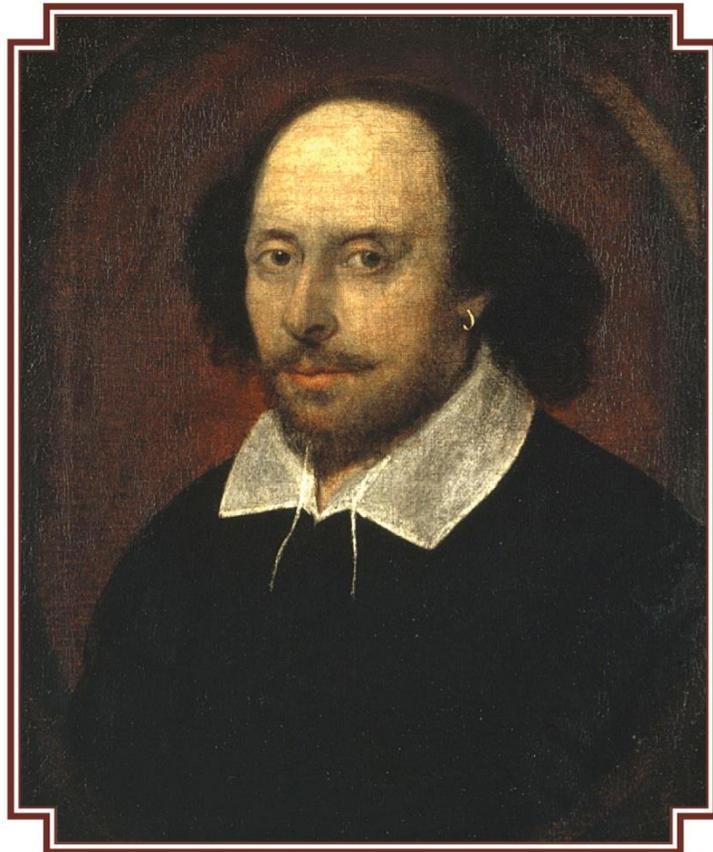


Study Guide for
William Shakespeare's
Much Ado About Nothing



Taylor, John. *William Shakespeare*. Circa 1600-1610. National Portrait Gallery, London.

Created by Bonnie Opliger and
Isabella Dumon
for San Diego Junior Theatre
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About the Play & Playwright

Characters

Leonato's Household

Signor Leonato: governor of Messina

Signor Antonio: brother of Leonato

Hero: Leonato's only daughter

Beatrice: Leonato's niece, an orphan

Margaret and Ursula: gentlewomen attending to Hero

Friar Francis

Musicians, Attendants, Maskers, and Wedding Guests

The Military

Don Pedro: Prince of Aragon

Don John: illegitimate (bastard) brother of Don Pedro

Count Claudio of Florence & Signor Benedick of Padua: companions of Don Pedro

Borachio and Conrade: followers of Don John

Messenger

Balthasar: a singer

Boy: servant to Benedick

The Town

Dogberry: Constable of Messina

Verges: Deputy Constable (or Headborough)

Sexton

George Seacoal: Senior Watchman

Watchman 1

Watchman 2

Other Watchman

The play is set in Messina, Sicily, Italy

Synopsis

Don Pedro, the Prince of Aragon, and his victorious army are on their way to visit Signor Leonato in Messina. Among the Prince's party is Count Claudio, who has a crush on Leonato's only daughter, Hero. Another of the visitors is Signor Benedick, who jokes and teases Hero's cousin, Beatrice.

Leonato holds a masked ball where Don Pedro plans on dressing up as Claudio in order to help him impress and propose to Hero. Borachio has overheard the men's plans and tells Don John, who then plots with his two followers to fool Claudio into believing Hero has been disloyal. As a result, a trick is carried out with the unknowing help of Hero's maid, Margaret, who makes out with Borachio in Hero's bedroom. Claudio and Don Pedro look on silently from a distance, thinking that the girl in the window is Hero.

Meanwhile, Hero and Don Pedro are convinced that Benedick and Beatrice are perfect for one another. They stage conversations that trick both Benedick and Beatrice into believing the other is secretly in love with them.

The night before the wedding, Dogberry, a goofy police officer, instructs his watchmen to be extra alert. The watchmen overhear Don John's followers drunkenly bragging about how they successfully tricked Claudio – they are quickly arrested. But Claudio has not yet been informed about the trickery and publically dumps Hero during the wedding ceremony, appearing to leave her dead from shock. On the advice of Friar Francis, Hero's recovery is kept secret until her name can be cleared.

