

Much Ado About Nothing Reconsidered

by

D. C. R. A. GOONETILLEKE
Department of English, Vidyalankara Campus

Much Ado About Nothing is the first of a group of three plays—the others are *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*—which were written just before the turn of the 16th century and are generally considered Shakespeare's greatest achievements in romantic comedy. Kenneth Muir regards these comedies as "the three masterpieces",¹ while M. C. Bradbrook writes :

In the years between the death of Marlowe and Greene, and the arrival of Jonson and Chapman, the critical years between 1594 and 1598, Shakespeare had the stage virtually to himself. This was the period of his most rapid development. He grew from the experimenter of *Love's Labour Lost* and *Richard III* to the author of *Much Ado About Nothing*. It is an unequalled achievement. He was not only the greatest of the Elizabethan dramatists, but he did far more than any other man to create the drama and establish it.²

Miss Bradbrook's high opinion of *Much Ado* is shared by T. W. Craik: "there is nothing to prevent our complete enjoyment of the subtle comedy that Shakespeare is offering; certainly there is no reason why we should find it in any sense a failure".³ E. C. Pettet refers to *Much Ado* as "what has always been considered one of the greatest of Shakespeare's comedies".⁴ But there is a contrary line of thinking particularly with regard to *Much Ado*. J. C. Maxwell regards it as "profoundly unsatisfactory",⁵ while Patrick Swinden writes: "These two plays (*Much Ado About Nothing* and *All's Well that Ends Well*) are often considered the least satisfactory of Shakespeare's mature comedies, and I must say I share the prevailing dissatisfaction".⁶ Thus, opinions about *Much Ado* tend to diverge sharply into the extremely favourable or the extremely unfavourable, and the determination of its true value calls for balanced discrimination.

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1. Kenneth Muir (ed.), *Shakespeare the Comedies* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1965), p. 1.
 2. M. C. Bradbrook, *Shakespeare and Elizabethan Poetry* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1951), p. 83.
 3. T. W. Craik, 'Much Ado About Nothing': *Scrutiny*, Vol. 19, No. 4, p. 316.
 4. E. C. Pettet, *Shakespeare and the Romance Tradition* (London: Methuen, 1970 ed.) p. 132.
 5. J. C. Maxwell, 'Shakespeare: The Middle Plays': Boris Ford (ed.), *The Age of Shakespeare* (London: Penguin, 1955), p. 203.
 6. Patrick Swinden, *An Introduction to Shakespeare's Comedies* (London: Macmillan, 1973), p. 88.

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Much Ado About Nothing, it seems to me, is a light comedy whose happy ending is assured. But Patrick Swinden is not far wrong when he claims that the play has "tragic potential".⁷ Really, for a while the play moves close to Romantic Tragedy when Don John's villainy begins to work and Claudio spurns Hero, but the comedy reasserts itself. Claudio is clearly not another Romeo who would commit suicide for love. Although the main action belongs to Claudio and Hero and although Claudio's changing attitudes to Hero are the main source of the play's momentum, it is Benedick and Beatrice who emerge as the most interesting among the characters in the play and their comic wit circumscribes the area of the play. At a superficial level, both Benedick and Beatrice find their sophisticated humour adequate to deal with the fashionable world of the Court in which the play is set. For instance, when Beatrice chattering away with typical brightness provokes a mock invitation from Don Pedro, she uses her polished wit to refuse him without offending his dignity :

DON PEDRO : Will you have me, Lady?

BEATRICE : No my Lord, unless I might have another for working-days, your Grace is too costly to wear every day: but I beseech your Grace pardon me, I was born to speak all mirth, and no matter.

(Act II, Scene i).

The play, however, obtrusively exploits wit too often for the sake of mere entertainment, the resulting humour being far from purposive as, say, Falstaff's in *Henry IV*. This tends to make characters stooges of wit :

LEONATO : You must not, sir, 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.

BEATRICE : Alas he gets nothing by that, in our last conflict, four of his five wits went halting off, and now is the whole man govern'd 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.

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. (I. i.)

Leonato's observation and the Messenger's question are openings for Beatrice's witty replies.

