

1 Why Truth?

The “nothing” of *Much Ado About Nothing* can mean practically anything. While the title’s cryptic accusative seems to brush off any scrutiny—as in the “nothing” of expressions like “Oh, it’s nothing”—many critics have felt compelled to give it metaphysical resonance. In a particularly rhapsodic example, Harold Goddard launches into a thought exercise that he views as a natural step for “those who seek a deeper meaning in the title.” For Goddard, this “nothing” prompts associations of possibility, perspective, and infinity:

If I draw a circle on the sand or on a piece of paper, instantly the spatial universe is divided into two parts, the finite portion within the circle (or the sphere if we think of it in three dimensions) and the infinite remainder outside of it. Actuality and possibility have a similar relation. Actuality is what is within the circle. However immense it be conceived to be, beyond it extends not merely the infinite but the infinitely infinite realm of what might have been but was not, of what may be but it not. (271–72)

Nothingness, with its dual registers of absence and the infinite, affords Goddard a springboard for philosophical inquiry. Goddard’s essay dwells on the play’s Christian themes, but his fundamental concern is Platonic; deeper meanings, invisible to the eye, reside beneath the pageant of the material and perceivable world. This mode of “nothing,” reminiscent of its abundant usage in *King Lear*, is more concerned with ontology than simply with skeptical weariness: rather than “Oh, it’s nothing,” Goddard seems to exclaim, as recognizing a long-lost friend: “Oh, it’s *nothing!*” Readings in this vein gained popularity as Shakespeare scholarship turned away from the character criticism of the early nineteenth century and concerned itself more with language, meaning, and symbolism. In this shift, *Much Ado* provided a useful vessel for discovering profound inquiries into the nature of reality itself, as evinced by the German critic Hermann Ulrici’s observation that Shakespeare, in writing his comedy, “rather seems to have drawn his ground-idea from a contemplation of the contrasts which human life presents between

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the reality of outward objects, and the perceptions of the inward subject” (289). The phenomenological contrast noted here, which presumes a difference between the knowable, if subjective, sensations of interiority and the objective, if unknowable, status of external life, signals the increasing prominence of *knowledge* as a scholarly topos for the play. In a 1956 lecture, A. P. Rossiter pinpoints “imperfect self-knowledge” as its comic heart (65), and Ralph Berry, in a 1971 reading that trains its eye on the play’s structure, still foregrounds its central theme as the “knowledge” that differentiates between levels of perceptual reality by proposing “that we conceive of the theme of *Much Ado* as an exploration of the limits and methods of humanly-acquired knowledge” (213). Similarly, Richard Henze notes how *Much Ado*’s deception can produce the salutary effect of allowing its lovers to be “caught by the mere truth” (198). The title’s apparently light dismissal of “nothing” as simply inconsequence, as folly, has increasingly been saddled with the ironic weight of gnomic meaning—“nothing,” in this interpretive tradition, indexes the limits of our consciousness; it serves as a modernist signal of humankind’s incapacity to grapple with paradoxical infinities of potentiality and negativity. We might say that criticism of *Much Ado* has proposed how knowledge—the accumulation of what we believe to be facts—can never quite align with truth—the absolute fact of the matter always beyond our grasp.

In what follows, I offer an alternative to the assumptions that underpin this tradition, assumptions rooted in an even deeper, more implicit critical preoccupation that appears so self-evident as to seem absurd: that the truth matters, that the discovery of the truth is of paramount importance. In this sense I would like to return to the seemingly more simple interpretation of the play’s title, the raised eyebrow that Puckishly dismisses as inconsequential our interest in wanting to stack up our knowledge in the first place. This kind of epistemological brush-off is succinctly put by Michel Foucault in a 1984 interview when, while fielding questions about power and knowledge from his eager interlocutors, he responds by asking “Why truth? Why are we concerned with truth, and more so than with the care of self? And why must the care of the self occur only through the concern for truth?” (*Ethics of Concern* 37). These questions, on their face, have the ring of postmodern caricature: *Who cares about the truth?* But a wider view of the context surrounding Foucault’s query gives us appropriate historical and theoretical

