

Humphrey Tonkin:
MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

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Much Ado About Nothing was written around 1598, when Shakespeare was at the height of his powers. *Julius Caesar* and *As You Like It* probably followed in 1599. And *Much Ado* came on the heels of the two *Henry IV* plays and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Around 1600, Shakespeare's direction changed, as he started work on the major tragedies, beginning with *Hamlet*.

Like *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, featuring the antics of the fat knight Falstaff, *Much Ado* is a play to be seen, rather than a play to be read. Along with *Merry Wives*, it contains an unusually high percentage of prose, verse being used relatively sparingly, primarily in contrast to the scurrying rapidity of the prose dialogue between the heroine Beatrice and her reluctant lover Benedick. Hero, the ingénue heiress of Leonato and the intended of the young soldier Claudio, speaks verse: her mental universe is a softer, more accommodating universe than that inhabited by her cousin Beatrice, she of the biting tongue and rapid-fire dialogue.

Benedick and Claudio are newly returned from the wars, along with their commander Don Pedro, and Don Pedro's bastard brother the loathsome and antisocial Don John. Don John excepted, there is a grand camaraderie among the young men, of a kind that wars and dangers foster, but that is not so easily sustained when young women enter the picture. Back in Messina, Benedick resumes the verbal sparring with Beatrice that has evidently characterized their relationship in the past. Claudio, his eye lighting once again on Hero, Leonato's daughter, falls madly in love with her. So our play begins with two pairs, the one held together by a kind of reciprocal yet irresistible animosity, the other by an intense but conventional interest in marriage. Given Claudio's status and Hero's coming wealth, nothing could be more appropriate.

Shakespeare's comedies, in fact large numbers of comedies in general, are about marriage. Comedy, which looks toward a happy ending, which seeks to create order out of disorder, and which has as its goal the establishment of community, naturally puts a premium on the marriage contract, since this contract both fosters fecundity and provides for the orderly transfer of wealth from one generation to the next. Don John, the bastard, is a living example of the corruption of the comedic process, and it is therefore no wonder that he turns out to be the villain, the underminer of marriage.

Comedy, of course, is not always about laughter, though laughter is one of the most fundamental ways in which we build and celebrate our common humanity, and by which we form community. *Much Ado* begins with celebration and laughter, and with music, that other dramatic emblem of harmony. The return of the young men from the wars is occasion for celebration. The ball that Leonato arranges is a masked ball, and so the question of who is who, and who is doing whose business, becomes an issue almost from the start. From the beginning of his career, Shakespeare was interested in questions of mistaken identity, linking them with deeper psychological questions having to do with the identity of the self, and the fluidity of personality. *The Comedy of Errors*, probably his first comedy, features pairs of twins, who are entertainingly confused with one another, but whose consequent psychological disorientation borders on the disturbing. Later, in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, and *Twelfth Night*,

women dress as men, causing similar confusion. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a character turns into an animal. Even Sir John Falstaff himself spends a portion of *The Merry Wives* in drag.

There is nothing quite like this in *Much Ado* – but the play is characterized by a sequence of visual misunderstandings, culminating in a devastating denunciation of Hero by Claudio in the course of their intended marriage ceremony (ever since the mid-nineteenth century, it has been suggested that the play is in some sense much ado about *noting*, a point reiterated in the program notes for the recent Hartford Stage production). The first such deception, minor in itself, is Don Pedro's undertaking to woo Hero in Claudio's name during the ball. Through the meddling of Don John, Claudio is led to believe that Don Pedro woos Hero in his own name, and it takes a certain amount of diplomacy on Don Pedro's part to resolve the issue and convince the gullible Claudio, clearly inexperienced in the affairs of the heart (hence his willingness to let Don Pedro do the wooing in the first place).

But this initial confusion emboldens both brothers – Don Pedro and Don John. Don Pedro, successful in bringing Claudio and Hero together and obtaining the consent of her father Leonato, is encouraged to attempt the seemingly impossible, a union of Beatrice and Benedick. Don John, who has so easily led Claudio by the nose, embarks on a yet more ambitious deception – to arrange for his follower Borachio, who is in the favors of Hero's attendant Margaret, to make love to Margaret in a place where they may be seen by Claudio and Don Pedro, under circumstances that will lead Claudio and Don Pedro to believe them to be not Margaret and Borachio but Hero and some unidentified lover – and all this on the eve of the planned wedding.

