

Much Ado About Nothing

The Shorter Shakespeare



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**Adapted from William Shakespeare by Tracy Irish
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Character List

Narrators

*The 3 narrators introduce, explain, describe
and sometimes comment on the action*

Leonato's Household

Leonato: Hero's father, the Governor of Messina

Antonio: Leonato's brother

Hero: Leonato's daughter

Beatrice: Leonato's niece

Ursula & Margaret: Hero's Gentlewomen

Don Pedro's Household

Don Pedro: Prince of Aragon

Don John: Don Pedro's illegitimate brother

Claudio: A young nobleman

Benedick: A gentleman

Conrad & Borachio: Followers of Don John

Balthasar: Musician

Messenger

The Watch

Dogberry: In charge of the Watchmen

Verges: Dogberry's assistant

Sexton

1st Watchman

2nd Watchman

3rd Watchman

&

Friar Francis

Attendant

Introduction

Narrators 1 and 3 are sitting talking. Narrator 2 joins them

Narrator 2:

My sister's getting married next spring.

Narrator 1:

Poor man – that's his life over then, being nagged all the time and worrying if his wife is looking at other men. What's the point of getting married in this day and age anyway?

Narrator 2:

To show you love someone?

Narrator 1:

You don't need a piece of paper to show you love someone and plenty of people who do have that piece of paper don't love each other. People don't marry for love – it's for convenience. Or money. Or security. Stuff like that. But not for love.

Narrator 2:

That's a very cynical point of view. What about Romeo and Juliet who had to marry in secret because their families hated each other?

Narrator 1:

Come on, that's just a story. It was written over 400 years ago. That's what people did in those days – got married. They used to worry about what their parents thought. It's different now.

Narrator 2:

Not for everyone. Perhaps some people have more choice about what they do these days, especially women. Women don't need a husband to protect them any more and they can choose whether or not they want a family...

Narrator 1:

And men don't need wives to nag, sorry – 'to look after' – them.

Narrator 2:

But people do still marry for love.

Narrator 1:

Love? or lust? How long does love last anyway? Surely not a whole lifetime? That's why so many people get divorced.

Narrator 2:

I think love that lasts is based on friendship and trust.

Narrator 3:

I know a story you might like. It's about two couples and why they get married. It might help with your argument. It's called a comedy - bits of it

are sad, bits of it are funny, bits of it are romantic. Like Romeo and Juliet it's a play written 400 years ago, so you can think about what's changed since then and what hasn't. Let me show you.

As Narrator 3 introduces the characters they step forward to form a freeze frame

The whole play takes place in and around the house of a widower called Leonato. He is the governor of a town called Messina on the island of Sicily in Italy.

Living with Leonato are his beautiful daughter, Hero, and his niece, Beatrice. Beatrice is also beautiful but better known for being bright and witty. They have two ladies in waiting, Margaret and Ursula. Leonato also has a brother called Antonio.

Don Pedro, the Prince of Aragon, has just won a war against his brother, Don John. Now they are friends again and are coming to visit Leonato. With them are two young gentlemen, who fought alongside Don Pedro: Signor Benedick, also renowned for his wit and Count Claudio.

Narrator 1:

Hang on, Don Pedro and Don John fought a war and now they're friends again?

Narrator 3:

Well 'being friends again' has been forced on Don John; he's not happy about it. Don John is a bastard – I mean he's illegitimate, not that he's a horrible person. (Actually he's that as well.) In Shakespeare's time that meant that you were a dangerous person – you weren't conceived in the proper way so you could upset the proper order of things.

Narrator 2:

Like claiming money or property when your father died which should, according to this proper order of things, only go to the legitimate children?

Narrator 3:

400 years ago in Shakespeare's time they took these inheritance issues very seriously. That's part of why it was so important for women, noble women anyway, to be virgins when they married. A husband wanted to be sure that he was passing his wealth and titles to his own son, not someone else's.

Narrator 2:

The men might have affairs, but if the women had affairs their husbands were called cuckolds and said to be wearing horns. There's a lot of jokes about horns in Shakespeare's plays.

Narrator 3:

And being faithful is an important issue in this play. Watch.

The narrators and characters leave the stage

Act 1 Scene 1

The gardens of Leonato's house

Leonato comes on with a messenger who has just given him a letter. He is followed by Beatrice and Hero

Leonato:

I learn in this letter that Don Pedro of Aragon 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?

Messenger:

But few of any sort, and none of name¹.

¹ no men of
high rank

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. He hath borne himself beyond the promise of his age, doing in the figure of a lamb the feats of a lion.

Beatrice:

I pray you, is Signor Montanto returned from the wars, or no?

Messenger:

I know none of that name, lady. There was none such in the army, of any sort.

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:

¹ this suggests that Benedick has boasted about how many he would kill and Beatrice has mocked him by promising to eat everyone he kills

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 killing¹.

Leonato:

² find fault with

Faith, niece, you tax² Signor Benedick too much. But he'll be meet with you³ I doubt it not.

Messenger:

He hath done good service, lady, in these wars.

Leonato:

³ get even with you

You must not, sir, mistake my niece. There is a kind of merry war betwixt Signor Benedick and her. They never meet but there's a skirmish of wit between them.

Beatrice:

⁴ limping

Alas, he gets nothing by that. In our last conflict four of his five wits went halting⁴ off, and now is the whole man governed with one. 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 hat.

Messenger:

⁵ in your good books, in your favour

I see, lady, the gentleman is not in your books⁵.