Dogberry's information is finally reported to Leonato and Don Pedro. Full of regret, Claudio agrees to accept Leonato's 'niece' in place of Hero, whom he believes is dead because of him. The 'niece' turns out to be Hero, and as the lovers make up, Benedick and Beatrice finally admit their love and announce that they will also marry. A messenger brings news of Don John's capture, while the play closes with a dance.

Historical Context

Much Ado About Nothing is generally considered one of Shakespeare's best comedies and was probably written in 1598 or 1599. The play combines the comedic with more serious issues like honor, gender, and politics. In Shakespeare's plays, the line between tragedy and comedy is often fuzzy.

It has been suggested that Shakespeare modeled much of the play after Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* (Collington). Written in 1528, *The Book of the Courtier* came to define the code of chivalry for its time. According to this text, the two most important qualities that a courtier must possess are "sprezzatura" and "grazia." "Sprezzatura" refers to the act of making "whatever is done or said to appear to be without effort and almost without any thought about it." "Grazia," or grace, can be obtained through "sprezzatura" (Castiglione). In other words, you have to act like being cool comes naturally.

Many of Shakespeare's characters in the play use sophisticated language to show their social status. But while Benedick and Beatrice easily hurl insults at one another with the little effort "sprezzatura" demands, Shakespeare uses their insults to poke fun at the flowery and dramatic language courtiers used to show their love. Benedick mocks Claudio's language to Hero when he says, "His words are a very fantastical banquet, just so many strange dishes." In fact, Claudio is so

concerned with social acceptance that he immediately ditches Hero after the first hint of her being unfaithful (marrying an “unchaste” woman would have been seen as very socially unacceptable at the time). Perhaps Shakespeare is making an even more serious critique of social pressure to conform, and the dangers of acting based on this pressure.

Castiglione, Baldassare. *The Book of the Courtier*. London: University of Oregon Press, 1900

Collington, Phillip. “Stuffed with All Honourable Virtues: *Much Ado about Nothing* and *The Book of the Courtier*”. *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 103, No 3 (Summer 2006), pp. 281-312

The Renaissance & Shakespeare

The Renaissance was a time when Europeans moved away from the more religious concerns of the Middle Ages. Beginning in the 14th century, people started to examine humanity’s place in the world – creating a new freedom for artists, writers, and philosophers.

William Shakespeare was born near the end of the Renaissance in 1564 in the town of Stratford-upon-Avon in England. While not much is known about Shakespeare’s early life, we do know that his father came from a family of farmers (yeomanry), and his mother came from a wealthy family of land owners (landed gentry). At only 18, he married a pregnant, 26 or 27 year-old woman named Anne Hathaway, and the two had three children: Susanna, Hamnet, and Judith.

Shakespeare mysteriously left home and began a career in London as an actor, writer, and part-owner of a playing company called the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, later known as the King’s Men. His plays brought the Renaissance to the theater through the use of classical Greek and Roman texts, as well as psychologically complex and flawed characters from different social classes.

William Shakespeare retired and returned to his home in Stratford around 1610, where he lived until his death in 1616. He is buried in Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon.

Jamieson, Lee. *Shakespeare’s Time*. About Education, 2014. Web. 20 May 2014.

<http://shakespeare.about.com/od/historicalcontext/a/Renaissance.htm>

Before the Show Activities

A Much Ado About Nothing Tableau

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.3, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.4, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.6

Directions:

Select three students and assign them each a role from below. Read to them their short character descriptions and give them their assigned line of dialogue to read out loud to the class. Each student should read this line and then strike a pose as their character. Both the line and the pose should evoke the character's distinct personality.

Beatrice: You are a very outspoken woman and are quite proud of yourself and your independence from men.

Line: My name is Beatrice, and I will not marry "till God make men of some other metal than earth."
(II.i.44)

Benedick: You strongly prefer the bachelor life, not just for yourself but for all of your closest friends, namely Claudio, as well. You have very high standards for the woman you will potentially fall in love with.

Line: My name is Benedick, and I can't imagine how one man, after "seeing how much another man is a fool" when in love, can fall in love himself.
(II.iii.7-8)

Don John: You are constantly being overshadowed by your brother, Don Pedro, and have grown angry and bitter because of it.

Line: My name is Don John, and I don't care for my brother's good opinion. "I had rather be a canker in a hedge, than a rose in his grace."
(I.iii.20)

Shakespeare, William. *Much Ado about Nothing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Print.

Iambic Pentameter

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.10, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.4

Iambic Pentameter is a style of writing poetry with rhythm. Shakespeare is well-known for writing primarily in this form in his plays and sonnets. Iambic pentameter helps readers understand the meaning of lines, as the stresses normally fall on the more important words. This natural rhythm also helps actors memorize their lines.

