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Much Ado About Nothing

The Cambridge Dover Wilson Shakespeare

VOLUME 24

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
EDITED BY JOHN DOVER WILSON



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EDITED FOR THE SYNDICS OF THE
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BY

SIR ARTHUR QUILLER-COUCH
AND JOHN DOVER WILSON

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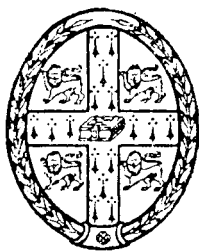
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MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

I

This happy play, chiming to the echo of Balthazar's song, converts all sounds of woe—its editors' included—

Into Hey nonny, nonny.

Questions of text, of date, etc., can be accurately resolved, or at most, as Sir Thomas Browne would say, admit no wide solution. We treat them respectfully in our Note on the Copy [pp. 89–107]; but for our present purpose it suffices to summarise two conclusions:

(a) The text was first set up in print in 1600; in a Good Quarto, direct from the MS theatrical prompt-book. A copy of this Quarto went back to the theatre to be used as prompt-book for later performances: and this same printed copy, scored with a number of prompter's jottings, went to Jaggard's office in 1622–3 to supply the *Much Ado* text in the First Folio. Here, then, in Quarto, we get, as nearly as anywhere in the canon, to Shakespeare's own manuscript; while the Folio bears traces of subsequent rehearsals—for the play was popular and must have been re-staged many times between 1600 and 1623. [See p. 108 below.]

(b) The date, then, is 1600 at latest; and it can scarcely be earlier than 1598, since Francis Meres' famous list, which appeared in that year, makes no mention of this successful *Much Ado*.

Here, however, we must make two reservations. In the first place Meres' list includes, as every one knows, a *Love's Labour's Won*, which has never been traced, or proved to be the alternative title of any play of Shakespeare's in our possession, though numerous

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attempts have been made—and notably to attach it as some early version of *All's Well that Ends Well* or of *The Tempest*. In *Collier, Coleridge and Shakespeare* (1860) A. E. Bray advanced a gallant claim for *Much Ado*, and supported it with some ingenious arguments of which we will only say here that they serve sundry good by-purposes while missing to convince us on the main. We must defer, however, the whole of this question of *Love's Labour's Won* until we come to deal with *All's Well that Ends Well*.

Our second reservation is that in limiting our date to 1598–1600 we speak only of the play *as we have it*. We believe, indeed—and in our Note on the Copy give reasons for our belief—that Shakespeare constructed this *Much Ado* on the groundwork of an earlier comedy, very possibly a first attempt of his own. But this matters little. As we have it—and whether derivative or not—the play is right Shakespeare; and on all external evidence belongs to just that romantic jollifying period to which, on its own quality, any intelligent reader must want to assign it: to the period, that is, when Shakespeare had ‘found himself’ as a playwright, and could start to let his genius ride with a loose rein. In any art this mastery, or the consciousness of it, will often arrive quitesuddenly to cut the cords of apprenticeship. There comes a day when one man knows himself a horseman; a day when another, after long grinding at syntax and paradigms, knows as by a flash that henceforth he is free to read Greek with understanding. Even so there comes to any creative artist a day when all the burden of ‘plotting,’ which hitherto he has duly and rightfully carried, drops from him as the load fell from Christian’s back, and henceforward he can provide stories enough to last ten of his lifetimes; the problem is no longer one of invention; it has changed into treatment—of learning to tell a thing so that the telling

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will endure; of how to make literature, which is memorable speech, out of any of the hundred-and-one things in his head. As we follow Shakespeare's novitiate to his nonage it appears to us that at any time before 1597 or thereabouts he might have used the story of wronged Hero for a plot; but that scarcely before 1598 or thereabouts was he man enough to do what in this play he does: to advance two subsidiary characters, Beatrice and Benedick, and let them take charge of the audience, relegating Don John and Claudio—even Hero herself and the whole stage-plot—into the background of our interest.

But this is not all: for simultaneously something else is happening. As in *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* Shakespeare had made bold to drag real Warwickshire ouths and oafs into his plot, so, advancing from masquerade to human comedy, in *Much Ado* he waxes bolder and works in the provincial English fool—Dogberry and his like—as universal fool, advanced as such to be a real agent of his plots. 'Lord, what fools these mortals be!' discovers Shakespeare: and upon that discovery of the proportion which foolishness holds in human events he goes on to build anything in Comedy from the blundering luck of the Watch in this play up to the demented vanity of Malvolio.

