

List of characters

Leonato's Household

SIGNOR LEONATO governor of Messina
 SIGNOR ANTONIO his brother
 HERO Leonato's only daughter
 BEATRICE an orphan, Leonato's niece
 MARGARET }
 URSULA } gentlewomen attending on Hero
 FRIAR FRANCIS
 Musicians, Attendants, Maskers and Wedding Guests

The Military

DON PEDRO Prince of Arragon
 DON JOHN his bastard brother
 COUNT CLAUDIO of Florence }
 SIGNOR BENEDICK of Padua } companions of Don Pedro
 BORACHIO }
 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 SEACOLE Senior Watchman
 WATCHMAN 1
 WATCHMAN 2
 Other Watchmen

The play is set in Messina, Sicily

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 Edited by Anthony Partington and Richard Spencer
 Excerpt
[More information](#)



A Messenger brings a letter informing Governor Leonato that Don Pedro and his victorious army will shortly arrive in Messina. The Messenger reports that young Count Claudio has performed great deeds of bravery in the war.

1 Messina: a man's world? (in groups of four to six)

Stand in a circle and read through lines 1–118 with as much energy and enthusiasm as possible. Discuss clues in the characters' speech and behaviour that suggest this play will focus on the position and role of women in a male-dominated world. Identify the words Leonato uses to describe Beatrice and Benedick's 'battle of the sexes', and take turns to read them out.

Stagecraft

Sending the audience a 'message'

Stagecraft is the technical side of performance, such as the way stage designers approach a scene.

In the 2002 Royal Shakespeare Company production (pictured below), the director and designer made the decision to begin the play with Beatrice entering the stage on a real Second World War-era motorbike. What sort of a 'statement' would this impressive theatrical moment have made about the character of Beatrice and the setting of that particular production? Suggest other ways in which the director and designer might use the technical opportunities of a modern theatre to create an impressive opening 'spectacle' for the audience.

by this by now
three leagues about nine miles
gentlemen noblemen
action battle
sort high rank, nobility
none of name no one well known
achiever winner
Florentine citizen of Florence
equally remembered
 suitably rewarded
borne himself performed in battle
figure appearance
bettered expectation
 surpassed all expectations
badge show or sign
kind natural
weep at joy cry with happiness



Much Ado About Nothing

Act 1 Scene 1

Messina Leonato's house

*Enter LEONATO, governor of Messina, HERO his daughter and
 BEATRICE his niece, with a MESSENGER*

LEONATO I learn in this letter, that Don Pedro of Arragon comes this
 night to Messina.

MESSENGER He is very near by this, he was not three leagues off when I
 left him.

LEONATO How many gentlemen have you lost in this action? 5

MESSENGER But few of any sort, and none of name.

LEONATO A victory is twice itself, when the achiever brings home full
 numbers. I find here, that Don Pedro hath bestowed much honour on
 a young Florentine called Claudio.

MESSENGER Much deserved on his part, and equally remembered by 10
 Don Pedro. 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.

LEONATO He hath an uncle here in Messina will be very much glad of it.

MESSENGER I have already delivered him letters, and there appears 15
 much joy in him, even so much that joy could not show itself modest
 enough without a badge of bitterness.

LEONATO Did he break out into tears?

MESSENGER In great measure.

LEONATO A kind overflow of kindness: there are no faces truer than 20
 those that are so washed. How much better is it to weep at joy, than to
 joy at weeping!

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Beatrice questions the Messenger about Benedick, sarcastically calling him Signor Mountanto. Faced with a barrage of mocking comments about a fellow soldier, the Messenger politely attempts to defend Benedick's reputation.

Characters

First impressions

Beatrice's lines in this scene mark her out as an intelligent and witty woman – quite a match for the Messenger, whom she teases and torments until Don Pedro arrives. Note how Beatrice's insults and accusations shape the audience's opinion of Benedick before he enters the scene. Why do you think that Shakespeare has done this? What does it add to Benedick's eventual arrival?