Iamb: The syllables in the line alternate between unstressed first and stressed second.

Pentameter: A line of verse containing five feet. Each foot contains two syllables.

Directions:

Select a student to read the lines below out loud to the class. Then reread the lines, this time stressing every other syllable beginning with the second. During this second reading, bounce a tennis ball as the stressed syllables in the lines are read.

HERO

O god of love! I know he doth deserve
As much as may be yielded to a man.
But Nature never framed a woman's heart
Of prouder stuff than that of Beatrice.

(III.i.47-50)

Interpretation:

Hero is talking about Beatrice and Benedick. She claims that Benedick is worthy of her cousins's love, but Beatrice is too full of pride to see this.

Shakespeare, William. *Much Ado about Nothing*. London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2006. Print.

A Merry War

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.6, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.4

Directions:

All students will pair up and select roles; have everyone read the following lines out loud one time through, asking them to adopt an insulting, argumentative tone. For a second read-through, ask for a pair of volunteers to read the lines again to the rest of the class, requesting that they adopt a flirtatious tone instead. Now that the students are more familiar with the potential tones for this dialogue, ask them to paraphrase and modernize the lines. What kinds of things might people say to each other now if they had the same type of conversation and relationship?

BEATRICE

I wonder that you will still be talking, Signore Benedick; nobody marks you.

BENEDICK

What, my dear Lady Disdain! Are you yet living?

BEATRICE

Is it possible Disdain should die, while she hath such meet food to feed it as Signor Benedick? Courtesy itself must convert to Disdain if you come in her presence.

BENEDICK

Then is Courtesy a turncoat. But it is certain I am loved of all ladies, only you excepted; and I would I could find in my heart that I had not a hard heart, for truly I love none.

BEATRICE

A dear happiness to women – they would else have been troubled by a pernicious suitor.

Afterwards, discuss the nature of Beatrice and Benedick's relationship with the students. They argue constantly and yet, in the end, fall in love. Ask the students to think of and discuss other examples of this type of relationship from more recent movies, books, television, etc.

Shakespeare, William. *Much Ado about Nothing*. London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2006. Print.

Looking Back at the Play

Class Discussion

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.1](#), [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.2](#), [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.3](#), [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.1c](#), [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.1d](#)

What did you think about this production of *Much Ado About Nothing*? How did the costumes, settings, actors and music add or detract from the production? Was the play how you imagined it? Was the performance more appropriate for a production during Shakespeare's time or was it more modernized? Did you like the portrayal of all the characters? Who is your favorite character? Least favorite?

Stage your own production of *Much Ado About Nothing*

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.4](#), [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.6](#), [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.7](#), [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.1](#), [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.1a](#), [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.1b](#), [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.1c](#), [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.1d](#), [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.2](#), [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.4](#), [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.5](#), [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.6](#)

Form groups and come up with a period and place that you would set your play. Would the play be more comedic, dramatic or realistic if set in a particular era? What is your reasoning for choosing your particular setting?

Consider:

- Set
- Costumes
- Props
- Lighting and sounds
- Posters/flyers for advertising
- Themes you will emphasize
- Casting roles such as director, editor, set design, etc.

Your finished assignment can be a file of drawings, notes and suggestions, a live presentation of your ideas or an actual performance. Discuss the different interpretations as a class.

Happy Couples?

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.1](#), [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.6](#), [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.1](#), [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.1b](#), [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.1c](#), [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.1d](#), [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.4](#)

Consider the different dynamics between the two couples. Could Claudio and Hero ever truly recover from Claudio's cruel accusations? Could a free spirit like Beatrice play the role of the obedient Elizabethan wife?

Imagine it is five years later. Which of the two couples is more secure and happy? Imagine you are a reporter for a popular magazine. Write an article where you interview the two couples together. Improvise what happens when the two couples go to see a marriage guidance counselor.

Don John and Don Pedro: Two Royal Brothers

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.1, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.3, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.6, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.1, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.1c, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.1d, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.3, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.4

Consider the relationship between Don John and Don Pedro. Struggles for power within a royal family were not unusual in Shakespeare's time, but Don John is seen as a particularly bad threat because he was born outside of marriage. Wealthy Elizabethans saw "bastards" as especially evil because they could question the inheritance of family property. Both brothers share a liking for trickery and plotting in the play—although Don John's is malicious. Compare and contrast the two brothers. Do you have sympathy for Don John because he was born into circumstances beyond his control? Does Don Pedro seem lonely in a play where all the other main characters find love? Consider the role of power between these two characters.