II

A word must be said about 'sources.'

Immediately or remotely the story would seem—as Capell was the first to point out—to derive from a *novella* of Bandello's [Matteo Bandello, Bishop of Agen], either directly or through a French version in Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques* (Paris, 1582). The trick by which Margaret personates Hero differs from the Bandello plot, and *may* have been borrowed either from the story of Ginevra in the Fifth Book of *Orlando*

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*Furioso*¹ or from *The Faerie Queene*, Book 2, Canto 4. *Orlando* had been translated into English by Beverly in 1565, by Sir John Harington in 1591—the latter telling us in a note at the end of the Fifth Book that the story had been already Englished ‘some few yeares past (learnedly and with good grace) though in verse of another kind by *M. George Turberuil*’: and Shakespeare, of course, was well acquainted with *The Faerie Queene*. But Bandello must put in his claim because (1) his scene is laid at Messina and (2) his story includes a *King Pedro* and a *Messer Lionato de’ Lionati*, father to the heroine. The concurrence of these two names with the place, Messina, and the personation-plot would seem to amount to proof.

But here intrudes a claimant with whom we have had to deal before, in discussing the sources of *The Tempest*—one Jacob Ayer, of Nuremberg, who about this time wrote a play, *Die Schöne Phaenicia* [abbreviated title], obviously derived from Bandello—obviously, for on top of Messina, King Peter and Leonato, Ayer’s heroine is Phaenicia as Bandello’s was Fenicia. There is no good reason to suppose that Ayer borrowed from Shakespeare, or Shakespeare from Ayer—and, anyhow, what does it matter? Sir Adolphus Ward sums up the evidence thus:

As the date of Ayer’s play is not known—it may have been written before or after 1600—and as that of Shakespeare’s is similarly uncertain, it is impossible to decide as to their relative priority. That, however, Ayer did not

¹ Non sappiendo io di questo cosa alcuna,
Venni al veron nell’ abito c’ ho detto;
Sì come già venuta era più d’ una
E più di due fiate a buono effetto.
Le vesti si vedean chiare alla luna;
Nè dissimile essendo anch’ io d’ aspetto
Nè di persona da Ginevra molto,
Fece parere un per un altro il volto....

Stanza 49.

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copy from Shakespeare seems, as Simrock points out, clear from the names of the characters in his play, which follow Bandello, while Shakespeare has changed all the names except those of Don Pedro and Leonato.

[As a matter of fact, Ayler follows just so far beyond Shakespeare as to retain the names of Bandello's hero and heroine.]

Dr Furness discusses this alleged Shakespeare-Ayler connexion with much spirit in pp. xxvi-xxxi of his *Variorum* edition of *Much Ado*, and gives a digest of the German play in his appendix (pp. 329-337).

Dr Furness, moreover, who—tied by his task (as his father was) to bestow endless care on straws and chaff—had his father's gift of detecting grain, of 'knowing coins from beans,' cites an extract from the Lord Treasurer Stanhope's Accounts, *anno* 1613, and conjectures, or suggests (p. xxi), that *Much Ado* may have taken its source from an older comedy, *Benedicte and Betteris*. He produces the warrant of that year in which both are mentioned:

Item paid to John Heminges vppon the cowncells warrant dated att Whitehall xx^o die Maij 1613, for presentinge before the Princes Highnes the Lady Elizabeth and the Prince Pallatynne Elector fowerteene severall playes, viz: one playe called ffilaster, one other called the knott of ffooles, One other Much adoe abowte nothinge....

Item paid to the said John Heminges upon the lyke warrant dated att Whitehall xx^o die Maij 1613, for presentynge sixe severall playes, viz: one play called a badd beginninge makes a good endinge¹....And one other called Benedicte and Betteris.

But, as Dowden has pointed out, it seems much more probable that by *Benedicte and Betteris* is meant *Much Ado* itself. King Charles I, who certainly witnessed the performances above recorded, owned a copy of the Second Folio, still preserved at Windsor Castle; and

¹ We may here be on the track of *All's Well that Ends Well*.

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therein entered in his handwriting 'Benedick and Beatrice' as a second title to our play.

Shakespeare, indeed, had fallen in with a fashion of riddling and elusive titles: and a frequent playgoer might well seek some *memoria technica* to remind him what the Nothing was that Much Ado was about, which of Love's Labours was Lost and which Won, what precisely reconciled All by ending Well, and just how As You Liked It differed from What You Willed.

