

6. *Much Ado About Nothing*

Much Ado differs in several ways from the other comedies. It is at the same time highly artificial, with conventional plot and characters, yet in places surprisingly realistic. The plot reaches a point at which it comes within a whisker of turning into tragedy. In most of the comedies, the characters are at the beginning strangers to each other, and their eventual pairing is a datum of the convention. For example, in *Twelfth Night*, whether Orsino deserves and is suitable for Viola is irrelevant, never called in question. But whether Benedick deserves Beatrice is a question at the heart of the play. Here the characters are acquaintances of long standing, but do not know each other any the better for that. Hence the drama is one not of making relationships but of changing them.

Much Ado mixes its artificiality and conventionality with a good deal of realism (it is a play in which two characters mention toothache), especially in the surprising homeliness of language: 'not till a hot January'; 'to make account of her life to a clod of wayward marl'. There are also details of what seem to be London street life: 'pick out mine eyes with a ballad-maker's pen and hang me up at the door of a brothel house for the sign of blind Cupid'; 'hang me in a bottle like a cat and shoot at me'; 'in such great letters as they write 'Here is good horse to hire''.

Life in Messina appears to be permanent holiday. It is characterized by frivolity, self-indulgence, adolescent irresponsibility, role-playing and game playing. Matchmaking is a game. Life is a game. It is a world in which there is too much laughter. Serious discussion of serious matters is *infra dig*. There is too much courtliness and courtesy, not enough love and life.

In each of the two plots obstacle to happy, mature love is ignorance stemming from seeming: Claudio does not know the truth about Hero, nor Benedick about Beatrice. Each is dependent on being told by others. Hearsay carries more weight than direct knowledge. Hero says that Cupid's crafty arrow 'only wounds by hearsay', and later, with heavy irony: 'One doth not know how much an ill word may empoison liking'. The play begins with one couple brought together by seeming, another kept apart by it. Don Pedro uses deceit to set up a fragile marriage. Don John uses deceit to break it. 'Practice' in this society is a way of life. It opens the way to many forms of misprision. It is a game in which truth soon becomes a casualty. It is no part of Don Pedro's 'practice' on Beatrice and Benedick to reveal to each the true feelings of the other: 'The sport will be, when they hold one an opinion of another's dotage, and no such matter'. Don Pedro has no sooner planned to 'practice on' Benedick than the villains plan to put 'in practice' their own plot: 'and there shall appear such seeming truth of Hero's disloyalty that jealousy shall be called assurance, and all the preparation overthrown'.

Don Pedro refuses to give his brother either liberty or full recognition. Brothers in Shakespeare are often the divided halves of what should be a single being. Don Pedro is charming. Life between wars is a game. Probably the wars too are a game, a chance to shine, to earn golden opinions. Such charm is, as we have seen, purchased at a cost. Everything in life which cannot be reduced to a game is repressed and turns nasty, dogging Don Pedro as his shadow self, his imperfectly suppressed bastard brother.

But even if Claudio and Hero had courted openly, their relationship would still have been based on seeming: 'Can the world buy such a jewel?', 'The sweetest lady that ever I looked on'. Love-thoughts simply fill the vacancy left by the ending of 'war-thoughts'. Why do we so dislike Claudio? When the accusation against Hero is first made, he responds not by saying what he will do to Don John if it proves false, but what he will do to Hero if it proves true.

Why at the beginning are Beatrice and Benedick so hostile to the opposite sex? Why does Benedick pride himself on being, and intending to remain, a bachelor? The tenor of all his off-colour jokes is the same: by remaining a bachelor he will avoid the risk (or rather, he suggests, almost the certainty) of acquiring horns, that is, of being cuckolded. The obsession with horns is, of course, bound up with the obsession with honour. An unfaithful wife or fiancée dishonours her husband (very seriously, according to the code) by turning him into a laughing-stock in the eyes of all other men. Since he believes, or affects to believe, that all women are 'light', Benedick has decided that the only way to keep his honour bright is to avoid marriage altogether. This principled bachelorhood also allows him to affect a witty superiority among his friends, and has won him the position of the life and soul of any (male) party.

There are plenty of indications that Benedick's misogyny is a pose. He has acquired some popularity among his mates for his repertoire of misogynist jokes. But when Claudio asks him for his opinion of Hero, he replies:

Do you question me as an honest man should do, for my simple true judgement, or would you have me speak after my custom, as being a profound tyrant to their sex?

Yet when Claudio asks for his honest opinion, he seems unable to give one, and relapses into his customary defamation. It seems that he has worn his mask for so long that it is now difficult to remove. It takes outside interference – the comic plot against him – to jolt him into removing it, to reveal someone pathetically unable to deal with being in love.