7. Patrick Swinden, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

The popular comedy of the sub-plot reveals the sort of interest in Shakespeare that deepens to Falstaff, but here it, too, works in a non-serious way. It adds a refreshing, earthy dimension to the light entertainment the play provides, its language effectively exploiting contemporary common speech, its vigour, its knack of using profound concepts fantastically (for instance, VERGES : Yea, or else it were pity but they should suffer salvation body and soul.—III. iii.). Much of this realistic humour is topical, as, say, the references to practices of Elizabethan Watchmen :

DOGBERRY : If you meet a thief, you may suspect him, by virtue of your office, to be no true man : and for such kind of men, the less you meddle or make with them, why the more is for your honesty.

WATCH : If we know him to be a thief, shall we not lay hands on him ?

DOGBERRY : Truly by your office you may, but I think they that touch pitch will be defil'd : the most peaceable way for you, if you do take a thief, is, to let him show himself what he is, and steal out of your company. (III. iii.)

The sub-plot also helps the play to tread only close upon Romantic Tragedy and no more. The Watchmen discover the conspiracy against Hero but their stupidity, plausibly enough, prevents them communicating their knowledge promptly. Yet, the very fact that the plot has been uncovered assures the audience that all the misunderstandings it has created are bound to be cleared up. And this sub-plot hardly does anything more. It has hardly any serious function of significance in itself or in connection with the main plot. It is true that sometimes Dogberry and Verges seem to pour comic acid on the self-regarding qualities of the world of the court by their ridiculous display of the same :

CONRADE : Away, you are an ass, you are an ass.

DOGBERRY : Dost thou not suspect my place ? dost thou not suspect my years ? O that he were here to write me down an ass ! but masters, remember that I am an ass, though it be not written down, yet forget not that I am an ass : No thou villain, thou art full of piety as shall be prov'd upon thee by good witness, I am a wise fellow, and which is more, an officer, and which is more, a householder, and which is more, as pretty a piece of flesh as any is in Messina, and one that knows the Law, go to, and a rich fellow enough, go to, and a fellow that hath had losses, and one that hath two gowns, and every thing handsome about him : bring him away : O that I had been writ down an ass ! (IV. ii.).

But, on the whole, their role is merely to purvey entertainment.

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However, I do not wish to convey the impression that the whole play is an entirely light comedy, smoothly moving towards a happy conclusion. While the elements of Romantic Tragedy help rectify any false notion of easy, straight, entirely happy, smoothness of movement, the Benedick-Beatrice relationship reveals a theme somewhat serious and consistent, the theme of marriage. At first, both Beatrice and Benedick appear very sceptical of marriage :

DON PEDRO : Well, as time shall try: in time the savage bull doth bear the yoke.

BENEDICK : The savage bull may, but if ever the sensible Benedick bear it, pluck off the bull's horns, and set them in my forehead, and let me be vilely painted, and in such great letters as they write, here is good horse to hire: let them signify under my sign, here you may see Benedick the married man. (I. i.)

Here we notice the recurring "bull" imagery that lends some continuity to the theme. Benedick seems to regard marriage as a concession to the animal in man, but he later grows to an acceptance of it, discarding his pose of scepticism (Beatrice's progress to this end will be seen to follow a slightly deeper course). In a characteristically Shakespearean way, prose is good enough to convey Benedick's surface tone of scepticism, but poetry is needed to communicate the final, more considered attitude to marriage found in his reply to Claudio :

CLAUDIO : I think he thinks upon the savage bull :
Tush fear not man, we'll tip thy horns with gold,
And all Europa shall rejoice at thee,
As once Europa did at lusty Jove,
When he would play the noble beast in love.

BENEDICK : Bull Jove sir had an amiable low.
And some such strange bull leap'd your father's cow,
And got a calf in that same noble feat,
Much like to you, for you have just his bleat. (V. iv.)

The "bull" imagery is used again; in this instance, it helps to suggest the necessity of marriage for the continuity of life. This new-felt attitude goes hand in hand with, and gains conviction from, Benedick's final serious comment on the inadequacy of mere witty scepticism :

DON PEDRO : How dost thou Benedick the married man?