III

By the time it reached the Quarto, at any rate, our comedy had in effect become 'Benedick and Beatrice'—or, yet more descriptively 'Beatrice and Benedick'—rather than 'Claudio and Hero': and this, happening with so early a play, makes *Much Ado* of much ado to all who study Shakespeare's growth as a playwright. Apparently the drama still hinges upon what we take leave to call, without prejudice, the old stage-plot—the intrigue against Hero, the accusation at the altar, her vindicated innocence. But the intrigue has a feeble spring of motive, and even its crucial scene under Hero's chamber-window reaches us at second hand¹. This is not the way in which Shakespeare handled, later, a somewhat similar situation in *Troilus and Cressida*: but oddly enough, in a yet later play—*The Winter's Tale*—the plot of which at many points recalls *Much Ado*—our interest gets a very similar rebuff when, instead of being allowed to assist at a great 'recognition'-scene, we are fobbed off with *oratio obliqua* and a 'Third Gentleman' telling us that we

have lost a sight, which was to be seen, cannot be spoken of. There might you have beheld one joy crown another, so, and in such manner that, it seemed, sorrow wept to

¹ In our Note on the Copy [pp. 104–107] we discuss some gaps and perplexities in the incidents of that night, as bearing on the history of the play.

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take leave of them, for their joy waded in tears. There was casting up of eyes, holding up of hands, with countenances of such distraction that they were to be known by garment, not by favour. Our king, being ready to leap out of himself for joy of his found daughter, as if that joy were now become a loss, cries, 'O, thy mother, thy mother!' then asks Bohemia forgiveness, etc.

—the answer to which is, that we *have* lost a sight, and this Third Gentleman is a very feeble 'walking gentleman.' The fault remains a fault, though we charge it upon Shakespeare's indolence and borrow the words of Elijah:

Cry aloud: for he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awaked.

But for our part we prefer the easier, warrantable explanation that such mischances happened in the process of adapting, revising, 'cutting'—whether for economy of effect, or to save time, or for some other purpose of the theatre.

The omission of the window-scene weakens our sympathy with Claudio in the chapel-scene. We cannot put ourselves in his place, deprived as we have been of the visual evidence that convinced him. We ought of course to tell ourselves that it must needs have amounted to strong proof of Hero's guilt to overpower him, hitherto presented to us as gallant and generous and quite deeply in love. After all, as the proverb says, seeing is believing.

A technical defence may be put up for the omission of the window-scene on the ground that, while it does injustice to Claudio, we have reached a point at which the playwright *intends* to disengage our interest from Claudio, to fasten it upon Beatrice and Benedick, the true protagonists; to focus the drama upon Beatrice's two strong words, 'Kill Claudio': as at this point undoubtedly Shakespeare transfers it from *novella* to drama—to a real spiritual conflict.

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That Shakespeare manages this in the temporary illusion of the theatre may be granted. But it may be questioned if any drama can be accounted right which, on second thoughts, holds a flaw of injustice. Nor is this lurking doubt of ours eased as we consider that Hero's vindication, when it comes, comes not by Beatrice's patient or devoted tracking down of the scandal.

The truth of it, as we shall presently see, is just stumbled upon by a parcel of fools; and would have been disclosed promptly and in time but for the un-wisdom of more highly placed folly. Beatrice has no practical resource but revenge. Her instinct is passionate, feminine, extremely natural; as the way she follows it is passionate, natural and extremely feminine; but at the utmost it could do nothing to clear her cousin's character. The good Friar gives better advice.—'For Claudio let the punishment be spiritual (not, as Beatrice demands, bodily), in the remorse that will gnaw him when he hears that Hero is dead. For the rest, let us play for time. Time *may*, under Providence, vindicate the poor lady: but anyhow the report of her death will hush present scandal and, at the worst, she can be withdrawn and concealed

In some reclusive and religious life,
Out of all eyes, tongues, minds, and injuries.

Our daily life has no more useful servants than the men of whom this admirable Friar may stand for a type; discreet elderly men who combine the offices of priest and family physician—who, having put aside their own ambitions, can be trusted for help at a pinch, and especially when it nips the young; themselves unmarried and therefore, may be, the tenderer ministrants to lovers, the better midwives of domestic travails; believers in the divine purpose, yet not above employing

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a worldly trick or so to force the Divine Hand. Such a man is the Friar in this play; its steadying sane mind, its *punctum indifferens*. He is the first to avow, against all odds, his faith in Hero's innocence; and Miss Ellen Terry never, among her many inventions, played a surer stroke of art than when (*Lyceum Theatre*, 1882), as Beatrice, she strode forth from the denunciators and doubters to fall on her knees and kiss the good man's hand for his avowal.