1 On guard! (in fours)

One of your group reads Beatrice's part (lines 23–56), in which she mocks the Messenger and sets out to deliberately 'mistake' his meaning. The other three take the parts of the Messenger, Leonato and Hero. Beatrice should say the lines quickly and with great energy, perhaps even moving around the stage. Think about how the other characters could say their lines, and what physical and facial gestures they might use to defend themselves from her verbal blows.

2 What does Beatrice think of 'Signor Mountanto'?

'Mountanto' (line 23) was a fencing term, which Beatrice uses here to imply that Benedick is a flashy swordsman. But is she talking about his skills in battle or about his ability to 'conquer' ladies? This is an early example of the **double entendre** (double meaning) that Beatrice uses for comic effect.

Read through lines 23–70. Make a list of Benedick's 'failings', as identified by Beatrice. Suggest why you think she might dislike him so much.

Mountanto in fencing, an upward thrust; also a lewd reference to mounting (see Activity 2 opposite)

set ... bills posted notices

Cupid Roman god of desire and love, famed for his ability with a bow and arrow

at the flight to an archery contest

subscribed signed on behalf of

birdbolt blunt-headed arrow

tax criticise

be meet get even

musty victual stale food

help helped

trencherman good eater

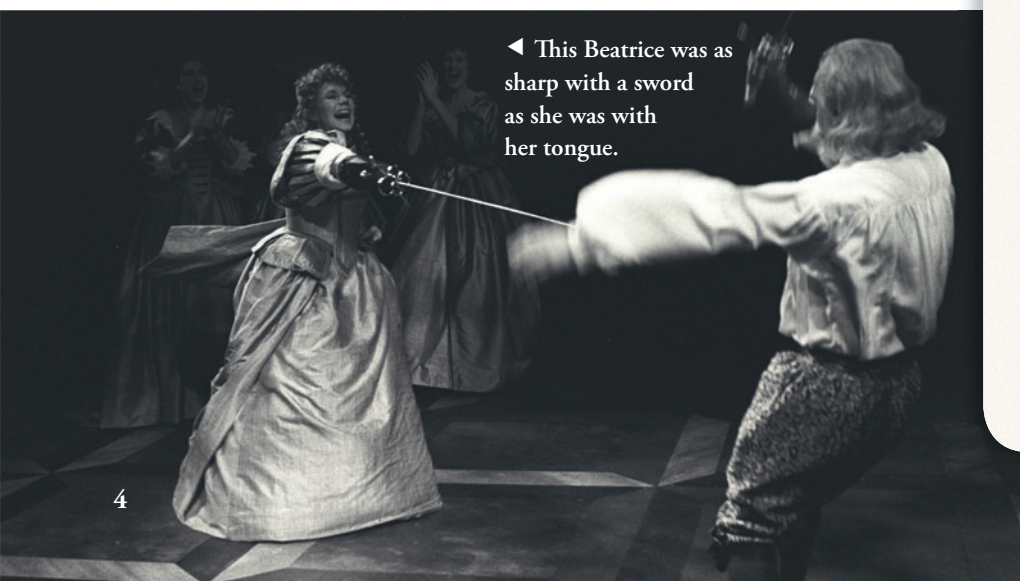
stomach courage, appetite to do something

wits parts of the mind

halting limping

wit intelligence

next block latest hat shape (see p. 171)



MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING ACT I SCENE I



- BEATRICE I pray you, is Signor Mountanto returned from the wars or no?
- MESSENGER I know none of that name, lady, there was none such in the
 army of any sort. 25
- LEONATO What is he that you ask for, niece?
- HERO My cousin means Signor Benedick of Padua.
- MESSENGER O he's returned, and as pleasant as ever he was.
- BEATRICE He set up his bills here in Messina, and challenged Cupid at
 the flight: and my uncle's fool, reading the challenge, subscribed for 30
 Cupid, and challenged him at the birdbolt. I pray you, how many hath
 he killed and eaten in these wars? But how many hath he killed? – for
 indeed I promised to eat all of his killing.
- LEONATO Faith, niece, you tax Signor Benedick too much, but he'll be
 meet with you, I doubt it not. 35
- MESSENGER He hath done good service, lady, in these wars.
- BEATRICE You had musty victual, and he hath help to eat it: he is a very
 valiant trencherman, he hath an excellent stomach.
- MESSENGER And a good soldier too, lady.
- BEATRICE And a good soldier to a lady, but what is he to a lord? 40
- MESSENGER A lord to a lord, a man to a man, stuffed with all honourable
 virtues.
- BEATRICE It is so indeed, he is no less than a stuffed man, but for the
 stuffing – well, we are all mortal.
- LEONATO You must not, sir, mistake my niece: there is a kind of merry 45
 war betwixt Signor Benedick and her: they never meet but there's a
 skirmish of wit between them.
- BEATRICE Alas, he gets nothing by that. In our last conflict, four of his
 five wits went halting off, and now is the whole man governed with
 one: so that if he have wit enough to keep himself warm, let him bear it 50
 for a difference between himself and his horse, for it is all the wealth
 that he hath left to be known a reasonable creature. Who is his
 companion now? He hath every month a new sworn brother.
- MESSENGER Is't possible?
- BEATRICE Very easily possible: he wears his faith but as the fashion of his 55
 hat, it ever changes with the next block.

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As Beatrice continues to speak mockingly of Benedick to the Messenger, the prince, Don Pedro, and his followers arrive. Leonato eloquently welcomes his royal guest and Beatrice begins her taunting of Benedick.

1 The warriors return (in large groups)

Stage your own performance of lines 70–88, where Leonato welcomes the prince and his comrades in arms. Act out the scene in two different ways:

- A highly organised, hierarchical and formal greeting, as shown in the image below. The characters (except for the hiding Beatrice!) line up neatly and according to rank.
 - A relaxed and good-humoured greeting, where the characters behave warmly towards each other. Some directors make the staging less formal by, for example, having Don Pedro hug Leonato ('You embrace your charge too willingly', line 76).
- a** Why did you position the different characters where you did in each performance? To what extent do you think the dialogue encourages physical interaction between the actors? Discuss these points in your group.
- b** Decide which of the two interpretations above you think is the most appropriate and dramatically interesting, and write a paragraph outlining how you would like to stage this scene.

▼ Benedick is centre left, in the black coat with white collar. Beatrice stands entirely hidden, except for part of her face, behind the characters on the other side of the stage. Why has the director placed her there?



your books your good books
and he were if he were
study library
squarer brawler, hooligan

pestilence plague
taker one who catches it
presently immediately
noble honourable
caught the Benedict
 caught madness
ere a be before he is

JOHN the bastard Don John is an illegitimate child (his parents were not married)

sorrow abides sadness remains
charge trouble, expense

have it full are well answered
fathers herself looks like her father

marks takes any notice of
Lady Disdain contemptuous lady

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING ACT I SCENE I



MESSENGER I see, lady, the gentleman is not in your books.
 BEATRICE No, and he were, I would burn my study. But I pray you, who is
 his companion? Is there no young squarer now, that will make a
 voyage with him to the devil? 60
 MESSENGER He is most in the company of the right noble Claudio.
 BEATRICE O Lord, he will hang upon him like a disease: he is sooner
 caught than the pestilence, and the taker runs presently mad. God
 help the noble Claudio, if he hath caught the Benedict. It will cost
 him a thousand pound ere a be cured. 65
 MESSENGER I will hold friends with you, lady.
 BEATRICE Do, good friend.
 LEONATO You will never run mad, niece.
 BEATRICE No, not till a hot January.
 MESSENGER Don Pedro is approached. 70