After growing into this pose for some years, Benedick, on his last meeting with Beatrice, had repressed his own true feelings of strong attraction to her, and aborted what would have been the natural progression of their mutual love, keeping their relationship on the level of flirtation and raillery. Beatrice, having no clue as to the reason for this, can only assume that he does not reciprocate her feelings, does not value her as a woman.

Both Benedick and Beatrice are, to some extent, outsiders. Benedick does not seem to have the same rank or aristocratic background as the other officers. When Beatrice scorns 'Princes and counties', she is not including Benedick. Indeed his language sets him apart from them, as more appropriate to rural Warwickshire than to noblemen and urbane sophisticates in Italy: 'spoken like an honest drover. So they sell bullocks'; 'twas the boy that stole your meat, and you'll beat the post'; 'poor hurt fowl, now will he creep into sedges'; 'as melancholy as a lodge in a warren'; 'the flat transgression of a schoolboy who, being overjoyed with finding a bird's nest, shows it to his companion, and he steals it'. He is accepted on equal terms with the aristocrats because he is, as Beatrice taunts him, the Prince's jester.

Unmarried women in aristocratic households at that time had nothing to do but ply their needles and play the spinet. For a woman of maturity, intelligence, high spirits, and strong sexual feelings, such a life must have been intolerable. The only escape route was marriage, and this, with Benedick's rejection, seems to have passed Beatrice by, most other men being no doubt put off by her undisguisable superiority to them. She can only sigh 'Heigh-ho!' for a husband. In the 2008 National Theatre production, she has, in fact, taken to the bottle.

All this, together with her somewhat anomalous position in the household as a niece and adopted orphan, causes her to protect herself within a brittle shell of irony, which turns everything to rather aggressive wit. Beatrice works on the principle that attack is the best form of defence both of herself and her sex. Her wit is at its sharpest and most wounding towards Benedick, since it has an element of revenge. But the whole culture of exclusive male comradeship, fighting and 'honour' is her target. She mocks the honour code not only in its sexual but also in its military context. The code required that men should be valued principally by their military exploits. 'How many hath he killed?' asks Beatrice of Benedick, 'for indeed I promised to eat all of his killing'.

Nevertheless, Beatrice is obviously still obsessed with Benedick, and he, for all his put-downs, cannot keep away from her. He might have dropped his frivolity long ago if he had realized her true feelings.

There is nothing behind Claudio's conventionally romantic idealization of Hero. But when Benedick starts to behave in a similarly conventional manner: 'I will go get her picture', it is comic precisely because of the disparity between this adolescent foolery and the complex feelings which eventually acknowledge that Beatrice, far from being just a pretty face, or even a pretty face at all, has intellectual and moral superiority, a capacity for total commitment, and spirited independence (not to mention her strong sexuality). The initially cocky Benedick comes at last to reveal a touching humility. Beatrice is wise, he says, 'but for loving me'.

Sheldon Zitner, the editor of *Much Ado* in the Oxford Shakespeare, speaks of 'Shakespeare's unpleasant portrayal of Hero's accusers'. He does not mean the villains, but Claudio, Don Pedro, and even her father Leonato, who believes the word of a stranger (because he is a Prince) against that of his own daughter. Quote 26-7

Why do we have so little sympathy for Hero? She is simply stunned and puts up no defence. She is a victim of the shallow conventions to which she has happily subscribed. Leonato is as easily taken in as Claudio and Don Pedro, and merely beats his brow theatrically. Claudio's carefully rehearsed renunciation of Hero is done in a tone of banter which at first is taken by the congregation to be jocular. He and Don Pedro slip effortlessly (and heartlessly) into their new roles, without, it seems, being particularly upset. They are urbanely impassive.

Everyone has been preoccupied with form and appearances. Beatrice and Benedick are silent. Belatedly the Friar makes some commonsense proposals. He suggests that they feign the death of Hero:

For it so falls out
That what we have we prize not to the worth
Whiles we enjoy it, but being lacked and lost,

Why, then we rack the value, then we find
The virtue that possession would not show us
Whiles it was ours. So will it fare with Claudio.
When he shall hear she died upon his words,
Th'idea of her life shall sweetly creep
Into his study of imagination,
And every lovely organ of her life
Shall come apparelled in more precious habit,
More moving, delicate, and full of life,
Into the eye and prospect of his soul
Than when she lived indeed. Then shall he mourn,
If ever love had interest in his liver,
And wish he had not so accused her –
No, though he thought his accusation true. [IV.i.216-233]

Here, when the Friar speaks of 'th'idea of her life', for the first time in the play we have a perspective not superficial. Only Beatrice understands him. This scheme completely fails because the Friar assumes a basic humanity in Claudio which isn't there. When Hero lived indeed, Claudio had little interest in her for herself, the lovely organs – that is works – of her life, only in the external features which inspire love at first sight. Claudio had valued Hero entirely in terms of 'particular will', and the same criticism applies as is later to be applied to Troilus' estimate of Cressida:

But value dwells not in particular will:
It holds his estimate and dignity
As well wherein 'tis precious of itself
As in the prizer.