It is, after all, pedantic and pickthank work to belittle Beatrice's part in the play. She may not, herself, achieve the solution, or see the way to it: but emotionally she dominates it with her great loyalty, and from the moment she takes charge we know that she will win somehow. Her cast of the die is not a light one, for she truly loves Benedick. To Shakespeare and to his Elizabethan audience her 'Kill Claudio' was probably a far more dangerous, more fatal, cast than in our day we readily understand; the obligation of a lover to his mistress being, in comparison with any convention of our own times, so far weaker than that of a man to his friend. This has to be allowed for if we would understand Beatrice's strength—and Benedick's devotion.

V

'Kill Claudio.' These two words *nail* the play, and may well seem overpoweringly too strong to be converted by Comedy into 'hey nonny, nonny.' But we are always lost with Shakespeare if we attempt to define Comedy in categories deduced from Menander or Plautus before him, or from Calderon or Molière or Congreve or Sheridan after him. All Shakespeare's 'comedies' lie close to sorrow; close at least to heart-ache, sometimes close to heart-break. Even in *The Comedy of Errors* we have pathos induced upon Plautus, who knew it not: even in *Love's Labour's Lost* the shadow of death overcasts a revel. Portia, like the

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Princess of France, mourns a father, in the beginning of a play which sails very close to tragedy, and only fetches off by cleverness; and so mourns Helena at the beginning of *All's Well that Ends Well*. In *Twelfth Night* Olivia and Viola mourn for brothers. No one can, under ordinary definition, make comedy of *Measure for Measure*. The half at least of *The Winter's Tale*, labelled a Comedy, is purely tragic. So *Much Ado* treads close, 'all the while, upon tragedy. Yet we have never a serious doubt that the issue will be blithe and bonny: and this for good reason.—

In *Much Ado*, no deceit happens, and no mistake, into the secret of which we are not admitted from the first; and therefore no explosion to catch us unprepared, no crisis to which we do not come wiser than the persons on the stage.

Before every lie is uttered we know that it is a lie, and we cannot doubt it will be detected. In the story of the treachery practised towards Hero, the incidents are in their external aspect deeply tragic, and the characters treat them as such; but we, who are in the secret, know that the whole rests within that sphere where comedy finds its nurture.... Here, the catastrophe comes to us after gradual preparation. No sudden convulsion attends it, and no softening close is necessary like that which carried us from Shylock's judgement-hall to the lady's villa. Here also we have been throughout in that mood of interest slightly excited for the incidents, which enabled us to watch with delight some of the most felicitous of all representations of character, in a type which Shakespeare, again and again fondly returning to it, here developed in its utmost possible perfection¹.

Let us add that *Much Ado* has been called 'a comedy of self-deception'—with some justice, for Beatrice and Benedick have to discover their own minds, while in the education of Dogberry, Verges and Co., among other things the great first lesson 'Know thyself' has very conspicuously been neglected; and that of all

¹ *Edinburgh Review*, July, 1840, p. 483.

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forms of comedy, a comedy of self-deception most stringently compels the author to be quick in advertising his audience, who must be wiser all the time than the persons on the stage. We know from the first that Beatrice is trying to hide a sincere feeling, which *we* detect; that 'my dear Lady Disdain' will sooner or later have as little use for disdain as for flippancy: and therefore, when she yields with

Contempt, farewell! and maiden pride, adieu!
as when her loyal heart cries indignantly

O, on my soul, my cousin is belied!
we say to ourselves 'Aha! dear lady, you didn't take *us* in!'—which, fatuous though it be, is just what Shakespeare has been aiming to extort from us. So again we know from the first that if ever Dogberry fulfils his function, to detect wrong-doing, it will assuredly be by luck rather than by good management.

VI

With this in mind, we can easily pass to Coleridge's famous criticism of Shakespeare's plots:

The interest in the plot is always on account of the characters, not *vice versa*, as in almost all other writers; the plot is a mere canvas and no more. Hence arises the true justification of the same stratagem being used in regard to Benedick and Beatrice,—the vanity in each being alike. Take away from *Much Ado about Nothing* all that which is not indispensable to the plot, either as having little to do with it, or, at best, like Dogberry and his comrades, forced into its service, when any other less ingeniously absurd watchmen and night-constables would have answered the mere necessities of the action:—take away Benedick, Beatrice, Dogberry, and the reaction of the former on the character of Hero,—and what will remain? In other writers the main agent of the plot is always the prominent character: in Shakespeare it is so, or it is not so, as the character is itself calculated, or not calculated, to form the plot. Don John is the mainspring of the plot of this play; but he is merely shown and then withdrawn.

