for Benedick, as he and the others counterfeit this love themselves: "O God! Counterfeit? There was never counterfeit of passion came so near the life of passion as she discovers it" (II.iii.98–99).

## THE STRUCTURE OF THE PLAY

**Major Conflict** Don John creates the appearance that Hero is unfaithful to Claudio, and Claudio and Don Pedro come to believe this lie. The real conflict that underlies all of this "ado about nothing" may be that Claudio, Don Pedro, and Benedick share a suspicion of marriage as a trap in which husbands are bound to be controlled and deceived, but they also deeply desire to be married.

**Rising Action** Claudio falls in love with Hero; Benedick, Don Pedro, and Claudio express their anxieties about marriage in jokes and witty banter; Don Pedro woos Hero on Claudio's behalf; the villainous Don John creates the illusion that Hero is a whore.

**Climax** Claudio rejects Hero at the altar, insulting her and accusing her of unchaste behaviour; Don Pedro supports Claudio; Benedick, who was most opposed to women and love at the beginning of the play, sides with Hero and his future wife Beatrice.

**Falling Action** Benedick challenges Claudio to a duel for slandering Hero; Leonato proclaims publically that Hero died of grief at being falsely accused; Hero's innocence is brought to light by Dogberry; Claudio and Don Pedro repent.

**Resolution** By blindly marrying a masked woman whom he believes he has never met, Claudio shows that he has abandoned jealous suspicions and fears of being controlled, and that he is ready to marry. He is rewarded by discovering that his bride is actually Hero.

## **MAIN CHARACTERS - SOME KEY DETAILS:**

### **Beatrice**

Leonato's niece and Hero's cousin. Beatrice is "a pleasant-spirited lady" with a very sharp tongue. She is generous and loving, but, like Benedick, continually mocks other people with elaborately tooled jokes and puns. She wages a war of wits against Benedick and often wins the battles. At the outset of the play, she appears content never to marry.

### **Benedick**

An aristocratic soldier who has recently been fighting under Don Pedro, and a friend of Don Pedro and Claudio. Benedick is very witty, always making jokes and puns. He carries on a "merry war" of wits with Beatrice, but at the beginning of the play he swears he will never fall in love or marry.

### **Claudio**

A young soldier who has won great acclaim fighting under Don Pedro during the recent wars. Claudio falls in love with Hero upon his return to Messina. His unfortunately suspicious nature makes him quick to believe evil rumors and hasty to despair and take revenge.

### **Hero**

The beautiful young daughter of Leonato and the cousin of Beatrice. Hero is lovely, gentle, and kind. She falls in love with Claudio when he falls for her, but when Don John slanders her and Claudio rashly takes revenge, she suffers terribly.

### **Don Pedro**

An important nobleman from Aragon, sometimes referred to as "Prince." Don Pedro is a longtime friend of Leonato, Hero's father, and is also close to the soldiers who have been fighting under him—the younger Benedick and the very young Claudio. Don Pedro is generous, courteous, intelligent, and loving to his friends, but he is also quick to believe evil of others and hasty to take revenge. He is the most politically and socially powerful character in the play.

### **Leonato**

A respected, well-to-do, elderly noble at whose home, in Messina, Italy, the action is set. Leonato is the father of Hero and the uncle of Beatrice. As governor of Messina, he is second in social power only to Don Pedro.

### **Don John**

The illegitimate brother of Don Pedro; sometimes called "the Bastard." Don John is melancholy and sullen by nature, and he creates a dark scheme to ruin the happiness of Hero and Claudio. He is the villain of the play; his evil actions are motivated by his envy of his brother's social authority.

### **Margaret**

Hero's serving woman, who unwittingly helps Borachio and Don John deceive Claudio into thinking that Hero is unfaithful. Unlike Ursula, Hero's other lady-in-waiting, Margaret is lower class. Though she is honest, she does have some dealings with the villainous world of Don John: her lover is the mistrustful and easily bribed Borachio. Also unlike Ursula, Margaret loves to break decorum, especially with bawdy jokes and teases.

### **Borachio**

An associate of Don John. Borachio is the lover of Margaret, Hero's serving woman. He conspires with Don John to trick Claudio and Don Pedro into thinking that Hero is unfaithful to Claudio. His name means "drunkard" in Italian, which might serve as a subtle direction to the actor playing him.

### **Conrad**

One of Don John's more intimate associates, entirely devoted to Don John. Several recent productions have staged Conrad as Don John's potential male lover, possibly to intensify Don John's feelings of being a social outcast and therefore motivate his desire for revenge.

### **Dogberry**

The constable in charge of the Watch, or chief policeman, of Messina. Dogberry is very sincere and takes his job seriously, but he has a habit of using exactly the wrong word to convey his meaning. Dogberry is one of the few "middling sort," or middle-class characters, in the play, though his desire to speak formally and elaborately like the noblemen becomes an occasion for parody.

### **Verges**

The deputy to Dogberry, chief policeman of Messina.

### **Antonio**

Leonato's elderly brother and Hero's uncle. He is Beatrice's father.

### **Balthasar**

A waiting man in Leonato's household and a musician. Balthasar flirts with Margaret at the masked party and helps Leonato, Claudio, and Don Pedro trick Benedick into falling in love with Beatrice. Balthasar sings the song, "Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more" about accepting men's infidelity as natural.

### **Ursula**

One of Hero's waiting women.

## **CONTEXT GENERAL TO MOST SHAKESPEARE PLAYS**

**Source:** As with many of Shakespeare's play, the basic plot outline is borrowed from pre-existing texts. The forfeit of a merchant's deadly bond was a common tale in England in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

**Shakespeare's time:** Shakespeare wrote his plays at the time of two monarchs: Queen Elizabeth I and King James I. The MOV was written fairly early in Shakespeare's career, during the relatively optimistic years of Queen Elizabeth I: this is when Shakespeare wrote the majority of his comedies, before the darker tragedies that he created during the reign of James I such a "Macbeth"

**Love and marriage:** Marriage was seen as property transaction: wealthy women would be much sought after as a means of ensuring financial stability for the sons of noble families

**WOMEN in Elizabethan times:** Nobility generally had arranged marriages in Elizabethan times. Women could not go to school, but noble women had private tutors - Queen Elizabeth set a trend amongst noble families of well-educated daughters. Perhaps, Shakespeare had Queen Elizabeth in mind when he created Hero. She was a woman in a man's world and like many of Shakespeare's female characters, actually proves to be more intelligent and resourceful than the males!

**Patriarchal Society:** Women were considered inferior to men in Elizabethan England, despite a powerful female on the throne defending her country against threats from the Spanish Armada and even courtiers within the English court. This patriarchal society was also the case in much of Europe including Italy. Women belonged to their fathers (or their brothers if their fathers had died) and then their husbands. Shakespeare crafts Portia to go against many expected traits of women at the time (passive and submissive), she is autonomous and creative.

**Playful language:** puns, quips and vibrant figurative language are written into the play to demonstrate wit.

Feature of a Comedy

**Misunderstanding / confusion / deception / disguise:** humour is derived from characters' shrouded perception of reality and dramatic irony.

**Happy ending:** normally involving a marriage.

**Underlying critique:** Shakespeare ridicules some of the issues in Elizabethan society: such as class, love and honour.