BENEDICK : I'll tell thee what Prince: a college of wit-crackers cannot flout me out of my humour, dost thou think I care for a satire or an epigram? no, if a man will be beaten with brains, a' shall wear nothing handsome about him: in brief, since I do purpose to marry, I will think nothing to any purpose that the world can say against it, and therefore never flout at me, for what I have said against it: for man is a giddy thing, and this is my conclusion: for thy part Claudio, I did think to have beaten thee, but in that thou art like to be my kinsman, live unbruis'd, and love my cousin. (V. iv.)

And this theme of marriage is given an enhancing credibility by the humanity shown by Beatrice and Benedick, particularly when Hero is "belied".

This theme is touched on, rather than carried out in a continuous way, but its examination can be searching enough. It is Benedick and, more, Beatrice who are treated with most subtlety in the play. They provide much surface humour, and Benedick is at times only the licensed of the Elizabethan stage :

BENEDICK : That a woman conceived me, I thank her : that she brought me up, I likewise give her most humble thanks : but that I will have a recheat winded in my forehead, or hang my bugle in an invisible baldrick, all women shall pardon me : because I will not do them the wrong to mistrust any, I will do myself the right to trust none : and the fine is (for the which I may go the finer), I will live a bachelor. (I. i.) .

This speech is mere verbal jugglery. But as Benedick and Beatrice act as "professed tyrants" to each other's sex, there is at times an oversharphness in their language that is significant. For instance, Benedick's reply to Don Pedro's "I shall see thee ere I die, look pale with love" is too exaggeratedly vehement :

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 blind Cupid. (I. i.)

So too Beatrice :

BENEDICK : Then is courtesy a turn-coat, but it is certain I am loved of all Ladies, only you excepted : and I would I could find in my heart that I had not a hard heart, for truly I love none.

BEATRICE : A dear happiness to women, they would else have been 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. (I. i.)

Later, Beatrice unerringly pierces Benedick at his weakest point :

Why he is the Prince's jester, a very dull fool, only his gift is, in devising impossible slanders, none but libertines delight in him, and the commendations is not in his wit, but in his villainy, for he both pleases men and angers them, and then they laugh at him, and beat him : I am sure he is in the Fleet, I would he had boarded me. (II. i.)

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It is the charge that he is an official jester rather than that he is a poor jester that offends Benedick. This is so telling because he, like Beatrice, sometimes does show an awareness of his humorous front that saves him from being ridiculous :

BENEDICK : O she misus'd me past the endurance of a block: an oake but with one green leaf on it, would have answered her: my very visor began to assume life, and scold with her: she told me, not thinking I had been myself, that I was the Prince's jester, that I was duller than a great thaw, huddling jest upon jest, with such impossible conveyance upon me, that I stood like a man at a mark, with a whole army shooting at me : . . . (II. i.)

The extra sharpness in the language of Benedick and Beatrice suggests that their witty scepticism is a semi-conscious pose covering up a deeper emotional condition. This is more so in the case of Beatrice whose emotional state is finely, though unknowingly, defined by Hero :

But Nature never fram'd a woman's heart,
Of prouder stuff than that of Beatrice :
Disdain and Scorn ride sparkling in her eyes,
Misprising what they look on, and her wit
Values itself so highly, that to her
All matter else seems weak: she cannot love,
Nor take no shape nor project of affection,
She is so self endeared. (III. i.)

Thus, in her diatribes against the male Beatrice seems to be using her wit to rationalise a dissatisfaction springing from an inability to enter into a relationship with a man. That the dissatisfaction is connected with Benedick is suggested, for one, by the curiously serious words Beatrice utters in the midst of a comic scene :

DON PEDRO : Come Lady, come, you have lost the heart of Signior Benedick.

BEATRICE : Indeed my Lord, he lent it me awhile, and I gave him use for it, a double heart for his single one, marry once before he won it of me, with false dice, therefore your Grace may well say I have lost it. (II. i.)

Beatrice and Benedick seem to have established a relationship in the past and Benedick seems to have broken it. Their persisting mutual concern beneath the surface antagonism is hinted at from the beginning. It is Beatrice who introduces Benedick to the play by inquiring after him :

BEATRICE : I pray you, is Signior Mountanto return'd from the wars or no? (I. i.)