Claudio several times speaks like a tepid Troilus, expressing his disillusion, for example, in the words: 'Are our eyes our own?' Like Troilus, he threatens, in consequence of the one disillusionment, 'To turn all beauty into thoughts of harm'.

No sooner has everyone else left than Benedick resumes his suit, comforting the distressed Beatrice in a manner which implies that there is nothing, beyond the Friar's suggestions, requiring to be done. Up to this point the scene has passed with remarkably little drama, little depth of feeling. The marriage is aborted with as little deep feeling as it was contracted. Suddenly the superficiality of it all, indeed of the whole play so far, is shattered by Beatrice in two words - 'Kill Claudio!' Why does she want Claudio killed? It needs a crisis, a trauma, to bring about a dropping of disguises (like the news of a real death in *Love's Labour's Lost*), though at first only by Beatrice. She sees that Claudio's offence, as one who professed to love Hero, is greater than Don John's, that Claudio is the true villain. Benedick, drawn for the first time into a new depth of seriousness, comes to share her view.

Beatrice's 'Kill Claudio' is as much of a shock to the audience as to Benedick. It is not what we expect in a witty comedy. He answers unthinkingly from the world of close male comradeship which has been his only world until now: 'not for the wide world'. But it does not take much plain speaking — wit would now be unthinkable —

to convince him that he now has commitments which overrule those of that world, as justice overrules honour, and honour itself has to be redefined.

The Prince and Claudio assume that Benedick has issued his challenge purely because he is now the conventional besotted lover, willing to perform any absurd act on the whim of his mistress. When they realize that he is indeed 'in profound earnest', they say he has simply left off his wits and become a fool.

Dogberry and Verges seem witless, as inept at the social graces as their betters are adept. Yet their hearts are in the right place and they are concerned to unmask seemers and bring truth to light.

Thus the realistic theme of the play is the harm which can be done by too much artificiality, by characters who try to live real life as if it were a conventional light comedy, and they had no other responsibility than to entertain each other.

We do not care much about Claudio and Hero, but we do care about Beatrice and Benedick. What will marriage hold for them? Beatrice is sometimes played as a shrew in need of taming. As Zitner has pointed out, towards the end of *Much Ado* Shakespeare himself quotes his earlier play. Benedick has just asked Margaret to fetch Beatrice. She comes immediately, and he greets her with the words: 'Sweet Beatrice, wouldst thou come when I called thee?' He is surely asking her if she is behaving like Kate at the end of *The Taming of the Shrew*, where Petruchio bets a hundred crowns that his wife will come quicker than the other two wives when their husbands send for them. In the event Kate is the only one who comes at all. Beatrice picks up the reference, and answers: 'Yea, signor, and depart when you bid me'. But when Benedick says: 'O, stay but till then', she replies " 'Then' is spoken. Fare you well now", which is to say that he is not to expect unchallenged obedience from her. She then asks him if he has responded equally promptly to her order that he should challenge Claudio. This is give and take. There will be no monopoly of obedience in this marriage.

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There is a major problem for the director and actors in any modern production of *Much Ado*. If the play's continual flow of wit is to sparkle, it must be delivered with pace. Beatrice and Benedick are obviously, in this game of wit, what Zitner calls 'the seeded players'. They set the standard. And since Beatrice wins most of the rallies, she has the quickest wit of all. Ellen Terry wrote:

I have played Beatrice hundreds of times, but not once as I know she ought to be played. I was never swift enough, not nearly swift enough at the Lyceum where I had a too deliberate, though polished and thoughtful, Benedick in Henry Irving.

Yet to give a modern audience any chance of following their exchanges in an idiom now completely unfamiliar, the actors must be slowed down. There is no easy solution to this problem.

Any production of *Much Ado* stands or falls by the casting of Beatrice and Benedick. Zitner claims that only once in the stage history of the play have they been

perfectly matched, in the 1976 Stratford production with Judy Dench and Donald Sinden. I did not see that production. My own favourite pairing is Emma Thomson and Kenneth Branagh in his 1993 film of the play.

In the National Theatre production in 2008 Simon Russell Beale at 46 and Zoe Wanamaker at 58 were rather older than most actors in these roles. They were, however, within the existing age-range. In 1836 Kemble, at the age of 61 played Benedick to a 19-year old Beatrice, Helen Faucit, who went on to become the definitive Beatrice of her generation, playing the part for the last time in 1879 at the age of 62! The maturity of Beale and Wanamaker allowed for a whole dimension of new meanings in their relationship, with the sense that for both of them this was a last chance to find themselves and each other.

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