

PRESTWICK HOUSE LITERARY TOUCHSTONE CLASSICS

# MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

by William Shakespeare



UNABRIDGED WITH GLOSSARY AND NOTES

# MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING



William Shakespeare



**Prestwick House**

LITERARY TOUCHSTONE CLASSICS

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# STRATEGIES

## Strategies for Understanding Shakespeare's Language

1. When reading verse, note the appropriate phrasing and intonation.

DO NOT PAUSE AT THE END OF A LINE unless there is a mark of punctuation. Shakespearean verse has a rhythm of its own, and once a reader gets used to it, the rhythm becomes very natural to speak in and read. Beginning readers often find it helpful to read a short pause at a comma and a long pause for a period, colon, semicolon, dash, or question mark.

Here's an example from *The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV, Scene i:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd, (*short pause*)  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath: (*long pause*) it is twice blest; (*long pause*)  
It blesseth him that gives, (*short pause*) and him that takes; (*long pause*)  
'Tis mightiest in the mighties; (*long pause*) it becomes  
The throned monarch better than his crown; (*long pause*)

2. Read from punctuation mark to punctuation mark for meaning.

In addition to helping you read aloud, punctuation marks define units of thought. Try to understand each unit as you read, keeping in mind that periods, colons, semicolons, and question marks signal the end of a thought. Here's an example from *The Taming of the Shrew*: Act I, Scene i:

LUC. Tranio, I saw her coral lips to move,  
And with her breath she did perfume the air;  
Sacred, and sweet, was all I saw in her.  
TRA. Nay, then, 'tis time to stir him from his  
trance.  
I pray, awake, sir: if you love the maid,  
Bend thoughts and wits to achieve her.

The first unit of thought is from “Tranio” to “air”:  
He saw her lips move, and her breath perfumed the air.

The second thought (“Sacred, and sweet...”) re-emphasizes the first.

Tranio replies that Lucentio needs to awaken from his trance and try to win “the maid.” These two sentences can be considered one unit of thought.

3. In an **inverted sentence**, the verb comes before the subject. Some lines will be easier to understand if you put the subject first and reword the sentence. For example, look at the line below:

“*Never was seen so black a day as this:*” (*Romeo and Juliet*, Act IV, Scene v)

You can change its inverted pattern so it is more easily understood:

“*A day as black as this was never seen:*”

4. An **ellipsis** occurs when a word or phrase is left out. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Benvolio asks Romeo’s father and mother if they know the problem that is bothering their son. Romeo’s father answers:

“*I neither know it nor can learn of him*” (*Romeo and Juliet*, Act I, Scene i)

This sentence can easily be understood to mean,

“*I neither know [the cause of] it,  
nor can [I] learn [about it from] him.*”

5. As you read longer speeches, keep track of the subject, verb, and object—*who did what to whom*.

In the clauses below, note the subject, verbs, and objects:

Ross: The king hath happily received, Macbeth,  
The news of thy success: and when he reads  
Thy personal venture in the rebel’s fight... (*Macbeth*, Act I, Scene iii)

1<sup>st</sup> clause: *The king hath happily received, Macbeth, / The news of thy success:*

SUBJECT – The king

VERB – has received

## Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights

Consider the following as you read *Much Ado About Nothing*:

### Characterization:

Beatrice and Benedick are two of the most complex, fully developed characters in all of Shakespeare's plays. Their complexity stems from their self-awareness; in the midst of mocking their friends and each other, they recognize their own faults.

The play itself is complex because we are given multiple views of these characters. We see Beatrice and Benedick through each other's eyes, and each through his or her own eyes. We also see them interacting with their friends and families; and we hear these friends and family members talk about them when they are absent.

- Benedick is aware of his own tendency to overstate the case—that his babbling, even when he is alone, is slightly self-mocking and intentional.

He likes being part of the “fraternity” of men that includes Claudio and Pedro and feels comfortable enough to mock his friends, even when they do not seem to appreciate it. However, when the seriousness of the situation with Hero becomes apparent, it is Benedick who remains both reasonable and loyal.

- Beatrice says of herself, “I was born to speak all mirth and no matter.” Other characters also comment on her natural cheerfulness, and so we can assume that, even when she is mocking Benedick, it is in a good-natured, rather than bitter, way.

When, in Act III, Scene I, she hears herself criticized for being too sarcastic, notice how ready Beatrice is to let down her defenses and admit her own wrongdoing.