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Benedick would rail against her:

...she speaks poniards, and every word stabs: if her breath were as terrible as her terminations, there were no living near her, she would infect to the north star: I would not marry her, though she were endowed with all that Adam had left him before he transgress'd, she would have made Hercules have turn'd spit, yea, and have cleft his club to make the fire too; come, talk not of her, you shall find her the infernal Ate in good apparel, I would to God some scholar would conjure her, for certainly, while she is here, a man may live as quiet in hell, as in a sanctuary, and people sin upon purpose, because they would go thither, so indeed all disquiet, horror, and perturbation follows her. (II. i.)

But his interest in her is subtly suggested by the idea contained in "I would not marry her", an idea not yet given him by any other person. Therefore, the gulling scenes form only the machinery which enables them to discard their defensive poses when the playwright has no use for them. Still, both have a psychologically explicable, human depth of character, though Benedick less so as he is closer to the licensed stage wit. At the wedding scene, of those who belong to the society of "fashion", only they show humanity and understanding. Beatrice's fidelity and spontaneity, not seen to great advantage in the comic world, bursts out:

O on my soul my cousin is belied. (IV. i.)

Benedick hesitates but, spurred by love, agrees to "Kill Claudio" (IV. i.).

Against Benedick and Beatrice are placed Don Pedro, Claudio and Leonato. Don Pedro is not scrutinised closely, although some criticism is implied in that he supports Claudio in the darker scenes. Claudio is viewed more critically. Superficially, Claudio is the romantic lover of the Elizabethan stage; he speaks thus to Benedick in praise of Hero:

In mine eyes, she is the sweetest Lady that ever I look'd on. (I. i.)

But really he is callously self-regarding; he is concerned to find out whether Hero is Leonato's heir before acquiescing in Don Pedro's proposal to woo Hero on his behalf; he talks thus in the eavesdropping scene where Don Pedro, Leonato and Claudio gull Benedick:

Stalk on, stalk on, the fowl sits.

.....

Bait the hook well.

.....

He hath ta'en th' infection. (II. iii.)

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The heartlessness, revealed by the nastiness of his witty language here, culminates in his cruel spurning of Hero :

Give not this rotten orange to your friend
She's but the sign and semblance of her honour :
Behold how like a maid she blushes here !
O what authority and show of truth
Can cunning sin cover itself withal !
Comes not that blood, as modest evidence,
To witness simple virtue? would you not swear
All you that see her, that she were a maid,
By these exterior shows? But she is none :
She knows the heat of a luxurious bed :
Her blush is guiltiness, not modesty.

(IV. i.)

Clearly, he is less romantic than Benedick and Beatrice as brought out, for one, by their attitudes to him and Hero after the spurning.

Yet all these glimpses of serious meaning in *Much Ado* do not go to form a consistently significant whole. Claudio is criticised, but the language fails in consistency as regards the criticism made. In the last scene, he agrees to marry a person who he thinks is Hero's cousin "were she an Ethiop", but this is presented not so much as final proof of his innate shallowness but as a necessary part of the action. The delaying of the inevitable happy climax to extract some not very deep suspense and the balancing of structural elements, as in the two main eavesdropping scenes, only reveals a certain cleverness on the part of the dramatist. The plot is obtrusively manipulative. Its main technique is to exploit conventions such as errors, overhearings, but, worked out through weak prose and weak poetry, these appear mechanical and make the characters seem too often mere puppets. This applies even to the bringing together of Benedick and Beatrice and it seems an arbitrary stage tie-up rather than something psychologically real :

This can be no trick, the conference was sadly borne. They have the truth of this from Hero, they seem to pity the Lady: it seems her affections have their full bent: love me? why it must be requited: I hear how I am censur'd, they say I will bear myself proudly, if I perceive the love come from her: they say too, that she will rather die than give any sign of affection: I did never think to marry, I must not seem proud, happy are they that hear their detractions, and can put them to mending: they say the Lady is fair, 'tis a truth, I can bear them witness: and virtuous, 'tis so, I cannot reprove it, and wise, but for loving me, by my troth it is no addition to her wit, nor no great argument of her folly, for I will be horribly in love with her.

I may chance have some odd quirks and remnants of wit broken on me, because I have railed so long against marriage: but doth not the appetite alter? a man loves the meat in his youth, that he cannot endure in his age. Shall quips and sentences, and these paper bullets of the brain awe a man from the career of his humour? No, the world must be peopled. When I said I would die a bachelor, I did not think I should live till I were married, here comes Beatrice: by this day, she's a fair Lady, I do spy some marks of love in her. (II. iii.)