The stratagem works, with disastrous consequences. The fact that Claudio has already been confused by Don Pedro's good intentions in wooing Hero for him adds to the plausibility of his falling for the deception. But a marriage built on such slight trust, and one in which the supposed honor of a soldier can so easily disrupt a love relationship, is hardly secure. Beatrice and Benedick's odd and contrary wooing may be a better guarantee, paradoxically, of subsequent harmony and understanding than the insipid conventionality of Claudio's love for Hero.

Don Pedro's efforts in bringing Beatrice and Benedick together work remarkably well. These efforts, true to the theme of the play, turn on a different kind of deception. First, Claudio and Don Pedro, in Benedick's hearing, speak of Beatrice's supposed attraction for Benedick. They even lay on romantic music for the occasion. Their allegations are pure fiction, but this empty nothingness is quite enough to cause much ado with Benedick, who, after eschewing marriage in Act 1, seems quite ready for it by the end of Act 2. "The world must be peopled," he declares emphatically.

Then it is the turn of Beatrice, who overhears Hero and Ursula walking in the garden (and speaking elegant blank verse as they go), describing an equally elaborate texture of misrepresentations about Benedick's love for the benefit of the hidden Beatrice. It is perhaps no wonder that Beatrice emerges from behind a bush speaking even more elegantly than the two she has overheard: quite uncharacteristically, she speaks in fragments of a love sonnet (and is perhaps amazed by her own utterances).

All this precedes the disaster in the church, where Claudio denounces Hero. It is common for Shakespeare's plays to take a sudden turn at midpoint: Lear thrust into the storm, Macbeth reeling from the hauntings of Banquo's ghost, Romeo killing Tybalt, Hamlet unmasking Claudius through the mousetrap play. In *Much Ado*, with the opening of Act 4 the play is plunged into darkness, as Don John's plot works so catastrophically well. All along, there has been a certain tension between Claudio and Benedick's (and Don Pedro's) soldierly brotherhood on the one

hand, and the interest of Claudio and, increasingly, Benedick in the other sex. Early on, Benedick very specifically separates himself from all thoughts of marriage and is mockingly distressed at Claudio's willingness to entertain the status of husband. Wars and boys' games are equally threatened by the arrival of mere girls, eager to participate but held in low esteem by their male counterparts. And Hero is the epitome of femininity, passive, restrained (she barely talks in the opening scene), indiscriminately enthusiastic about pleached bowers and honeysuckles and the pleasures of gardens (the speech, at the opening of Act 3, is too often cut: it is delivered in innocence by Hero but is in fact obscenely suggestive).

Now, following the church incident, Benedick must make a decision, must choose sides. To side with the men means abandoning his newly recognized affection for Beatrice, and also to accept the slight evidence of wrongdoing based above all on the notoriously unreliable testimony of the eyes (the "ocular proof" that brings down Othello). To side with the women means abandoning the men and opting for the evidence of the heart: Hero is innocent, Beatrice suggests, because it is simply unthinkable that she be guilty. She is innocent, in other words, because Beatrice knows her, and to know someone well is the best way of judging them. Because of the nature of their hilarious relationship to this point, Benedick's dilemma is less tragic than entertaining, but it is also a lesson in making promises. "I love you so much that I will do anything for you," says Benedick, in effect. "Kill Claudio" is the icy reply. Beatrice, eager to test her wits against Benedick's for much of the action, and to enjoy life in doing so, is now deadly determined. She beats against the boundaries of her own limitations as a woman, wishing that she herself could go out and do the deed. No Hero she. No passive bystander, no victim.

And Benedick, true to his heart, rises to the occasion. He does so, however, in the context of a further deception, this one practiced against Don Pedro and Claudio: at the Friar's suggestion it is given out that Hero, who fainted clean away in the church, is dead. Benedick challenges Claudio to a duel, in a scene in which Claudio and Don Pedro are still trying to make the best of things, but in which the verbal wit of earlier in the play is reduced to Don Pedro's essentially talking with himself in retelling, in I-said-she-said style, a witty conversation with Beatrice.