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Very true: and nevertheless our comment upon it must be that, for our part, we had preferred to be given some more particular motive for Don John's scheming than a certain degree of moroseness at having been born a bastard¹. Edmund in *Lear* has a like grudge against life; but, with all his faults, pursues his quarrel definitely. Don John has no quarrel with Claudio or with Hero, nor any hope of advancement through the success of his villainy. If it seem too flippant to say, quoting an old country proverb—'A full year of nuts is a full year for bastards'—that Don John just happened so because it was such a year, we may at least plead that Shakespeare, who afterwards created Iago, could easily, by taking a little more trouble, have given Don John an intelligible motive, and thereby made him a more intelligible villain.

In tragic life, God wot,

No villain need be!

—and still less in comedy. But if we introduce one, we ought to provide him with some excuse for himself.

VII

Under this reservation Coleridge says truly enough: and the sum of his meaning is that the stage-plot may go hang as soon as Beatrice discovers her 'grit' and we allow her to test Benedick's devotion. She may not—in fact she does not—discover the way out; but from the moment she discovers *herself* we feel that all will end well somehow.

So we enjoy the play, and are amazed, returning to the critics, to find that quite a number of them miss the

¹ Moreover in the play itself his bastardy is never announced to the audience until 4.1.187–8. Up to that point it occurs only in the stage-directions, though likely enough the play-bill advertised it. But it is never till then mentioned as accounting for his character or as begetting the particular villainy he commits.

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meaning of Beatrice altogether. The poet Campbell calls her an 'odious woman'—'She is a tartar, by Shakespeare's own showing, and, if a natural woman, is not a pleasing representative of the sex...for a good heart, that shows itself only on extraordinary occasions, is no sufficient atonement for a bad temper....' Mrs Inchbald, before him, had permitted herself to observe that 'if Benedick and Beatrice had possessed perfect good manners, or just notions of honour and delicacy, so as to have refused to become eaves-droppers, the action of the plot must have stood still, or some better method have been contrived—a worse hardly could—to have imposed on their mutual credulity.' [Papa, potatoes, poultry, prunes and prism!] Even M. Jules Lemaître, the last man one would have looked to find in this chariot, declaims upon our hero and heroine as 'insupportable' persons—'savages aiming to be witty'—'extremely subtle brutes.' Eh?—or is it Hey?—nonny, nonny!

VIII

But let us answer these critics, 'straight brow' and tight lip; for, after all, they have something to plead.

We may cut out of their question the *method* of the wooing, or at all events recommend its critics to study Shakespeare's habitual conduct of his stage love-making *per ambages* or through quickset and briars. Let them note for example, for a 'first sketch' of Benedick and Beatrice, Berowne's wooing of Rosaline in *Love's Labour's Lost*. Let them proceed to Rosalind's pretty teasing, the taming of Katharina, King Harry's blunt courtship; and study how Desdemona was won. Shakespeare, one can see, hated all 'pawing' of first love—

the sweetest thing

That ever mingled frank and shy.

Even in *Romeo and Juliet* he interposes the distance of a balcony (and moreover Romeo is no novice). It is

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not until he has outlived passion on his own account that Shakespeare—in *The Winter's Tale*, in *The Tempest*—dares to take down the hedge, to let boy and maid 'change eyes' before us and go each to other unafraid. If he did it before, in *Troilus*, he did it in savagery.

We see from the outset that Beatrice is a woman and 'therefore to be won': we cannot believe for a moment that she is fated to 'sit in a corner and cry "heigh-ho for a husband".' All her scornfullest talk bears on mating. As Motteux sings:

Man is for the woman made,
And the woman made for man;
As the spur is to the jade,
As the scabbard for the blade....

We see, too, from the outset that Benedick is her man and meant for her. 'Shakespeare's doctrine concerning the war of the sexes,' says Dowden, 'is that it is only a bright prelude to the victory of love and a permanent treaty of peace.' There is no Phaedra in Shakespeare's gallery.