entry points for a discussion of *Much Ado*. As evinced by his invocation of the “care of the self,” Foucault was at the time reading and thinking deeply about the ancient Stoics; the interview takes place amidst several long lecture series at the Collège de France on the topic. In the same year as the interview, Foucault published a book called *The Care of the Self*, though that work—part of his vast, multivolume, unfinished project on the history of sexuality—strips away many of the longer, ruminative, and speculative explorations of the Stoics that took place in the lectures. Those lectures, relieved of the teleological pressure of conforming his readings into a wider narrative that eventually lands in what he will call biopolitics, constitute a powerful set of interlocutors for considerations of Stoicism’s influence.¹

However, to paraphrase Foucault, we might ask: Why the Stoics? What do the Stoics have to do with *Much Ado*? A lot, as it turns out, and as I aim to demonstrate. The philosophy helps us recover the title’s sense of radical indifference by critiquing the belief that the separation of actuality from deception—the focus of critical readings preoccupied with the relationship of knowledge to truth—can proceed without first understanding and fine-tuning the fitness of the consciousness that must undertake the act of

¹ Foucault is admittedly an overdetermined figure to invoke in any work of literary scholarship. His work has received powerful criticism from a legion of disciplines (history, philosophy, literature) that have found his conclusions reductive and evidence scant. To take an exemplary case, Pierre Hadot, in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, finds much to admire in Foucault’s work but identifies a glaring blind spot in his discussion in *The Care of the Self* of the Stoic attitude toward joy. Stoic joy is not to be found strictly in the self, Hadot elaborates; it “can be found in what Seneca calls ‘perfect reason’ (that is to say, in divine reason) since for him, human reason is nothing other than reason capable of being made perfect”; as a result, the joyous portion of one’s self is fundamentally a “transcendent self” (*Philosophy* 207). The understanding of Stoicism in *Care of the Self* perpetuates a secularized and non-metaphysical version of the philosophy. It is because of Foucault’s tendency to make such sweeping and thinly researched claims in his published work that I draw instead on his much more considered and nuanced readings of the Stoics in his lectures. For perhaps the paradigmatic criticism of Foucault, see Habermas 238–93; for a recent and provocative accusation of Foucault’s complicity with neoliberalism, see Behrent and Zamora.

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perception. The play makes much ado about the assumption that anyone in it has properly cultivated the powers of attentiveness needed to even begin discovering the truth of the matter. In other words, *Much Ado* repeatedly steers its focus away from a pursuit of knowledge in hopes of ascertaining the truth; instead, it keeps beckoning its characters and audience members to first train themselves to know how to interpret anything. My connection of Stoicism to *Much Ado* is not simply the discovery of this symmetry; it is not only that the play exemplifies Stoic ideas or acts as a case study of a larger set of ideas. I focus here on more significant points of engagement. The first is historical. Shakespeare's comedy preoccupies itself with florid displays of wit and lightly satirical manifestations of early modern courtier culture, two elements that share Stoic forbearers, though this connection is little noted. The precise witty maneuvers performed in the play, in fact, can be traced back from Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* (a noted influence on the play) to its classical predecessor, Cicero's *De Oratore*, which, slyly and implicitly, links rhetoric to Stoic ideals.

The play's second Stoic affinity is more abstract: it exists in its execution of what I am calling Stoic performance. "Performance" is an admittedly capacious term—the field of performance studies has applied it, at times perhaps too loosely, to objects of study as varied as professional sports, gender, animal behavior, video games, and even rock formations. While I am wary of employing an overly broad understanding of performance in my discussion of Stoicism and *Much Ado*, I do believe the philosophy earns this categorization for its situation as neither textually doctrinal nor aesthetically theatrical. To be a Stoic was to *behave* in a certain way, to practice what Pierre Hadot, a contemporary philosopher and scholar of early antiquity, calls a "way of life." As the Stoic philosopher Epictetus puts it, in a favorite passage of Hadot's, a "carpenter does not come up to you and say 'Listen to me discourse about the art of carpentry,' but he makes a contract for a house and builds it" (qtd. in *Philosophy* 91). A Stoic does not talk about philosophy; a Stoic *lives* in a philosophical manner. The Stoics explained how one had to repeatedly adhere to a program of exercise, known as *askesis*, to promote existence in the continuous present. The habitual execution of these exercises, which ranged from imagining one's death to noting the passage of emotions and sensations one could feel to

