Much Ado About Nothing

Fantasy

William Shakespeare

The Play (MAAN)

- Much Ado About Nothing is generally considered one of Shakespeare’s best comedies, because it combines elements of great comedy with more serious themes dealing with honor, shame, and court politics.
- Though it has darker concerns, it is a joyful comedy that ends with multiple marriages and no deaths.

The Nature of Comedies

- Although one of the features of Shakespearean comedy is that no one dies, it would be a mistake to assume that death is absent from this genre.
- Often, Shakespeare’s comedies are more accepting of death than his tragedies, treating death as part of the natural cycle of life.
- Many of his comedies feature fake deaths or figurative deaths of main characters.
- Much Ado About Nothing is no exception, and Hero’s pretending to die of humiliation makes death more vividly present here than in any of Shakespeare’s other comedies.

A Problem Comedy?

- In this play, the line between tragedy and comedy is sometimes fuzzy.
- Many critics have noted that the plot of Much Ado About Nothing shares significant elements with that of Romeo and Juliet.
- Other critics call MAAN a problem comedy:
  - Hero stages a false death only to come back to life once her beloved has repented.

Ah, Young…or is it…Old Love?

- Although the young lovers Hero and Claudio provide the main impetus for the plot, the courtship between the older, wiser lovers Benedick and Beatrice is what makes MAAN so memorable.
  - Benedick and Beatrice argue with delightful wit, and Shakespeare develops their journey from antagonism to sincere love and affection with a rich sense of humour and compassion.
  - Since Beatrice and Benedick have a history, weight is added to their relationship.
  - They are older and more mature than the typical lovers in Shakespeare’s comedies, though their unhealthy competitiveness reveals them to be childish when it comes to love.

Dramatis Personae

Cast of Characters
Don Pedro
- The Prince of Aragon (Spain).
- He has won victory over his illegitimate brother (Don John).
- He is visiting Messina on his way home.

Benedick
- A follower of Don Pedro.
- His name means ‘the blessed one’.
- He has decided that he’s a woman hater, and swears he shall never marry.

Claudio
- Don Pedro’s favorite soldier.
- Falls instantly in love with Hero.
- Is quick to believe the word of a villain (Don John) in accusing his beloved Hero of infidelity.
- A wuss.

Don John
- The illegitimate brother of Don Pedro.
- A stage direction in the play even refers to him as the ‘Bastard’, as does Benedick later in the play.
- He describes himself as a ‘plain-dealing villain’.

Don John’s Stooges
- Borachio
  - A follower and friend of Don John, and the originator of the plan to ruin Hero’s good name.
  - His name comes from the Spanish word for ‘wine bottle’.

- Conrad
  - Another of Don John’s followers.
  - Is mean... period.
  - Part of the plot to ruin Hero’s name as well.

The Bad Boys of Messina
**Hero**
- The daughter of Leonato.
- Described by Claudio as 'a modest young lady'.
- Dismissed by Benedick as 'too low for high praise and too little for great praise'.
- Attended by Margaret and Ursula.

**Beatrice**
- Although Leonato is her 'uncle and her guardian', her household position isn’t clear.
- She speaks and behaves with a lot of freedom, and her wit challenges the male characters.
- She has sworn never to marry.

**Dogberry**
- Master Constable of Messina.
- Has a great opinion of himself and his office but cannot speak English very well.
- Definite comic relief

**Verges**
- Headborough or the under-constable.
- Dogberry’s assistant.
  - Lesser Role

**Brothers in Messina**
- **Leonato**
  - The Governor of Messina.
  - Father of Hero.
  - He is flattered by the attentions of Don Pedro, and quick to believe whatever the prince tells him.
- **Antonio**
  - Leonato’s brother.
  - Ready to murder Claudio on his brother’s behalf.
  - Has a lesser role.

**Antonio and Leonato**
Lesser Roles

- **Balthasar**
  - A servant to Don Pedro.
  - A co-conspirator in the romance plot between Benedick and Beatrice.
  - A singer.

- **Friar Francis**
  - A priest.
  - He is not as prone to over-emotional responses like other characters.
  - A co-conspirator in the plot to cover up Hero’s ‘death’ until her innocence is proven.

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PLOT SUMMARY

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**Setting:**

Messina

The Plot Begins…

- Don Pedro, the Prince of Aragon is returning from victory against his half-brother, the rebellious Don John, who tried to take over Aragon.

- One of Don Pedro’s officers, Claudio has distinguished himself greatly in this campaign.

- Though beaten, as part of the truce negotiated, Don John agreed to also come to Messina.

We Continue…

- As a courtesy for passing through his territory, