

*Cambridge Student Guide*

Shakespeare

# Much Ado About Nothing

Mike Clamp

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## ***Contents***

<b><i>Introduction</i></b>	<b>4</b>
<b><i>Commentary</i></b>	<b>5</b>
<b><i>Contexts</i></b>	<b>61</b>
What did Shakespeare write?	61
What did Shakespeare read?	62
What was Shakespeare's England like?	64
The place of women in a patriarchal world	67
The Elizabethan social order	69
War, politics and male honour	70
The Elizabethan household	71
An age of ostentation	72
Law and order	73
Attitudes to love and marriage in Elizabethan England	75
<b><i>Language</i></b>	<b>77</b>
Imagery	77
Antithesis	80
Repetition	81
Lists	82
Malapropisms	83
Verse and prose	84
Songs	87
<b><i>Critical approaches</i></b>	<b>88</b>
Traditional criticism	88
Modern criticism	92
Feminist and political criticism	94
Performance criticism	98
Psychoanalytic criticism	102
Postmodern criticism	102
Conclusion	103
<b><i>Organising your responses</i></b>	<b>104</b>
Writing about an extract	104
Writing an essay	112
Writing about character	118
A note on examiners	124
<b><i>Resources</i></b>	<b>125</b>
Books	125
Films and audio books	128
<i>Much Ado About Nothing</i> on the Web	128

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## Commentary

### Act 1 Scene 1

The Messenger brings Leonato a letter informing him that Don Pedro, prince of Arragon and ruler of Sicily, will shortly return to Messina after his successful military campaign. The governor is thankful to learn from the Messenger that so few men of high rank have been killed in the war and pleased to hear him describe the brave deeds of a young Florentine, Count Claudio:

He hath borne himself beyond the promise of his age, doing in the figure of a lamb the feats of a lion. He hath indeed better bettered expectation than you must expect of me to tell you how. (lines 11–13)

Two young women, Leonato's daughter Hero and his niece Beatrice, have been silently watching and listening. Perhaps they have a particular interest in one of the young men in the army. Branagh's 1993 film version hinted at Hero's prior interest in Claudio by having her attendant gentlewomen say 'Oooh!' mischievously at the mention of his name. Hero says virtually nothing in this opening scene, but her cousin Beatrice is not so reticent. By the time she has finished with the Messenger he may well be begging for mercy!

Beatrice begins to talk to the Messenger innocently enough, enquiring whether a Signor Mountanto had returned safely from the war. The Messenger is baffled – there is no one of that name in the army to his knowledge. But it quickly becomes apparent that she is referring sarcastically to Signor Benedick of Padua (*mountanto* was the term for an upward sword-thrust in fencing, suggesting a flashy swordsman or 'stuck-up' social climber).

The Messenger loyally attempts to say praiseworthy things about his comrade in arms, Benedick, but each attempt is cleverly twisted by Beatrice into an insult. So, for example, when the Messenger praises Benedick's good service in the wars, she assumes the only service he performed was to eat all the 'musty victual' (stale food). Her remarks are witty and amusing, but they are also sharply critical. The comic abuse she heaps upon the absent Benedick in lines 23–65 is

impressive: he is a slow-witted fool, a coward, a glutton, a 'stuffed man' (all show and no substance), a scrounger, an unreliable friend and a disease that sends men insane.

Although Leonato explains to the Messenger that Beatrice and Benedick have had many lively skirmishes of wit in a long-standing 'merry war', for a moment the Messenger almost believes what Beatrice says about Benedick. 'Is't possible?' he wonders, only to realise that she is mocking both Benedick and himself. The confident soldier-gentleman back from the war has been attacked and beaten by a mere woman! Desperately, he offers a truce: 'I will hold friends with you, lady', a surrender which Beatrice teasingly accepts: 'Do, good friend.'

Who seems to be the prime target of Beatrice's belligerence and scorn in this encounter with the Messenger – Benedick, the Messenger, or men in general? Beatrice certainly makes it clear that she could never love Benedick. In line 64, she talks of Claudio catching the 'Benedict' disease and going mad ('Benedict' priests were used to exorcise madmen to rid them of their evil demons), but when Leonato suggests that she 'will never run mad' (i.e. fall in love with Benedick), her reply is very forthright:

No, not till a hot January.

*(line 69)*

But does Beatrice mean what she says, or does the lady 'protest too much'? It is a question which will resonate through the play.

The entrance at this point of Don Pedro and his men is the event that sets the action of the play in motion. In Shakespeare's day this would have been an impressive moment as the magnificently costumed lords were greeted by Leonato and the ladies of the house. Many recent productions have highlighted the excitement in Leonato's household at the arrival of the army. Branagh's film showed picnicking ladies squealing with delight as Don Pedro and his men were seen galloping round the bend of a road in the valley below. The ladies then raced to the house to wash and dress ready for the soldiers' arrival.

Don Pedro greets his host, Leonato, warmly, gracefully acknowledging that entertaining himself and his entourage will be a costly business. Leonato answers with equally elegant politeness. Entertaining Don Pedro is not a trouble, for when trouble departs

comfort must take its place, yet when the prince departs only sorrow will remain:

Never came trouble to my house in the likeness of your grace:  
for trouble being gone, comfort should remain: but when you  
depart from me, sorrow abides, and happiness takes his leave.  
*(lines 73–5)*

The prince's eye then falls on Hero and he enquires of Leonato if this lady might be his daughter. When Leonato replies jokingly that her mother had assured him he *was* her father, Benedick is quick to take the sexual innuendo further and Leonato happy to go along with it:

BENEDICK Were you in doubt, sir, that you asked her?  
LEONATO Signor Benedick, no, for then were you a child.  
*(lines 79–80)*

This interchange is very revealing. Although the Elizabethans were very fond of making jokes about men with unfaithful wives (such men were called cuckolds), their banter often hid a very real unease. For a man of high rank, his wife's chastity before marriage and her faithfulness in marriage were of paramount importance, for fear that she might produce an illegitimate child who could inherit his wealth (see pages 67, 70–1). The prince and his illegitimate brother, Don John, may well laugh very uneasily at this moment, for Shakespeare reveals later in Act 1 (Scene 1, lines 114–15 and Scene 3 lines 15–16) that Don John had recently led a rebellion against Don Pedro. This bastard brother has already proved a serious threat to the inheritance of the legitimate prince of Arragon.

Leonato's reply to Benedick's joke also echoes the double standards of the time. While an heiress lost her inheritance if she was found unchaste, a male heir did not, for it was no crime for a man to womanise. What does Hero think of her father joking about her own mother's virtue? Some productions have shown her distinctly uncomfortable, in others she laughed along with the men.

It may be the men's joking about the age-old male double standard that provokes Beatrice to speak, although there may be other reasons: she is secretly pleased to see Benedick, she wants to settle old

scores, he is deliberately ignoring her, he is too much the centre of attention.

Beatrice begins her encounter with Benedick with a barbed remark: 'I wonder that you will still be talking, Signor Benedick, nobody marks you.' Unlike the Messenger, Benedick is a much more formidable opponent and replies with assumed amazement: 'What, my dear Lady Disdain! Are you yet living?' (line 88).

And so begins a new skirmish in the 'merry war'. Each one picks up on the other's words, twists them, then hurls them back: ('Lady Disdain' – 'Disdain should die' – 'Courtesy itself' – 'Courtesy a turn-coat', and so on). Is it light-hearted and affectionate banter? Or is it angry and bitter? Many Beatrices have been playful, but some have delivered their lines with an edge of bitterness as though they harboured a long-standing hurt and resentment. Their encounter becomes more acrimonious as the conversation progresses. When Beatrice says she would want no man to swear he loves her, Benedick fervently hopes she means it because that would ensure some poor man escaped having his face scratched. In one production, Beatrice's riposte earned a loud 'Oooh!' from the onlookers:

Scratching could not make it worse, and 'twere such a face as  
yours were. (lines 101–2)

Who actually wins this verbal spat? Benedick attempts to have the last word. He first expresses the wish that his horse had the speed and endurance of Beatrice's tongue, then quickly ends the encounter: 'but keep your way a God's name. I have done.' Beatrice, however, is too quick-witted to be beaten like that: 'You always end with a jade's trick: I know you of old', she retorts, picking up on Benedick's horse insult (a 'jade' was a vicious, broken-down old horse).

So is it a win for Benedick, a win for Beatrice, or a score draw? One production attempted to show how evenly matched the two were by having Benedick turn away as Beatrice makes her final gibe, suggesting some bitterness and hurt might lie beneath the wit and mockery. Beatrice's final words ('I know you of old') suggest their past history might not have been entirely happy. Were they once close, possibly in love, but now apart? Or is their apparent hostility a mask to hide a long-felt mutual attraction?

Don Pedro now announces to the whole company that Leonato has

invited them all to stay with him for at least a month (so the prince was certainly right when he told Leonato the visit was going to ‘cost’ him!). Before escorting his guests off, Leonato welcomes Don John to his house. It is easy to imagine a certain unease in Leonato’s polite welcome and a veiled menace in Don John’s reply:

LEONATO Let me bid you welcome, my lord, being reconciled to the prince your brother: I owe you all duty.

DON JOHN I thank you, I am not of many words, but I thank you.