witnessing the willed destruction of seemingly necessary aspects of life—trains individuals to be aware, to follow reason, and to evaluate and understand sensations and emotions. These elements bind Stoicism to a broad grammar of performance, not as a formalist set of principles (there is no Stoic equivalent of Aristotle’s *Poetics*) but as what Richard Schechner has memorably termed “twice-behaved, coded, transmittable behaviors”: restored and restorable, even ritualistic, executions of intentional actions (52). This notion of performance has rendered porous the boundaries of staged work and everyday life, and the paradigmatic work of performance theorists such as Joseph Roach, Peggy Phelan, and Diana Taylor has allowed for more catholic understandings of “theatre” that link the rehearsed and performed work of the stage to the rehearsed and performed work of politics, culture, and identity.

In drawing out connections between Shakespeare’s drama and performance theory, I align myself with the work of scholars such as Erika T. Lin, Andrew Sofer, and Miles P. Grier, and perhaps most clearly with the foundational work of William B. Worthen.² The interdisciplinary interventions of these thinkers have carved out new interpretive paradigms for reading early modern texts as not simply static, archival signals of historical or literary import but also as inextricably linked to embodiment—and not just the predetermined embodiment of their staging. The burgeoning subfield of Shakespeare performance studies allows for the drama to present, not simply re-present, the material and bodily grammar of off-stage performances such as religious ritual, civic festival, and even the enactment of gendered and racial identity. As Grier puts it, in a study of an early American production of *Macbeth*, a broader sense of early modern “performance culture”—not simply the staged production, limned by the walls of the theatre building—“mediated perceptions of real events” (78). That is,

² The intersection of performance studies and Shakespeare studies contains multitudes: scholars such as Franklin J. Hildy devote themselves to the accurate reconstruction of the “original practices” of Shakespeare’s theatrical art; on the other hand, more theoretical approaches may read Shakespeare’s drama as meditations on the nature of performance—as works of performance theory themselves. For a bracing example of this latter case, see Sofer 28–65.

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the “real” performances that constitute habituated life find their extension, not fictive separation, on the Shakespearean stage, and likewise, staged Shakespearean works structure the perception of “real” events. Seen this way, Stoic exercises certainly constitute a mode of behavior that can be linked to the formal enactment of drama, as they provide a type of performance that, on its face, resists categorization as either entirely theatrical or experiential. Stoicism was between the two Platonic poles of the aleatory, non-repeatable events of life and the artistic, iterable imitation of it.³ It was neither the raw material of the represented nor the refined simulacra of the representative; Stoic activity lived in a space between drama and spontaneity. It was a practice, and thus a type of performance, and while it was not strictly theatre, it certainly could (and, I will argue, did) infiltrate the theatre.

The goal of the performance of *askesis* is to focus only on what one can control: one’s capacity for reason, which in turn allows the realization of a virtuous life. To everything else, the Stoic must profess indifference (*apatheia*), a word activated as both the philosopher’s disposition and the *adiaphora*, or “things indifferent,” which the Stoic was unconcerned with differentiating. Hadot, in an inspired passage of his book *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, plays with this double meaning when he claims that the task of Stoicism is to educate people to know only “the goods they are able to obtain” and to know the difference between good and evil:

In order for something good to be always obtainable, or an evil always avoidable, they must depend exclusively on man’s freedom; but the only things which fulfil these conditions are *moral* good and evil. They alone depend on us; everything else does *not* depend on us. Here, “everything