*Enter DON PEDRO, CLAUDIO, BENEDICK, BALTHASAR and JOHN the
 bastard*

DON PEDRO Good Signor Leonato, are you come to meet your trouble?
 The fashion of the world is to avoid cost, and you encounter it.
 LEONATO 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. 75
 DON PEDRO You embrace your charge too willingly. I think this is your
 daughter?
 LEONATO Her mother hath many times told me so.
 BENEDICK Were you in doubt, sir, that you asked her?
 LEONATO Signor Benedick, no, for then were you a child. 80
 DON PEDRO You have it full, Benedick: we may guess by this, what you
 are, being a man. Truly, the lady fathers herself: be happy, lady, for
 you are like an honourable father.
 BENEDICK If Signor Leonato be her father, she would not have his head
 on her shoulders for all Messina, as like him as she is. 85
 BEATRICE I wonder that you will still be talking, Signor Benedick,
 nobody marks you.
 BENEDICK What, my dear Lady Disdain! Are you yet living?



Beatrice and Benedick renew their ‘merry war’, each trying to score points off the other, each attempting to have the last word. Leonato invites Don Pedro and his followers to stay as guests at his house.

1 ‘Courtesy itself must convert to Disdain’ (in pairs)

Beatrice once again interrupts the men’s conversation. But this time she faces Benedick, a much more formidable opponent.

- a Decide in your pair who will act the part of Beatrice and who will be Benedick. Face your partner and read lines 86–107 a few times, until you are comfortable with speaking the words. Select the most insulting or amusing phrases your character uses and compile a shortened script using just these phrases (with perhaps a few extra words of your own to help it all make sense). Then use your revised script to hurl the best insults back and forth.
- b Show your version to the rest of the class. Debate and decide which character is forced to break off hostilities first, and whether there is a clear winner to this particular battle in Beatrice and Benedick’s ‘merry war’.

Stagecraft

Exposition

This section of the play introduces us to new characters. It gives us a glimpse into their backgrounds and suggests what has shaped them. This is technically referred to as **exposition**. A character’s first words are often very revealing. It was Don John who led the recent rebellion against his brother, Don Pedro, although the two are now friends again (‘reconciled’).

Imagine you are a director, and write notes for the actors playing Don John and Don Pedro, advising them on how to make lines 113–18 an uneasy moment in an otherwise happy reunion. How do you think the two royal brothers should behave towards each other?

2 Beatrice and Benedick do battle! (in pairs)

Lines 86–107 are a very well-known sequence in the play. The interplay between Beatrice and Benedick is often compared to fencing or a boxing match. Try performing the scene in the following ways (as well as any others you can come up with) and decide which physical approach is the most impactful and effective:

- slowly circling one another at a distance
- in close proximity, almost head to head, whispering
- moving from one end of the stage to the other, almost shouting across the space
- standing completely still, with all emphasis on facial expressions and tone of voice.

Courtesy ... presence
even courtesy itself would be rude to you
turn-coat traitor
excepted not included

dear happiness great fortune
pernicious evil, villainous
humour temperament

scape ... face escape the fate of getting his face scratched
and 'twere if it were

parrot-teacher chatterer

so ... continuer were as good at keeping going
jade broken-down vicious horse

prays hopes
occasion event
hypocrite one who preaches one thing, yet in reality does the opposite
be forsworn swear in vain

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING ACT I SCENE I



- BEATRICE Is it possible Disdain should die, while she hath such meet
 food to feed it, as Signor Benedick? Courtesy itself must convert to 90
 Disdain, if you come in her presence.
- BENEDICK Then is Courtesy a turn-coat: 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 95
 troubled with a pernicious suitor. I thank God and my cold blood, I
 am of your humour for that: I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow
 than a man swear he loves me.
- BENEDICK God keep your ladyship still in that mind, so some gentleman
 or other shall scape a predestinate scratched face. 100
- BEATRICE Scratching could not make it worse, and 'twere such a face as
 yours were.
- BENEDICK Well, you are a rare parrot-teacher.
- BEATRICE A bird of my tongue is better than a beast of yours.
- BENEDICK I would my horse had the speed of your tongue, and so good a 105
 continuer: but keep your way a God's name. I have done.
- BEATRICE You always end with a jade's trick: I know you of old.
- DON PEDRO That is the sum of all: Leonato, Signor Claudio and Signor
 Benedick, my dear friend Leonato, hath invited you all. I tell him we
 shall stay here at the least a month, and he heartily prays some 110
 occasion may detain us longer: I dare swear he is no hypocrite, but
 prays from his heart.
- LEONATO If you swear, my lord, you shall not be forsworn. [*To Don John*]
 Let me bid you welcome, my lord, being reconciled to the prince your
 brother: I owe you all duty. 115
- DON JOHN I thank you, I am not of many words, but I thank you.
- LEONATO Please it your grace lead on?
- DON PEDRO Your hand, Leonato, we will go together.