*(lines 114–16)*

Productions have used this exit to highlight both the Beatrice–Benedick and the Hero–Claudio relationships. One Beatrice jokingly placed an empty glass in Benedick’s hand as she went off. Another threw down a glove as if challenging him to a duel and he picked it up as if accepting her challenge. In another production, Claudio crossed to exit with Hero, but was intercepted by Don John who escorted her off, leaving a disappointed Claudio gazing after her.

Benedick and Claudio, friends and comrades in arms, do not leave with the others. Claudio seems to have been deeply and suddenly smitten with love for Leonato’s daughter, Hero, and wants Benedick’s honest opinion of her qualities. Benedick, as usual playing the part of the cynical ‘tyrant’ to women, refuses to be serious, making fun of Hero’s small stature and dark hair. The more Claudio sings the praises of Hero (‘Can the world buy such a jewel?’), the more extreme become Benedick’s cynical comments about women and love. Finally, when Claudio admits he actually wants to *marry* Hero, it is all too much for Benedick. Why, he protests, does every man in the world seem to want to risk being made a cuckold?

Is’t come to this? In faith, hath not the world one man, but he will wear his cap with suspicion? Shall I never see a bachelor of three score again?

*(lines 146–8)*

Benedick’s outburst is the second of several joking references to female infidelity in this opening scene. A cuckolded husband was supposed to grow horns on his forehead, visible to everyone but the husband himself – hence the need for a suspicious husband to wear a cap to hide his horns so people would not know his shame.



Shakespeare provides an interesting clue to the two men's relationship in the use of 'you/your' and 'thou/thy/thine' forms. There was a subtle social use of these pronouns/adjectives in his time. When addressing one person, the use of 'you' implied distance, suggesting respect for your superior, or courtesy to your social equal. 'Thou' could imply either closeness/friendship towards an equal or the superiority of one of higher rank over a lower. So far in the play the more formal and respectful 'you' pronoun has been used exclusively (even Beatrice and Benedick use it to talk to each other, for example).

However, in the two friends' conversation, Claudio uses 'thou' to Benedick, while Benedick generally uses 'you'. It may signal Claudio's superior status (he is a count while Benedick is merely a 'signor' or gentleman) or a certain distance on Benedick's part, an unwillingness to become too 'serious'. The only time he uses the less formal 'thou/thy' is when he is obviously genuinely exasperated and disappointed at Claudio's desire to get married:

Go to, i'faith, and thou wilt needs thrust thy neck into a yoke,  
wear the print of it, and sigh away Sundays.                    (*lines 148–9*)

So what does each man really think about love and marriage? Claudio sounds genuinely (if extremely suddenly) in love: 'In mine eye, she is the sweetest lady that ever I looked on.' But is this the infatuation of an adolescent? And how seriously is the audience to believe Benedick's protestations that he will never become involved with any woman? His remark that Beatrice is a far more beautiful woman than Hero, if it weren't for her ferocious temper, suggests his woman-hater image may be partly a facade.

When Don Pedro returns to find out what 'secret' has prevented the two men from joining the rest of the company, Benedick begs the prince to force the secret out of him and 'reluctantly' reveals that Claudio loves Hero. As in the Claudio–Benedick conversation, the use of 'you' – 'thou' when Don Pedro joins them signals subtle shades of social status. Although they are all friends, the prince generally addresses the others using 'thou' (to signify both friendship and superior social status), while the other two use the respectful 'you' to address the prince. It is no wonder then that when Don Pedro addresses Claudio with the more formal 'you', the young man is

disconcerted that the prince might be mocking him:

You speak this to fetch me in, my lord. *(line 165)*

Still sulking a little at Benedick's mocking betrayal of his confidence, Claudio eventually admits the truth when Don Pedro assures him he is serious:

CLAUDIO That I love her, I feel.

DON PEDRO That she is worthy, I know. *(lines 169–70)*

Benedick, however, just cannot be serious:

That I neither feel how she should be loved, nor know how she should be worthy, is the opinion that fire cannot melt out of me: I will die in it at the stake. *(lines 171–3)*

Benedick's boast that he will never allow himself to love any woman is received very sceptically by his friends, which provokes him to make ever more extravagant accusations. Since no woman can be trusted to remain faithful, he will never marry – no wearing of the cuckold's horns for him, thank you very much. And when Don Pedro hopes that one day he will see Benedick 'look pale with love', Benedick lays down the challenge: if he ever falls in love, they can either put out his eyes with a ballad-maker's pen and hang him up outside a brothel, or stick him in a wicker basket and shoot arrows at him; and if he ever marries they are welcome to stick bull's horns on his head and paint a sign on him saying "Here you may see Benedick the married man" (lines 195–9). Shakespeare, with comedy in mind, is obviously setting Benedick up for a mighty fall – and Don Pedro may even have a plan already in mind when he responds:

Nay, if Cupid have not spent all his quiver in Venice, thou wilt quake for this shortly. *(lines 201–2)*

Some critics see in Benedick's railings against love and women a genuine bitterness and disappointment, rather than light-hearted banter, suspecting that the gentleman, like the Lady Beatrice, also protests too much.