³ Paul Kottman has explored how even this seemingly reified boundary between Platonic *mimesis* and the affective immediacy of “actual” emotion may be blurred. In an essay on Herodotus’ account of Phrynichus’ tragedy *The Fall of Miletus*, Kottman takes up Hannah Arendt’s claim that the theatre is “pre-philosophical” to account for how the actuality of mourning can infiltrate its attempted representation (83).

else,” which does not depend on us, refers to the necessary linkage of cause and effect, which is not subject to our freedom. It must be indifferent to us: that is, we must not introduce any differences into it, but accept it in its entirety, as willed by fate. This is the domain of nature. (*Philosophy* 83, italics in original)

To be a Stoic, for Hadot, is to practice the dictum with which Epictetus begins his *Enchiridion*: “Some things are up to us and some things are not up to us” (*Handbook*, 11). Epictetus’ limpid proclamation finds moral resonance in the performative day-to-day and moment-to-moment upkeep of attentiveness needed to separate contingent things from Hadot’s “everything else,” the domain of nature that need not invite our curiosity, much less mastery, and need not have differences introduced. It is indifferent to us and we resist layering differences upon it. This is the form of indifference that *Much Ado* urges us to comport ourselves with when evaluating knowledge. Rather than see a gap in our knowledge, however, or rather than pursue the truth through the fallible medium of our human understanding, the Stoic exercise of Shakespeare’s play—what it *does*, not what it *means*—invites an embodied refocus onto our own selves. To ground this distinction briefly in an example from the play: rather than care about the “truth” of a situation (Claudio does not realize that it is Ursula, not Hero, whom he witnesses with a lover) the Stoic would question whether the perceived circumstances stem from reason or not. Did Claudio adequately train himself to be attentive to which cognitive and affective inputs correlate to reason?

In focusing on Stoicism’s performative dimension, I differ from literary scholars who have largely studied the classical philosophy’s intellectual inheritance. To be sure, the foundational work by T.S. Eliot, Gordon Braden, Andrew Shifflet, Reid Barbour, Patrick Gray, and others has helped trace vital connections between early modern poetry and drama and early modern translations and adaptations of texts by figures such as Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus, and, most prominently, Seneca, alongside the Neo-Stoic work of Justus Lipsius. But the study of Stoicism as a set of doctrines and ideas that wind their way

through early modern culture—surfacing, say, as *sententiae* and aphorisms in grammar instruction books and manuals of political and legal conduct, or as portentous speechifying in Senecan tragedies—elides the philosophy’s inheritance as a performed way of life, one that often opposed itself to precisely the sagacious-seeming nuggets of wisdom that characterize Stoicism’s more doctrinal disseminations. Thus while I agree with Braden that early modern Stoicism constitutes not a “set of static norms” but “an ongoing process of reinterpretation and revision” (3), I do not limit this organic quality to the text, but instead see texts as principles of embodied, practical living, not as bound maps of conceptual terrain. It is thus contemporary Stoic philosophers and critics such as Foucault, Hadot, and Martha Nussbaum who provide my major interlocutors, as their readings of Stoicism remain alive to the possibility of the philosophy’s vital and lived-in qualities.

The difference between Stoicism as a set of principles to know, on the one hand, and Stoicism as an embodied performance to learn, on the other, helps illuminate why I can search for its existence in a play such as *Much Ado* even though it explicitly professes distaste for the philosophy. In perhaps the most florid gesture of Stoicism’s apparent rejection, Leonato, in the throes of false mourning for his daughter, Hero, waves away consolation with a dismissal of philosophy’s efficacy:

I pray thee peace; I will be flesh and blood.
For there was never yet philosopher
That could endure the toothache patiently,
However they have writ the style of gods
And make a push at chance and sufferance.