Wit, in fact, has vanished, as Benedick closes in on Claudio. In all the plays of Shakespeare the word "wit" and its derivatives appears most frequently (45 times) in *Love's Labors Lost*, an earlier play about a company of young men whose bachelor's existence is disrupted by their irrepressible enthusiasm for the opposite sex – an enthusiasm expressed most particularly in the rapid dialogue of the young, and in their efforts to entertain one another and their women friends through the exercise of their wit. But *Much Ado* is in second place with some 32 instances (*Twelfth Night*, by the way, is third). From the beginning, the play is sustained by the speed and agility of its dialogue. Note, for example, how, at the very beginning, a reasonably factual account of the end of the wars and the return of Don Pedro and company is hijacked and diverted by the quick-witted Beatrice. A Messenger tells Leonato about the fortunes of Don Pedro and Claudio. Suddenly Beatrice jumps in: "I pray you, is Signior Mountanto returned from the wars or no?" Confronted by the confusion of the messenger, who is stopped dead in his tracks by this enigmatical intervention, it is Hero who explains, "My cousin means Signior Benedick of Padua." By calling him Signior Mountanto, a term from fencing meaning "a quick upright thrust," Beatrice moves the conversation off objectivity towards an implied criticism of a rather absurd Benedick upwardly thrusting (in every sense) inappropriately and to no avail. And having seized the conversation, she retains it, turning it to a discussion of Benedick's strengths and limitations that serves the incidental purpose of telling us a good deal about our protagonist, or at least Beatrice's views of him (which in turn tell us a good deal about Beatrice).

Her choice of a term from fencing is appropriate for a young officer, but also for the style of repartee (another fencing term) that is Beatrice and Benedick's particular specialty. Beatrice is a crossover figure – enough of the tomboy to enjoy inciting the men by trespassing on their territory, and enough of the initiator to force the action in her direction after the *débat* in the church. The figure of the master-mistress, embodied in the sonnets, walks the shadows of many of Shakespeare's plays. His is not the way of conventionality, but a way that tests the limits of comedy by daring society to accommodate it.

We note that, as soon as Don Pedro and company arrive, Benedick tries the same gambit as Beatrice, pushing himself into the middle of the exchange between Don Pedro and Leonato with a slightly off-color observation that is summarily deflected by a riposte (yet another term from fencing) that leaves Benedick on the sidelines. "I wonder that you will still be talking, Signior Benedick: nobody marks you," declares Beatrice. Score one point for Beatrice.

It is as antagonists and equally-matched rivals, then, that Beatrice and Benedick develop their relationship. Edmund Spenser, in *The Faerie Queene*, in his presentation of the virtues, suggests that friendship is the proper precursor to married chastity – the state of matrimony that, in true Pauline fashion, was esteemed by the moralists of the sixteenth century. Marriage that is not based on trust cannot prosper. We watch such a relationship of trust develop between Beatrice and Benedick as the play progresses. When, in the final act, Claudio sees the error of his ways, atones for his shortsightedness, and accepts Leonato's terms – that he will marry whomever Leonato arranges for him to marry – the reappearance of Hero is like a resurrection from the dead, a *Romeo and Juliet* with a happy ending, or the conclusion of a *Winter's Tale* in which the audience is in on the secret from the beginning. If it is the relationship of Benedick and Beatrice that actually undoes the disaster of Act 4, it is only the reunion of Hero and Claudio in Act 5 that makes possible the anything but spontaneous union of the protagonists.

But if on the moral level Beatrice and Benedick undo the disaster, on the literal level it is actually Dogberry and Verges and the rest of the clodhopping members of the Watch who find the conspiracy out. "What your wisdoms could not discover," says Borachio to Don Pedro in Act 5, "these shallow fools have brought to light." The Marxists among us might find in the portrayal of Dogberry and his colleagues the condescension of the rulers toward the ruled, and a true comedic reaffirmation of the fact that the lower classes have a place, though limited, in the ordered capitalist society. Indeed, comedy, protean and adaptable, finds a new way of accommodating the old society and reasserting, in more humane fashion, the old values. Here, only Don John is left out, and Benedick has the last word: "Think not on him till tomorrow; I'll devise thee brave punishments for him." Tonight, in fact, the purpose is festival not retribution, community not excision. We can buy our revenge tragedy tickets tomorrow....