Once Benedick has been sent off on an errand to Leonato, the atmosphere changes. Claudio tells the prince how he had admired Hero before they went on campaign, but was too preoccupied by the coming battle to think more about it. Now, on his return, he has become aware of how beautiful she is.

The characters have so far spoken an elegant, witty and assured prose, but Shakespeare now has his characters switch to speaking blank (or unrhymed) verse. The pulse of the metre, the onward flow of the run-on lines (*enjambement*), together with the heightened language and imagery, give a particular power and conviction to Claudio's expression of love as he tells how his feelings for Hero have changed from mere liking to 'soft and delicate' thoughts of love:

O my lord,  
When you went onward on this ended action,  
I looked upon her with a soldier's eye,  
That liked, but had a rougher task in hand,  
Than to drive liking to the name of love;  
But now I am returned, and that war-thoughts  
Have left their places vacant, in their rooms  
Come thronging soft and delicate desires,  
All prompting me how fair young Hero is,  
Saying I liked her ere I went to wars. (lines 222–31)

However, Claudio's very first words concerning Hero, 'Hath Leonato any son, my lord?', raise questions about the sincerity of his passionate declaration of love. Social expectations, both in the fictional onstage world and in Shakespeare's England, held that marriage for a man of Count Claudio's high rank had to be carefully arranged. For such persons, it was literally a serious *business*, in which a woman's inheritance was of paramount importance (see page 67).

Don Pedro, however, has no reservations about the match and offers to help Claudio by raising the matter with Hero's father. Then the prince has a better idea. At the masked ball that evening, *he* will disguise himself, pretend to be Claudio, woo Hero with passionate words and win her consent to marry him. Why does Claudio not insist on doing his own wooing? Although such proxy wooings were not unknown in Shakespeare's time, it does suggest that Claudio, the 'lion' in battle, is very much a 'lamb' in love. The

scene ends with the two men leaving to get the 'love campaign' organised.

## **Act 1** Scenes 2 and 3

It is later the same day. Leonato, busy with the preparations for the banquet and masked ball that evening, is interrupted by his elderly brother, Antonio. One of Antonio's servants has overheard Don Pedro confess to Claudio that he loved Hero, intended to tell her of his love at the ball, then, if she agreed, to discuss marriage terms with Leonato. In this world of arranged marriages, Leonato's reaction seems typical. He decides to tell Hero of the prince's possible marriage proposal 'that she may be the better prepared for an answer' (lines 17–18). Marriage to the prince would be an admirable match and Leonato assumes Hero's answer will be yes – whether she loves him or not is immaterial.

This episode is the first of many examples in the play of eavesdropping and 'mistaking' (misunderstanding), because Antonio's servant has of course got it all wrong. The audience knows Don Pedro does not intend to propose marriage for himself. The gullible Antonio believes his servant's report, but Leonato is more cautious – he will wait and see. Later in the play, Leonato will be asked to judge the accuracy of far more serious reports concerning his daughter. His judgement then will be far less rational.

Scene 2 ends with great hustle and bustle as Leonato and his household leave to get everything ready for the banquet. Don John and his henchman Conrade enter to begin Scene 3. Don John has chosen not to attend the supper. He is very much the stock villain of the Elizabethan stage (see pages 70, 120, 121): the bastard son or brother, an outsider, stereotypically jealous, scheming and bad-tempered. Yet Shakespeare gives him a certain degree of individuality. He talks obsessively about himself (using 18 'I's between lines 8 and 27), almost delighting in the fact that he is 'a plain-dealing villain':

I cannot hide what I am: I must be sad when I have cause, and  
smile at no man's jests (lines 10–11)

When Conrade urges him to hide his malice and ill-humour, because his recent rebellion against his brother has left him with few friends, Don John bitterly expresses his alienation from his brother and all

those associated with him, using powerful ‘restraining’ images. He is muzzled like a dog, shackled to a heavy wooden block, caged like a bird. Particularly disturbing is his comment that he ‘had rather be a canker in a hedge, than a rose in his [Don Pedro’s] grace’ (line 20). A ‘canker’ was a wild rose, but it could also mean a disease and is linked to our modern word ‘cancer’. It is as if his malice and hatred is eating away at him like a disease.

Their conversation is interrupted by Don John’s other henchman, Borachio, who has interesting news. Like Antonio’s servant, Borachio has been eavesdropping on the prince and Claudio’s conversation, but, unlike the servant, has not ‘mistaken’: Don Pedro plans to woo Hero, ‘and having obtained her, give her to Count Claudio’ (lines 45–6). Don John immediately starts to think of a way to use this information for his own malicious purposes. Revenge on Claudio, who has gained all the credit for his overthrow, would be sweet. So Don John decides to go to the supper after all and see what mischief can be made:

Let us to the great supper, their cheer is the greater that I am  
subdued. Would the cook were a my mind (lines 52–3)

If only the cook thought like him – he could poison the lot of them!