Beatrice needs only a good excuse for bestowing her best gifts on Benedick. They have known each other before the play opens; they have encountered each other in the lists of mimic strife; each desires no better antagonist. The first word of Beatrice is to inquire whether 'Signior Mountanto' has returned from the wars or no. She has appropriated him as her special theme for mockery; he is already her own for the ends of laughter, and the laughter of Beatrice is so glad an outbreak of the brain and heart that it lies not very far from admiration and love.

Beatrice will never 'lead apes into hell.' On the other hand—to hark back to Motteux—she is no jade to need, or to brook, a spur, but high-mettled: her spirit will use the sword of wit to defend her maidenhood as a citadel. She will be worsted; but by Nature, not by better swordsmanship. She is doomed to capitulate; but it shall be on the handsomest terms.

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This wit of hers, says Andrew Lang, 'let it be frankly avowed, is uncommonly Elizabethan.' She has read the *Hundred Merry Tales*, sure enough. But that sort of knowledge, or the instinct for it, never troubles or spoils any woman in Shakespeare. Miranda, bred on an islet, unacquainted with anything in the shape of man save a monster and her father, can talk with a simplicity outspoken enough to make a dozen Mrs Inchbalds scurry for shelter, albeit Mrs Inchbald had been an actress in her time and impersonated Imogen. We expect Shakespeare's women to be frank of speech as they are frank-eyed, and we respect them the more for it.

IX

Our trouble (we suggest) with Benedick's and Beatrice's 'wit-combats' is rather a trouble with Shakespeare's 'wit' in general. These two, as practitioners eminent by tradition, have served as lightning-conductors for a censure which should more justly be spread over many plays—indeed over almost all the Comedies.

If we could rid ourselves of idolatry and of cant when we talk about Shakespeare, we should probably admit that his 'wit'—the chop-logic of his fools, the sort of stuff that passes for court-conversation and repartee—is usually cheap, not seldom exasperating, and at times (as when we have to listen to a Speed or a Lucio—if we *must* reckon these two creatures as Shakespeare's) merely disgusting. He purveyed this stuff for his age; certainly not for all time: and the more accurately we detect it, to put it away, the more cleanly we get at his virtues.

Let us take it as we should take it with any other writer. A provincial youth (who happens to be an acquisitive genius) comes up to London, to try his luck. He finds the fashion of speech there among his 'betters'

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—even the great ones at Court—to be an elaborate and artificial Euphuism; and naturally, as a youth ardent to make his mark and a name, he catches and practises the habit—for he has a most sensitive ear for any manner of speech. He finds, moreover, that at the theatre, to which he is presently apprenticed, this court-talk is sedulously imitated and tends to relax itself (or, we may say, to parody itself) in bawdry. We are much mistaken if this be no fair account of whole pages in Shakespeare wherein some silly serving-man or serving-woman rings changes upon ‘muttons’ or ‘stewed prunes’—‘crosses’ or ‘prick-song.’

Alas! ’tis true I have gone here and there,
And made myself a motley to the view,
Gored mine own thoughts, sold cheap what is most dear....

But that is no reason against *our* separating what is cheap, or even detestable, from what is most dear, and rejecting it. Even when the chop-logic is innocent, as it is in the first Act of *As You Like It*, or merely silly, as it usually is when the Clown in *All’s Well* opens his mouth, it belongs to a fashion; and if we are bored by it, we advance the business of criticism by announcing the stuff for rubbish.

There is not a little of this rubbish in the earlier scenes of *Much Ado*. But when we have sifted it out and made allowance that Benedick and Beatrice are both fencing in a *mode*, the revelation of their true hearts, each to each, when the crowd has left the chapel, has an effect the more startling because it breaks and shines through this artificiality. Beatrice has shone through it already, in promise. ‘You were born in a merry hour,’ says Prince Pedro.

No, sure, my lord, my mother cried—but then there was a star danced, and under that was I born
—born to ‘keep on the windy side of care,’ she says, ‘born to speak all mirth and no matter.’ When it comes to the test, there is matter enough in her.

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X

As for Benedick, in the preliminary war of words he is always and inevitably put down. But we cannot blame him, save for accepting the challenge; since ‘a man is never more a fool than when he enters into a wit-duel with a brilliant woman.’ But he proves himself true and solid when he comes to the test; and it is, after all, the residuum of honest stupidity in a good man on which such women as Beatrice may rely to be defeated. He has, moreover, wit enough for his business of ‘playing up’ to Beatrice—enough, and a little to spare. She knows very well that she is not ‘enamoured of an ass.’