Exeunt all except Benedick and Claudio



Claudio tells Benedick of his love for Hero and asks Benedick what he thinks of her. Benedick is unimpressed by Hero's charms and quite dismayed that his young friend Claudio should be considering marriage.

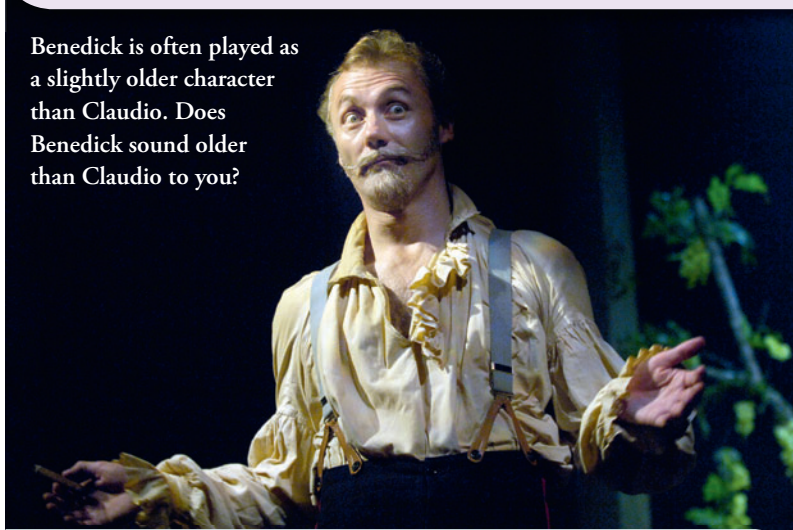
Characters

Benedick the play-actor

In lines 136–7, Benedick pretends to think that Claudio is mocking him by making impossible remarks (Cupid, the god of love, was blind; Vulcan, the god of fire, was a blacksmith).

- Find other examples of Benedick's agility of mind and love of play-acting in the script opposite. Has he made any genuinely serious remarks since he appeared?
- 'Shall I never see a bachelor of three score again?' asks Benedick, the apparently cynical woman-hater (lines 147–8). Find quotations that suggest he might be more interested in women – and Beatrice in particular – than he would care to admit. Add to these notes as you progress through the play.

Benedick is often played as a slightly older character than Claudio. Does Benedick sound older than Claudio to you?



Write about it

Noting or nothing?

This play's title has a number of meanings. 'Noting' and 'nothing' were pronounced very similarly in Shakespeare's time. Both Claudio and Benedick talk of 'noting' (observing) Leonato's daughter.

- Look out for other 'notings' – list anything else significant that has been 'noted' by other characters so far.
- Write two paragraphs exploring whether you think Benedick genuinely feels 'nothing' for Beatrice. Use quotations to support your points.

noted her not did not study her

modest sweet, virginal, innocent

professed tyrant declared enemy and bully

low short

commendation praise

flouting Jack mocking rascal

go in the song match your mood

and she ... fury if only she were not so tormenting

I would scarce trust myself
I wouldn't feel worthy

wear his cap i.e. to hide his cuckold's horns (see p. 12)

bachelor of three score
single man of sixty

and thou wilt needs if you must

yoke wooden frame to harness pairs of oxen

sigh away Sundays be stuck at home with the wife on Sundays