## Act 1: Critical review

Act 1 establishes the play's setting. Eminent and powerful men have briefly put aside matters of war and politics to relax in the company of elegant women and turn their thoughts to love. Yet strains and tensions underlie this seemingly confident and relaxed society. This patriarchal world, with its strict codes of honour, places repressive moral restraints on its young women, as Hero's silence, Beatrice's defiance and the men's persistent jokes about cuckolds and faithless wives make abundantly clear.

The main plot's romantic love-match between Claudio and Hero has been set in motion by Don Pedro with his plan to woo Hero in disguise, the first of many deceptions in the play. Don John, however, intends to thwart his brother and Claudio. The personalities of Beatrice and Benedick, key protagonists in the anti-romance sub-plot, have been established, particularly their hostility to each other.

Character groupings are paired in parallel or contrasting ways: two sister-like young women, one silent, the other sparkingly witty; two comrades in war, one young and inexperienced, the other more worldly wise; two estranged brothers, two loving brothers. The power structure within these relationships is clearly important: allegiance to your lord, loyalty to your friend, devotion to your cousin, duty to your father. Women in this male world must either be passively 'feminine', like Hero, or assertively 'masculine', like Beatrice.

Act 1 also introduces key themes and preoccupations:

- Male honour and female virtue: Claudio's courage has gained him much honour in the recent war, Benedick fears commitment to any woman lest she shame him by her infidelity. Underneath the male joking lies a fear and mistrust of women.
- Truth and illusion: people in Messina love to deceive and pretend, making it difficult to distinguish appearance from reality, pretence from sincerity. Don John's politeness is clearly a mask, but what of Beatrice and Benedick's hostility or Claudio's love for Hero?
- 'Noting' and 'mistaking': in this deceptive world characters constantly observe, react, interact, even eavesdrop. Many will 'mistake' (misinterpret, misunderstand) what they see or hear.

## Act 2 Scene 1

Supper is over. Leonato, Antonio, Hero and Beatrice await the arrival of the maskers and the start of the dancing. It is a quiet, intimate moment which gives the audience a brief glimpse into the governor's family relationships.

Beatrice begins by commenting on the sour-faced Don John, then significantly brings Benedick into the conversation. Her ideal man would be somewhere between the two of them: Don John says too little, while Benedick prattles non-stop. Both Leonato and Antonio warn Beatrice about her sharp tongue. It is obvious that she does not conform to their idea of proper womanly behaviour. Leonato's warning is more good-humoured ('shrewd' could mean either sharp-tongued or sharp-witted), but Antonio is much more bluntly disapproving:

LEONATO By my troth, niece, thou wilt never get thee a husband, if  
thou be so shrewd of thy tongue.

ANTONIO In faith, she's too curst. (lines 14–16)

Nothing daunted, Beatrice takes up Antonio's use of the phrase 'too curst' (too ill-natured) and runs with it. If, as the proverb says, God sends a 'curst' cow short horns to limit the damage it can inflict, then, by implication, He will send a 'curst' woman a short-horned (small-penis) husband. But if Antonio says she is 'too curst', then she will be sent no horns (i.e. no husband) at all, which is just fine by her!

The implication in Leonato's banter is the male assumption that Beatrice really ought to behave like a good girl and get herself married, but she proves herself more than a match for him in this battle of attitudes. When she expresses horror at being scratched by a man's beard, Leonato suggests she may meet a man who has no beard – but she mocks that idea too. Playing with phrases like 'more than' and 'less than', she ingeniously explains how a man with no beard is also useless. Such a man would be no better than a girl.

Beatrice's conversation with her two uncles is laced with sexual innuendo. She suggests, for example, that her ideal man would need a 'good foot' (which could mean penis). She speaks of 'short horns' (small penises) and jokes about cuckold's horns, even suggesting that the devil's horns were a result of his wife's infidelity. Old Antonio sees it is useless trying to teach Beatrice how to behave properly, so turns to lecture his other niece, Hero:

Well, niece, I trust you will be ruled by your father. (line 38)

Hero's future happiness is a more serious matter, so now Beatrice uses her wit to support her cousin and friend. She both acknowledges and mocks the reality of arranged marriages – Hero *will* have to obey her father (in Elizabethan times a father had the legal right to dispose of his daughters as he wished), but if the husband Leonato chooses for Hero is not to her liking, then she should reject him:

Yes faith, it is my cousin's duty to make curtsy, and say, father, as it please you: but yet for all that, cousin, let him be a handsome fellow, or else make another curtsy, and say, father, as it please me. (lines 39–41)

A woman's right to choose whom she marries is what is at stake here and Beatrice will certainly not accept a husband's authority (an Elizabethan wife was legally her husband's property). God fashioned men out of clay and she has no desire to 'make an account of her life to a clod of wayward marl'. Her idea of marriage is a union of equals.