Once on a time one of the present editors helped to organise a congregation of children to witness a performance of *Much Ado* in which Mr Matheson Lang enacted Benedick. On the return journey, at a junction where the children had to be shepherded into trains, one girl stood on the platform as in a trance saying aloud, ‘Only to think that a man can be so splendid!’ And this is reported for the very reason that some readers will find it trivial: since, when all is said and we editors have done with our solemnities, the best of Shakespeare remains a something that a child can read—‘a lesson,’ in Lamb’s phrase, ‘of all sweet and honourable thoughts and actions.’

XI

But this Comedy, so often dismissed with a recognition of its acting value (which nobody can deny) and a discussion of the ‘merry war’ between Beatrice and Benedick, has a quality of its own which critic after critic has failed to detect as its supreme quality; being thrown off the scent, may be, by the intrusion of Dogberry and his Watch, who slouch across the hunt ‘as

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unconcernedly as though Messina were in the heart of their own Warwickshire.' Actually it is the most Italianate play in the canon, and actually the closest to the spirit of the Renaissance. Nay, that spirit—so peculiar in essence and so volatile—permeates the whole piece and exhales from it. The characters can all speak 'by the book.'

They are all great readers. Even the women have probably studied Plato with Roger Ascham. Beatrice at any rate has read the Hundred Merry Tales (2. 1.). The men are choke-full of the classic lore of the new time, a time

Sentant encore le lait dont elle fut nourrie.

Benedick talks glibly of Leander and Troilus (5. 2.), and writes verse—bad verse, as a scholar-soldier should—'a halting sonnet of his own pure brain' (5. 4.). Claudio is a bard. Part of his penance, if you please, for killing a poor lady is to 'hang her an epitaph upon her tomb and sing it to her bones' (5. 1.).

We quote from a short critique written by Mr A. B. Walkley on the *Lyceum* performance of 1891¹; to our mind the shrewdest brief summary written on *Much Ado* in a generation. Mr Walkley, who has already spoken of the superabundant life, the *joie de vivre*, in this play, adds:

But life and letters do not sum up the Renaissance; they must be completed by a touch of the lurid—Benvenuto Cellini must cut Pompeo's throat as well as carve in silver—and so we get our third impression. This is an impression of sombre melodrama, Italian treachery, the intrusion of Mephistopheles into the *Kermesse*, which the dramatist has provided for us in the intrigue of Don John and Borachio. ...Can I register a fourth impression? Yes; in the strange manner of Claudio's wooing—behind a mask and in the person of his prince—I like to fancy a premonition of the theatre of Hugo and Musset. And when Claudio consents to wed a veiled lady whom he has never seen, he is the

¹ *Playhouse Impressions*, by A. B. Walkley, 1892.

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direct ancestor of Don César de Bazan. Thus here are the Elizabethan and the Romantic epoch brought together. One might go on to a fifthly or a fifteenthly—all merging at last into one composite picture of the multifarious, seething, fermenting life, the polychromatic phantasmagoria of the Renaissance. Like some quaint book of the time, with a quaint title, some *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, or like some vast crowded canvas of the time—the great marriage-piece, say, of Veronese in the Salon Carré of the Louvre—*Much Ado about Nothing* is an Inn of Strange Meetings.

But the first, the capital, impression is of superabundant life and the will to do what we choose in our ‘May of youth and bloom of lustihood.’ There are no toppers, no wenchers in this play; no Lucios, Belches, Falstaffs; no one ‘run to seed.’ We are all young: like Beatrice, every Jill and Jack of us ‘hath legs’ (5. 2.) and will fling ‘em. Critics who write of Marlowe talk of Renaissance *virtù* and prove to us that Marlowe wrote on a theory. Well, here we get the careless, sunny side of *virtù*, presented the more convincingly because theory has nothing to do with it. The characters—the men and women ‘doing things’ (as Aristotle would say)—just do them because they are people of that sort. Their motto is that of the Abbey of Thelema—*Fay ce que voudras*: and this, after all, may be the sufficient, Renaissance, excuse for Don John. Like Gloucester he is

determinéd to prove a villain

—and why not, when the others are doing as they choose? If they choose ‘to be good Pantagruelists—that is to say, to live in Peace, Joy, Health, always making merry,’ Don John has a natural and equal right (in Comedy at any rate, and as a foil, and because they leave him out of their company) to join the crew from which they are warned to be averse; of men who actually though not in Rabelais’ literal sense, ‘always peep through a hole.’