She, like Benedick, is vulnerable and combative at the same time.

Though they discount one another's opinion, Beatrice and Benedick are defined, even in their own eyes, by each other.

### Language:

Also look out for uses and abuses of formal language. While Benedick and his friends seem to be well-born and educated and can, therefore, make complicated rhetorical jokes and allusions with ease, Dogberry and Verges fail utterly in their attempts to use elevated language.

# MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

DON PEDRO, Prince of Arragon  
LEONATO, Governor of Messina  
ANTONIO, an old man, brother of Leonato

BENEDICK, a young lord of Padua  
BEATRICE, niece to Leonato  
CLAUDIO, a young lord of Florence  
HERO, daughter to Leonato  
MARGARET, gentlewoman attending to Hero  
URSULA, gentlewoman attending to Hero

DON JOHN, Don Pedro's bastard brother  
BORACHIO, follower of Don John  
CONRADE, follower of Don John

DOGBERRY, a Constable  
VERGES, a Headborough  
A Sexton  
FIRST WATCHMAN  
SECOND WATCHMAN

BALTHASAR, attendant on Don Pedro  
FRIAR FRANCIS  
A Boy  
Messenger to Leonato  
Another Messenger

Attendants, Musicians of the Watch, Antonio's Son and other Kinsmen



# MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

# ACT I

## ACT I

### SCENE I

[Before 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.

MESSSENGER: He is very near by this. He was not three leagues off when I left him.

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

MESSSENGER: 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.

10 MESSSENGER: Much deserved on his part, and equally remembered by 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.

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

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

20 LEONATO: Did he break out into tears?

MESSSENGER: In great measure.

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

25 BEATRICE: I pray you, is Signior Mountanto returned from the wars or no?

MESSSENGER: 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 Signior Benedick of Padua.

30 MESSENGER: O, he's returned, and as pleasant as ever he was.

BEATRICE: He set up his bills here in Messina and challenged Cupid<sup>1</sup> at the flight; and my uncle's fool, reading the challenge, subscribed for Cupid and challenged him at the birdbolt.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

35 LEONATO: Faith, niece, you tax Signior Benedick too much; but he'll be meet with you, I doubt it not.

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

40 BEATRICE: You had musty<sup>4</sup> victual,<sup>5</sup> and he hath help to eat it. He is a very valiant trencherman;<sup>6</sup> he hath an excellent stomach.

MESSENGER: And a good soldier too, lady.

45 BEATRICE: And a good soldier to a lady; but what is he to a lord?

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.

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

55 BEATRICE: Alas! He gets nothing by that. In our last conflict four of his five wits went halting<sup>7</sup> 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 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.

60 MESSENGER: Is't possible?

BEATRICE: Very easily possible. He wears his faith but as the fashion of his hat; it ever changes with the next block.

65 MESSENGER: I see, lady, the gentleman is not in your books.<sup>8</sup>

BEATRICE: No, and if 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?

<sup>1</sup>the god of love

<sup>2</sup>the novice level of archery (see glossary)

<sup>3</sup>[Beatrice implies that Benedick is a harmless soldier.]

<sup>4</sup>stale

<sup>5</sup>food

<sup>6</sup>good eater

<sup>7</sup>limping

<sup>8</sup>book of friends

70 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

75 the Benedick, it will cost him a thousand pound ere he be cured.

MESSENGER: I will hold friends with you, lady.

BEATRICE: Do, good friend.

LEONATO: You will never run mad,<sup>9</sup> niece.

80 BEATRICE: No, not till a hot January.

MESSENGER: Don Pedro is approached.

*Enter Don Pedro, Claudio, Benedick, Balthasar, and [Don] John the Bastard.*

DON PEDRO: Good Signior 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  
85 your Grace; for trouble being gone, comfort should remain; but when you depart from me, sorrow abides and happiness takes his leave.

DON PEDRO: You embrace your charge too willingly. I think this is your daughter.

90 LEONATO: Her mother hath many times told me so.

BENEDICK: Were you in doubt, my lord, that you asked her?

LEONATO: Signior Benedick, no; for then were you a child.

DON PEDRO: You have it full, Benedick. We may guess by this what you are, being a man. Truly, the lady fathers herself. Be  
95 happy, lady; for you are like an honourable father.

BENEDICK: If Signior 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, Signior Benedick;  
100 Nobody marks you.