Have her words had any effect on Leonato? It seems not, because his instructions to Hero before the masked dance begins make it abundantly clear that *he* has already decided:

Daughter, remember what I told you: if the prince do solicit you in that kind, you know your answer. (lines 48–9)

Yet Beatrice continues to battle for her cousin's happiness, telling Hero not to rush her decision. Wooing, wedding and repenting, she says, are like dances. First the wooing dance, all 'hot and hasty', then the wedding dance, 'full of state and ancience', to be quickly followed by the long dance of repentance that ends only in death. This time Leonato does take note of Beatrice's worldly wisdom:

LEONATO Cousin, you apprehend passing shrewdly.

BEATRICE I have a good eye, uncle, I can see a church by daylight. (lines 58–9)

The entrance of maskers to the beat of a drum prevents further conversation between uncle and niece. Masking was a favourite



entertainment in great Elizabethan households. A group of masked and costumed male dancers would enter the chamber and take partners from the assembled female guests.

As the couples begin to dance, Shakespeare presents in turn four rather ill-matched couples, where the lady sees through the man's disguise and has fun at his expense. It is almost as if the women are taking advantage of the masking to redress the balance of male–female power, if only for a moment. Hero, Margaret and Ursula tease or mock their partners; then it is the turn of Beatrice and Benedick:

BEATRICE Will you not tell me who told you so?

BENEDICK No, you shall pardon me.

BEATRICE Nor will you not tell me who you are?

BENEDICK Not now.

BEATRICE That I was disdainful, and that I had my good wit out of  
*The Hundred Merry Tales*: well, this was Signor Benedick that  
said so.

BENEDICK What's he?

BEATRICE I am sure you know him well enough.

BENEDICK Not I, believe me.

BEATRICE Did he never make you laugh?

BENEDICK I pray you, what is he? (lines 92–102)

If Benedick pretended not to know the man to learn what Beatrice really thinks of him, he pays dearly for his vanity, for his disguise, now penetrated, proves his downfall. He hears himself called a dull fool and a poor liar (some truth in this!) who makes witty comments that are nothing more than outrageous slanders. Men either laugh at him or find his words so offensive they beat him up. The last straw comes when Beatrice says how all the disparaging comments Benedick makes about *her* are neither funny nor hurtful:

BENEDICK When I know the gentleman, I'll tell him what you say.

BEATRICE Do, do, he'll but break a comparison or two on me, which  
peradventure (not marked, or not laughed at) strikes him into  
melancholy, and then there's a partridge wing saved, for the  
fool will eat no supper that night. (lines 108–12)

Some productions have had Beatrice assert her superiority over Benedick in this exchange by pursuing him about the stage. Others have highlighted the ill-feeling between the two by making Beatrice refuse to dance with him – one Benedick was reduced to grabbing a small child for a partner.

As the dancing proceeds, Don Pedro continues his wooing of Hero, a fact no doubt ‘noted’ by many of those present, then leads Leonato away to speak with him. Hero leaves and the ladies follow her, until only Claudio, Don John and Borachio remain. Don John recognises Claudio despite his mask and sees his chance to do mischief. He pretends to mistake Claudio for Benedick, an ‘error’ that Claudio is happy to play along with. With pretended concern for his brother’s reputation, Don John asks ‘Benedick’ to dissuade his brother from marrying someone so far below him in rank as Hero. Their mischief done, Don John and Borachio leave Claudio alone with his misery.

Claudio is convinced that he has been told the truth and gives expression to the pain of lost love and betrayal in emotional blank verse. Even faithful friends cannot be trusted in matters of love. If the audience is tempted to sympathise with Claudio, they should remember that Claudio has not yet spoken a single word to Hero. His dramatic flourish: ‘farewell therefore, Hero’ is surely somewhat premature, for he has never really met her!