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XII

In our Introduction to *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* we commented on Shakespeare's habit of repeating himself; of using again and again, in play after play, any stage device that he had tried and found successful or, if unsuccessful, at any rate worth another attempt; and of managing this with an infinite variety which no custom can stale for us. Rather, when some one points it out here or there, will any true Shakespearian smile and wonder at the art which has tricked him and kept him unaware. For this economy of invention indicates no imaginative poverty, but a teeming wealth, and is of a piece with Shakespeare's genius for borrowing his plots from anywhere and everywhere. 'Give me an Italian *novella*,' he says, 'or a page or two of Plutarch, or of Holinshed, or a pamphlet on a Virginia voyage, and I'll make you a *Much Ado*, an *Antony and Cleopatra*, a *Macbeth*, a *Tempest*, whichever you will, to your esteemed command. Or, if your Majesty insist, Falstaff shall be delivered in love within this fortnight.... Give me a shipwreck, or a damsel in male attire, or a stolen ring, and you shall have diversities of entertainment to make you stare.'

So, as Furnivall pointed out¹, *Much Ado* is full of echoes, and starts other plays echoing, even in phrases. Dogberry and Dame Quickly might be husband and wife to help each other in their 'nice derangement of epitaphs'; Dogberry's Watchmen are Bottom's fellow-amateurs acting 'in another capacity'; Friar Francis is brother to Friar Laurence of *Romeo and Juliet*, and gives very similar advice; old Leonato grieves like old Capulet—and so on: while for trick of speech we match Benedick's

I will live in thy heart, die in thy lap, and be buried in thy eyes: and moreover, I will go with thee to thy uncle's—

¹ *The Leopold Shakespeare*, 1877, p. lv.

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with Hamlet's conclusion upon Polonius:

Polonius. My lord, the queen would speak with you, and presently.

Hamlet. Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?

Polonius. By the mass, and 'tis like a camel, indeed.

Hamlet. Methinks it is like a weasel.

Polonius. It is backed like a weasel.

Hamlet. Or like a whale?

Polonius. Very like a whale.

Hamlet. Then I will come to my mother by and by.

But we must hark back a page or two and say a word on the ancestry of Benedick and Beatrice in Berowne and Rosaline. For here we have an instance of Shakespeare's borrowing from his own purse so obvious that it conceals, under obviousness, the real sleight.

The most of us, caught at unawares with a query, would assert off-hand and with conviction, that we find Shakespeare's heroines charming because he makes them so individual to us, so vividly different: that all are stars, but particular stars, differing by character as by magnitude. And so he does: yet on second thoughts we must allow them a family likeness, indefinable, haunting us as family likenesses do in real life: so that Shakespeare's women—be it a Beatrice, a Rosalind, an Imogen, or even a Lady Macbeth—differ somehow, one and all, from the women of other Elizabethan playwrights and carry a common stamp of paternity.

Rosaline shades into Beatrice, Beatrice into Rosalind, into Portia, and so on into Imogen: Cressida into Cleopatra; Perdita into Marina, Miranda. We feel that the same brain begat them; that, as Donne says:

Twice or thrice had I loved thee
Before I knew thy face or name;
So in a voice, so in a shapeless flame
Angels affect us oft and worshipped be.

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Or shall we cite Shakespeare himself, supposing him to follow this idea of his through many inventions, many avatars, all alike 'interest of the dead'?—

Thy bosom is endearéd with all hearts,
Which I by lacking have supposed dead,
And there reigns Love and all Love's loving parts,
And all those friends which I thought buried.
How many a holy and obsequious tear
Hath dear religious love stol'n from mine eye
As interest of the dead, which now appear
But things removed that hidden in there lie.
*Thou art the grave where buried love doth live,
Hung with the trophies of my lovers gone,
Who all their parts of me to thee did give;
That due of many, now is thine alone:
Their images I loved I view in thee,
And thou, all they, hast all the all of me.*

We hope that it is not entirely fanciful to claim Beatrice for a creature, and one of the best-embodied, of the many through whom Shakespeare chased his mirage. We may, if we choose, see him chasing it thus through his long gallery of portraiture

Still clutching the inviolable shade,
but the portraits step out of their frames behind him,
flesh and blood, created to consent and be merry
mothers of children.

[1923]

Q.

POSTSCRIPT, 1952

On pp. ix ff. readers should consult *The Sources of 'Much Ado about Nothing'* by Charles T. Prouty (Yale Univ. Press, 1950), and an article entitled 'Much Ado about Claudio' in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, April 1952.

J. D. W.