BENEDICK: What, my dear Lady Disdain! are you yet living?

BEATRICE: Is it possible Disdain should die while she hath such meet<sup>10</sup> food to feed it as Signior Benedick? Courtesy itself must convert to disdain if you come in her presence.

105 BENEDICK: Then is courtesy a turncoat. But it is certain I am loved of all ladies, only you excepted; and I would I could find in

<sup>9</sup>[i.e., run mad with the "plague" of Benedick]

<sup>10</sup>suitable

my heart that I had not a hard heart, for truly I love none.

110 BEATRICE: A dear happiness to women! They would else have  
 been 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.

115 BENEDICK: God keep your ladyship still in that mind! So some  
 gentleman or other shall scape a predestinate<sup>11</sup> scratched  
 face.

BEATRICE: Scratching could not make it worse an '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.

120 BENEDICK: I would my horse had the speed of your tongue, and  
 so good a continuer. But keep your way, a God's name!  
 I have done.

BEATRICE: You always end with a jade's<sup>12</sup> trick. I know you of  
 old.

125 DON PEDRO: That is the sum of all, Leonato. Signior Claudio  
 and Signior 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. I dare swear he is no hypocrite, but prays from  
 130 his heart.

LEONATO: If you swear, my lord, you shall not be forsworn. [*To  
 Don John*] Let me bid you welcome, my lord. Being recon-  
 ciled to the prince your brother, I owe you all duty.

135 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 but] Benedick and Claudio.*

CLAUDIO: Benedick, didst thou note the daughter of Signior  
 Leonato?

140 BENEDICK: I noted her not, but I looked on her.

CLAUDIO: Is she not a modest<sup>13</sup> young lady?

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

CLAUDIO: No. I pray thee speak in sober judgment.

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

<sup>11</sup>fated

<sup>12</sup>worthless horse's  
 [see glossary]

<sup>13</sup>mild

## Glossary and Vocabulary

### ACT I, SCENE I

**birdbolt** – a beginners’ level in archery; Beatrice is mocking both Benedick’s boastful nature and his inability to do serious damage both in love and in war.

**jade’s trick** – A *jade* is an unreliable horse, one which might stop in the last stretch of a race. Beatrice accuses Benedick of abruptly and unfairly dropping out of their battle of wits.

**play the flouting Jack** – tease us; Benedick asks if Claudio is trying to get them to believe that Cupid, usually portrayed as blind, has great vision, or that Vulcan, the famous blacksmith, is actually a great carpenter.

**sometime guarded with fragments** – In response to Claudio and Pedro’s mockery of his speech, Benedick retorts that their wittiness is lacking coherence. Wordplay is very important in *Much Ado About Nothing*; characters are always criticizing, building on, and playing off of each others’ words and phrasing. Formal styles of writing and speaking are often referenced (as here, when a casual word becomes the closing of a letter or at the wedding of Claudio and Hero, when Benedick quotes a widely-used Latin grammar phrase).

### ACT I, SCENE III

**born under Saturn** – During Elizabethan times, most people believed that the positions of the planets played a great role in a person’s temperament. Because Don John was born under Saturn, he is supposed to have a gloomy nature.

### ACT II, SCENE I

**Philemon** – A classical myth relates that an elderly husband (Philemon) and his wife (Baucis) invited a stranger into their home. Although they were poor, they gave the guest everything they could; they were rewarded when the guest turned out to be Jove, king of the gods, in disguise. Don Pedro tells Hero that his real face is much more attractive than his mask in the same way that the face of Jove was more attractive than Philemon’s roof.

**Answer, clerk** – Margaret pretends that she and Balthasar are in a formal question-and-answer period similar to the one used in church services; as *clerk*, Balthasar is supposed to supply the responses to Margaret’s questions.

**Hercules** – In Greek and Roman mythology, Hercules was the strongest man in the world. Benedick complains that Beatrice would have reduced even Hercules to the humblest position—that of turning the spit on which a piece of meat was cooking.

**Antipodes** – places on Earth that are opposite of each other; often, it is a reference to Australia and New Zealand, which are diametrically opposed to England--the other side of the earth.

**harpy** – Both the Greek author Homer and the Roman author Virgil mention these foul half-women, half-vultures in their long poems. The name *harpy* eventually became synonymous with “bad-tempered woman.”

### ACT II, SCENE III