When Benedick returns to fetch his friend, he guesses the reason for Claudio’s unhappiness, because he too has ‘noted’ the prince’s wooing of Hero. He tries to tease Claudio out of his misery, saying that he will either have to suffer in silence, or be a man and challenge Don Pedro to a duel. Claudio’s response to Benedick’s taunts: ‘I wish him joy of her’ suggests he is not likely to fight for his love and, unable to bear Benedick’s teasing, he leaves. Benedick feels a momentary sympathy for the ‘poor hurt fowl’ but has his own wounds to deal with, for Beatrice’s mockery during the dance has struck home:

... but that my Lady Beatrice should know me, and not know  
me: the prince’s fool! *(lines 154–5)*

It seems Beatrice has hit upon Benedick’s deepest anxiety: do people genuinely find him amusing or do they secretly despise him, as she claims? (Elizabethan aristocrats were notoriously touchy about personal honour and reputation.) Benedick responds to

adversity in a very different way to Claudio. Where Claudio speaks his thoughts in emotional, self-pitying verse, Benedick uses more considered and reasoned prose to think the situation through:

. . . the prince's fool! Hah, it may be I go under that title  
because I am merry: yea but so I am apt to do myself wrong: I  
am not so reputed, it is the base (though bitter) disposition of  
Beatrice, that puts the world into her person, and so gives me  
out: well, I'll be revenged as I may. (lines 155–9)

When Don Pedro enters, looking for Claudio, Benedick is faced with a tricky problem: how do you criticise your prince for stealing another man's woman? He deals with it in characteristic fashion, softening his accusation with humour. Claudio, he says, is like

a schoolboy, who being overjoyed with finding a bird's nest,  
shows it his companion, and he steals it (lines 168–9)

The prince explains what really was going on, much to Benedick's relief, then mentions that Beatrice had told him that Benedick had been spreading malicious slanders about her. This is too much for Benedick. He explodes, launching into a list of all the abusive things she has said about him! She hurled so many insults at him, he says,

that I stood like a man at a mark, with a whole army shooting  
at me: she speaks poniards [daggers], and every word stabs  
(lines 186–7)

Benedick's wit is as inventive as ever, but now it is much more personal, focusing on how appalling this fearsome woman is. If Beatrice's breath were as powerful as her tongue, she would infect everything to the far end of the universe ('to the north star'); she could have enslaved and emasculated even the mighty Hercules; she is Ate (the goddess of discord) in fine clothes, risen up from hell; indeed, he heartily wishes someone would conjure her back down into hell, because while she is on earth men are deliberately sinning to get sent to hell for a bit of peace and quiet!

This increasingly acrimonious 'merry war' now reaches a painful climax, as Claudio, Beatrice, Leonato and Hero approach. Actors have

sought to mark the significance of the mutual hurt the two are inflicting in different ways. One production had Beatrice listen unobserved by Benedick, while he listed all the tasks he would rather do than ‘hold three words conference with this Harpy’. Then he noticed her presence and addressed to her face the words which brought her to the brink of tears:

Oh God, sir, here’s a dish I love not, I cannot endure my Lady  
Tongue. *(lines 207–8)*

For Beatrice also has been truly hurt. Her reply to Don Pedro’s remark that she has ‘lost the heart of Signor Benedick’ hints at a past relationship with Benedick that had hurt her deeply:

Indeed, my lord, he lent it me a while, and I gave him use for  
it, a double heart for his single one: marry once before he won  
it of me, with false dice, therefore your grace may well say I  
have lost it. *(lines 211–13)*

Although her wit does not falter, Beatrice cannot completely hide her bitterness and disappointment:

DON PEDRO You have put him down, lady, you have put him down.  
BEATRICE So I would not he should do me, my lord, lest I should  
prove the mother of fools *(lines 214–16)*

‘Put down’ could also mean ‘to lay, have sex with’. Beatrice does not want to get laid by Benedick, for if she got pregnant she would certainly give birth to a fool like him. That ‘fool’ could also mean ‘bastard child’ adds to the complexity of her bitter wordplay.

Don Pedro’s attention now turns to Claudio. He knows the reason for Claudio’s unhappiness but cannot resist a little teasing before revealing that he has kept his word – Hero is to be Claudio’s bride. Claudio is struck dumb for a moment and Beatrice has to prompt him to respond. When he finally does speak his first words to Hero he is typically romantic:

Lady, as you are mine, I am yours: I give away myself for you,  
and dote upon the exchange. *(lines 233–4)*

Hero once again is silent, but she does manage to whisper her love for him in his ear. Some productions have highlighted the charm of this betrothal, but others have taken a more jaundiced view. In the Royal Shakespeare Company's 1976 production, the marriage was clearly an agreement negotiated by the men, Leonato and Don Pedro shaking hands as if finalising a business deal.

Beatrice, however, seems genuinely happy to see her cousin and Claudio betrothed. She pretends to wish that she too were getting married: an independent life is a lonely life. Don Pedro gallantly volunteers to 'get' (obtain) her a husband and Beatrice almost invites the prince to propose, very boldly playing on the other meaning of 'get' (i.e. to beget, or father, a child). It is too long to wait for a son of Don Pedro's (be)getting to grow up, she says, so what about one of his father's 'getting'? Yet, when Don Pedro appears to propose to her ('Will you have me, lady?'), she refuses – a prince is far too expensive a husband for everyday use. Until the late twentieth century, this episode was typically presented as a light-hearted compliment graciously received, but in some recent productions the prince's proposal was seriously intended. Whatever their motives, the prince is clearly charmed by her 'merry heart':

BEATRICE I beseech your grace pardon me, I was born to speak all  
mirth, and no matter.