(5.1.34–38)

Although not named, the particular philosophy that Leonato takes aim at is clearly Stoicism, and his overdrawn picture of Stoicism as stuffy misanthropy survives in its small-s terminology today: to be “stoic” often denotes an unhealthy denial of feeling. Leonato’s lines rehearse the early modern origins of this commonplace, which features in many dramatic scenes of the era that reject philosophy as a comically inadequate salve for the real

feelings and sensations of life. This was not an inaccurate picture, provided our understanding of the philosophy limited itself to adages, ideas, and other digestible sentiments and not the performed engagement encouraged by its classical sources. Perhaps most emblematically, the trope of rejecting Stoicism appears in Hamlet's rebuttal to his former schoolmate: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (1.5.174–75). Leonato elevates Hamlet's claim to high dudgeon. Stoics, Leonato claims, cannot account for the realities of "flesh and blood." In fact, they can barely handle a toothache, a telling choice of ailment, as Benedick's toothache has already served as a symptom of romantic attraction. Write all the lovely words you want, Leonato implies: when faced with pain and love, abstract beliefs collapse.

In early modern dramaturgy, Stoics often serve as foils for the more kinetic and full-blooded actions of a comic or tragic protagonist. To take a particularly self-aware example, Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Faire* playfully calls attention to the archetypal Stoic figure when Adam Overdo, a justice of the peace, finds himself humiliatingly strapped into the stocks at the titular celebration. When asked if he sighs or groans or "rejoice[s] in his affliction," he responds "I do not feel it, I do not think of it, it is a thing without me" before reciting some lines of Horace in Latin (4.6.91–94). Another observer exclaims "What's here? A stoic i'the stocks? The fool is turned philosopher" (4.6.100–1). The stock Stoic finds himself in actual stocks that physically manifest the paralysis associated with his philosophy. Overdo, despite his name, is more notable here for what he does *not* do: unfeeling and unthinking, he finds comfort in the kind of textual therapy at which Leonato sneers.

But the form of Stoicism that Leonato mocks and Overdo satirically emblemizes is one realized textually, rather than in the performed way of life celebrated by Hadot and the coy deferment of truth effected by Foucault. It is, in other words, the flattened and overly intellectual version too often conflated with the more vital understanding. Hence, in *Much Ado*, the frequent distaste for philosophy is always a distaste for philosophy that finds itself in words, in language. Moments before his stock dismissal of stock Stoicism, Leonato had railed against those who would, Overdo-like, "patch grief with proverbs" (5.1.34–38). In a more minor key, *Much Ado*

frequently satirizes as inefficient the “paper bullets” that litter its plot with witticisms and idioms. “Dost thou think I care for satire or an epigram?” asks Benedick at the close, in an apparent show of his redeemed belief in the virtue of dealing with emotional realities head-on (5.4.99). And Don John, wallowing in his melancholy, acts offended at the consolation of philosophy proffered by Borachio: “I wonder that thou—being as thou sayst thou art, born under Saturn—goest about to apply a moral medicine to a mortifying mischief” (1.310–12). Borachio has simply advised that Don John “hear reason,” but even this misapprehends how reason figured itself philosophically; rather than something heard (merely a word, a phrase, a sentence), reason was something done, something practiced.

While the play continually disavows the possibility of philosophy resolving itself into transmittable and communicable language, it does realize Stoicism’s practiced incarnation as *askesis*. It does so in its repeated gestures of reorienting the audience and its characters away from placing a premium on the accumulation of knowledge in pursuit of the truth—away from chasing the “nothing” that tempts us with the promise of the infinite—and instead leveling its gaze on the faculties of the self that would embark on such a journey. The Stoic needed to examine deeply their own ability to perceive before they could even begin to care definitively about what is real or not, and *Much Ado* performs the training needed to undertake this examination more than it does the actual examination. It thus realizes in dramatic performance a mode of practice—that is, it aestheticizes and theatricalizes a type of performance meant to be executed in the space of one’s private life. To explore this process further, my task here is threefold. I want to introduce Stoicism as a way of life that professes kinship to contemporary understandings of performance. I want to demonstrate how that way of life lived on in the early modern era despite efforts to reduce it to intellectual platitudes. And I want to show that *Much Ado* has historical, theoretical, and practiced resonances with this mode of performance. Before arriving at a sustained reading of *Much Ado*, then, I will need to explore thoroughly different forms of Stoicism at length; this lengthy digression is necessary in order to counter the persistent narrative of Stoicism as intellectual knowledge by tracing the