Beatrice:

⁶ someone who loves a quarrel

No. An he were, I would burn my study. But I pray you, who is his companion? Is there no young squarer⁶ now that will make a voyage with him to the devil?

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 have caught the Benedick.



Photo: Courtesy of Greg King, Resurgence Theatre Company, Canada

Messenger:

Don Pedro is approached.

Don Pedro enters followed by Claudio, Benedick, Balthasar, and lastly Don John the bastard, who does not look happy to be there. Don Pedro and Leonato greet each other politely, but with good humour

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, but when you depart from me, sorrow abides¹ and happiness takes his leave.

¹ stays

Don Pedro:

You embrace your charge too willingly.

Don Pedro smiles at Hero

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.

They all laugh

Don Pedro:

Be happy, lady, for you are like an honourable father.¹

Don Pedro leads Leonato aside to talk. Hero and Claudio pretend to listen to Beatrice and Benedick but are really more interested in stealing glances at each other.

¹ Don Pedro means that Hero looks like her father who is an honourable man. Benedick takes him literally to make a joke

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.

Beatrice:

I wonder that you will still be talking, Signor Benedick. Nobody marks² you.

² takes any notice of you

Benedick:

What, my dear Lady Disdain! Are you yet living?

Beatrice:

Is it possible disdain should die while she hath such meet³ food to feed it as Signor Benedick?

³ suitable

Benedick:

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. 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 scape⁴ a scratched face.

⁴ escape



Photo: J Docker-Drysdale © RSC

Beatrice:

Scratching could not make it worse an 'twere such a face as yours were.

Benedick:

I would my horse had the speed of your tongue. But keep your way, o' God's name. I have done.

Beatrice:

You always end with a jade's trick¹. I know you of old.

Don Pedro and Leonato come back to the others.

¹ an old horse who tries to get out of work

Don Pedro:

That is the sum of all, Leonato.

Don Pedro turns to Claudio and Benedick

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 occasion may detain us longer.

Leonato turns to Don John and holds out his hand

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.

Leonato leads his guests away. Everyone follows except Claudio who pulls Benedick back to talk

Claudio:

Benedick, didst thou note the daughter of Signor Leonato?

Benedick:

I noted her not, but I looked on her.

Claudio:

Is she not a modest young lady?

Benedick:

Do you question me as an honest man should do, for my simple true judgement, or would you have me speak after my custom, as being a professed tyrant¹ to their sex?

¹ critic

Claudio:

No, I pray thee speak in sober judgement.

Benedick:

Why, i' faith, methinks she's too low for a high praise, too brown for a fair praise, and too little for a great praise. Only this commendation I can afford her, that were she other than she is, she were unhandsome, and being no other but as she is, I do not like her.

Claudio:

Thou thinkest I am in sport. I pray thee tell me truly how thou likest her.

Benedick:

Would you buy her, that you enquire after her?

Claudio:

Can the world buy such a jewel?

Benedick:

Yea, and a case to put it into. But speak you this with a sad brow?¹

¹ are you serious?

Claudio:

In mine eye she is the sweetest lady that ever I looked on.

Benedick:

I can see yet without spectacles, and I see no such matter. There's her cousin, an she were not possessed with a fury, exceeds her as much in beauty as the first of May doth the last of December. But I hope you have no intent to turn husband, have you?

Claudio:

I would scarce trust myself though I had sworn the contrary, if Hero would be my wife.

Benedick:

Is 't come to this? Shall I never see a bachelor of three-score again? Go to, i' faith, an thou wilt needs thrust thy neck into a yoke², wear the print of it, and sigh away Sundays.

² wooden collar that binds together a pair of working animals eg oxen

Don Pedro comes back

Don Pedro:

What secret hath held you here that you followed not to Leonato's?

Benedick:

I would your grace would constrain me to tell.³

³ Benedick asks Don Pedro to insist that he tells the secret and Don Pedro responds by referring to the most binding oath of loyalty

Don Pedro:

I charge thee on thy allegiance.

Benedick:

You hear, Count Claudio? I can be secret as a dumb man, but on my allegiance, mark you this, on my allegiance! He is in love. With who? Mark how short his answer is – with Hero, Leonato's short daughter.

Don Pedro:

For the lady is very well worthy.

Claudio:

You speak this to fetch me in⁴, my lord.

⁴ to trick me

Don Pedro:

By my troth, I speak my thought.

Claudio:

And in faith, my lord, I spoke mine.

Benedick:

And by my two faiths and troths, my lord, I spoke mine.

Claudio:

That I love her, I feel.

Don Pedro:

That she is worthy, I know.

Benedick:

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.

Don Pedro scowls at Benedick for making fun of them

Don Pedro:

Thou wast ever an obstinate heretic in the despite of beauty¹

Benedick:

That a woman conceived me, I thank her. That she brought me up, I likewise give her most humble thanks. But because I will not do them the wrong to mistrust any, I will do myself the right to trust none. I will live a bachelor.

Don Pedro:

I shall see thee ere I die look pale with love.

Benedick:

With anger, with sickness, or with hunger, my lord; not with love. Prove that ever I lose more blood with love than I will get again with drinking, pick out mine eyes with a ballad-maker's pen and hang me up at the door of a brothel house for the sign of a blind Cupid.²

Don Pedro:

If ever thou dost fall from this faith thou wilt prove a notable argument. Well, as time shall try³. "In time the savage bull doth bear the yoke."

¹ Don Pedro means that Benedick is determined not to be affected by love

² it was believed that being in love thinned the blood but drinking thickened it

³ if you change your mind it will give us all something to talk about. Well, we'll see