DON PEDRO Your silence most offends me, and to be merry, best  
becomes you, for out a question, you were born in a merry hour.

BEATRICE No sure, my lord, my mother cried, but then there was a  
star danced, and under that was I born (lines 250–5)

When Beatrice leaves on an errand for Leonato, Don Pedro plans a second piece of matchmaking – between her and Benedick. Claudio wants his marriage to take place almost immediately, but Leonato says that he will need a week to make the arrangements. So the prince suggests that they all have fun over the next few days by tricking Beatrice and Benedick into falling in love with each other, difficult though the task may be ('one of Hercules' labours'). The others agree and follow Don Pedro to hear his plan to out-perform Cupid himself:

if we can do this, Cupid is no longer an archer, his glory shall  
be ours, for we are the only love-gods (lines 290–2)

## Act 2 Scene 2

Don John knows that his attempt to sabotage Claudio and Hero's marriage has failed. Borachio, however, has another plan. He is very friendly with Margaret, Hero's lady-in-waiting, and, at some suitably compromising point during the night before the wedding, he will persuade her to look out of Hero's bedroom window. Don John, not the most quick-witted of villains, fails to see what Borachio intends:

What life is in that to be the death of this marriage? (line 16)

Borachio explains. Don John must go to the prince and accuse Hero of being a 'contaminated stale' (diseased prostitute). Expressing concern for the prince and Claudio's honour, he should offer to show them Hero in the act of entertaining another man in her bedchamber. Borachio will meanwhile have arranged for Hero to be absent, and he and Margaret will talk together at the chamber window using the names Hero and Claudio.

As in the earlier scene with the three villains (Act 1 Scene 3), the language creates a strong sense of darkness, as if the lights have suddenly dimmed in this happy household. Both men sprinkle their conversation with disease and death images: Don John speaks of being 'sick in displeasure' and Borachio talks of ways to 'poison' the marriage. The 'seeming truth' of Hero's dishonour will force Claudio, Don Pedro, Leonato, Beatrice and Benedick to face the difficult task of distinguishing what *seems* true from what *is* true. If they fail the test, then Borachio is not exaggerating when he claims his plan will be

Proof enough, to misuse the prince, to vex Claudio, to undo  
Hero, and kill Leonato (lines 22–3)

It is no wonder that Don John promises to pay Borachio a thousand ducats if the plan succeeds.

## Act 2 Scene 3

Benedick, unaware of the trick his friends are about to play on him, soliloquises on the foolishness of men in love. Claudio was once a plain-speaking soldier who would walk ten miles to see a good suit of armour, but now he speaks in elaborate flowery language, listens to love songs and thinks only of fashionable new clothes.

There is a smug superiority in Benedick's disapproval of the lovestruck Claudio. He uses rather pompous phrases like 'I do much wonder, that . . .' and 'I have known when . . .' and 'he [Claudio] was wont to speak plain and to the purpose . . . and now is he turned orthography, his words are a very fantastical banquet, just so many strange dishes'. Although Benedick does not rule out the possibility of one day falling in love, he is convinced he would never behave like an oyster and clam up in a moody silence. So long as love fails to strike him down, he is confident of resisting the charms of any woman:

one woman is fair, yet I am well: another is wise, yet I am well:  
another virtuous, yet I am well (lines 21–2)

It is clear that Benedick is being set up for a mighty fall when he boasts that only when he meets a woman possessed of every female quality (beautiful, intelligent, virtuous, rich, noble, well-spoken, a good musician) will he be in the slightest bit interested.

Benedick spots Don Pedro, Claudio, Leonato and Balthasar approaching and decides to hide himself in the arbour (eavesdropping, of course, is a favourite pastime in Messina).

The prince and his friends settle themselves, speaking in blank verse as befits the love-obsessed characters they intend to play. Don Pedro asks Balthasar to sing. Balthasar makes a mock show of modest reluctance, but Don Pedro insists. Just at the very moment when Benedick is going to be massively deceived, a blizzard of puns echoes the themes of 'noting' and 'nothing':

DON PEDRO Nay, pray thee come,  
Or if thou wilt hold longer argument,  
Do it in notes.  
BALTHASAR Note this before my notes,  
There's not a note of mine that's worth the noting.  
DON PEDRO Why these are very crotchets that he speaks,  
Note notes forsooth, and nothing. (lines 44–9)

The determinedly unromantic Benedick, however, suspects nothing, merely remarking in blunt matter-of-fact prose on the strange power of sheep's guts (from which lute strings were made) to charm the souls of men.