This is Benedick speaking, after the eavesdropping device has been used on him. The patterned prose, not following the run of common speech, takes the form of a sort of debate (with the enumeration of points— “..they seem .. they say .. they say too .. they say ..”, with questions and answers) and conveys the impression of an artificial cold logicality rather than of the warm inward movements of a heart leading towards a decided change of attitude. The convention remains merely mechanical. So, too, in the case of Beatrice :

What fire is in mine ears? can this be true?
Stand I condemn'd for pride and scorn so much?
Contempt, farewell, and maiden pride, adieu,
No glory lives behind the back of such.
And Benedick, love on I will requite thee,
Taming my wild heart to thy loving hand:
I thou dost love, my kindness shall incite thee
To bind our loves up in a holy band.
For others say thou dost deserve, and I
Believe it better than reportingly. (III. i.)

Here poetry is used with the same result. This speech of Beatrice's, in the first place, does not seem in character. She can hardly be so artless as this, nor had she revealed an uncontrollably “wild heart”. It is in keeping with the courtly code that Beatrice seems to want to fall openly in love with Benedick as some kind of reciprocal duty, but the speech is too brief, the verse too stilted, to convincingly communicate warm inward movements of the heart. Conventions to be dramatically effective must be brought to life as, say, in *The Winter's Tale* :

LEONTES (ASIDE) : Too hot, too hot!
To mingle friendship far is mingling bloods.
I have tremor cordis on me; my heart dances,
But not for joy, not joy. This entertainment
May a free face put on; derive a liberty
From heartiness, from bounty, fertile bosom,
And well become the agent. 'T may, I grant;
But to be paddling palms and pinching fingers,
As now they are, and making practis'd smiles
As in a looking-glass; and then to sigh, as 'twere
The mort o' th' deer. O, that is entertainment
My bosom likes not, nor my brows!

(I. ii.)

sad conference: I whipt me behind the arras, and there heard it agreed upon, that the Prince should woo Hero for himself, and having obtain'd her, give her to Count Claudio.

Leontes' sudden obsessive jealousy is made plausible by the power of the poetry here, though not prepared for earlier.

The general lightness of *Much Ado* is now very clear, but from this I am unable to proceed to James Smith's assumption of a special world of the play.⁸ The staging would make it obvious that the play is set in the fashionable world of the Court, yet this too often forms a lifeless backdrop as it were. The word "fashion" recurs, but not in such a way as to help recreate a society that is thematically significant. It is only at stray points (for instance, in that eavesdropping scene when Claudio's language is charged with that repelling nastiness capable of breaking through convention) that the words are strong enough to give an inkling of the kind of culpably frivolous society Smith imagines existing as a whole in the play.⁹ Assuming the creation of such a society, Smith can only oversimply treat Benedick's and Beatrice's cynicism as a conscious pose to protect themselves from others of the opposite sex so as to keep themselves free for each other.¹⁰ It has been my contention that theirs were semi-conscious rather than conscious, poses adopted to cover up their real emo-

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JOHN : Come, come, let us thither, this may prove food to my displeasure, that young start-up hath all the glory of my overthrow: if I can cross him any way, I bless myself every way: you are both sure, and will assist me.

CONRADE : To the death my Lord.

(I.iii)

Yet his is a mechanical role, lacking significance :

MESSENGER : My Lord, your brother John is taken in flight,
And brought with armed men back to Messina.

BENEDICK : Think not on him till tomorrow, I'll devise three brave
punishments for him: strike up pipers.

Dance.

(V. iv.)

Benedick refuses to think Don John and problems worth consideration, and decides to carry on with the dance, thus closing the play on this light note in keeping with its general level of entertainment. Yet Shakespeare's talent does manage to achieve something more despite this. I have indicated serious elements in the play. Leonato's later poetry and the racy vernacular comic prose are clearly promising excellencies.

Much Ado is not a "masterpiece". Nor is it "profoundly unsatisfactory". It seems to me to have a mixed value and is, from one aspect, a transitional work from Shakespeare's early comedies to that extraordinary period in the opening years of the 17th century which gave us *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It* as well as *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet*.