Much Ado is an infinitely adaptable play, and a play that turns on a few major moments – the tone and speed established in the first exchanges, when the Messina crowd comment on the new arrivals; the way in which Hero and Claudio are developed as characters, in a situation in which Shakespeare gives us very little to go on; the handling of the broken marriage and the complex, ambiguous moral and emotional ethos that dominates the play through the fourth act and into the fifth; Beatrice's sudden command, "Kill Claudio"; the tone that Don Pedro and Claudio adopt in the nuanced challenge scene at the beginning of Act 5. These are moments that you will watch for, and that will determine the tone and direction of the play.

It has always been a popular play on the stage, starting with a presentation at court on the occasion of the Princess Elizabeth's marriage to the Elector Palatine, later the Winter King, in 1613. David Garrick's best known comic role was Benedick, and he played it a hundred times

between 1749 and 1776. Charles Kemble had equal success with the role, until his last performance in 1836, opposite the 19-year-old Helen Faucit, who last performed the role in 1879 at the opening of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford. Ellen Terry took it on, and she and Henry Irving were a famous pair. In later times, John Gielgud and Peggy Ashcroft played the roles in 1950, the second year of Gielgud's own production at Stratford. Even 19th-century productions moved away from Elizabethan authenticity, and by the 20th century it was even usual to move the time or the location of the play: it was set in Regency England, in Risorgimento Italy, and, in a notable production by Zeffirelli at the Old Vic in 1965, in a kind of late-Verdi Italy, with Maggie Smith in one of the most noted interpretations of Beatrice. Another famous production, in 1976, set the play in the British Raj, complete with cricket and gin and tonic. Judi Dench played Beatrice, to great acclaim, not least because she deepened the part, portraying a Beatrice more introverted and edgy than in earlier productions.

Recently, we have seen *Much Ado* set in the Harlem Renaissance at the Long Wharf, and as a country-house party a few weeks ago at Hartford Stage. The Hartt Company, under director Alan Rust, has chosen to set it in the American South, a place of honor, steaming romance, decadence, and the various characteristics that most conventional societies attribute to a somewhat familiar Other. "Will this fadge?" asks Viola in *Twelfth Night*. We shall see. "Strike up, pipers," says Benedick.

A POST-PERFORMANCE POSTSCRIPT. Alan Rust's production of *Much Ado* carries on the tradition of setting the play in exotic yet slightly familiar places – places about which there exist popular clichés, exploitable to add a further layer of irony to the action (this was very much the way in which the British Raj was used in the RSC production that I described above). Setting the play in a generalized southern world derived from *Gone with the Wind* works wonderfully well. The text stays in place, but every so often, under circumstances that cause an amused double-take on the part of the audience, a comic version of the southern vernacular surfaces in some rewritten curse or exclamation – down to the final evocation of Rett Butler at the end of the play. In this regard, having the Watch break into close harmony in the middle of their principal scene was a stroke of genius.

Of course, directors must make choices. As critics, when we come to a fork in the road, we take it (as Yogi Berra memorably recommended), but a director, at each crossroads, makes irrevocable choices. So inevitably some things worked and some things were lost in this production.

Alan clearly did what he could to build up our perception of Hero, though, with the best will in the world, it is still hard to make her relationship with Claudio fully plausible. One of the casualties of the southern speech in which the play was delivered was the poetic quality of the blank verse that surfaces in certain key scenes in the course of the play. If, as McDonald suggests, wit and longing are the two essential qualities of Shakespearean comedy, they are kept in balance in *Much Ado* in large part by the alternation of prose and verse – and we must care enough about the romantic fate of our lovers to be shocked when it is at risk.

But Alan was wonderfully successful in channeling the natural enthusiasm of young actors into all manner of hilarious stage business. It's a long time since I have seen as convincing a crowd of bumblerers as Dogberry and his colleagues in this production. And I thought the sense of timing displayed by our Benedick and Beatrice was as good as or better than the work of the professionals at Hartford Stage and Long Wharf. I think I am not romanticizing things if I suggest that youth and risk-taking were probably quite characteristic of the Elizabethan theater and major contributors to its vitality. We saw both, to admirable effect, in this production.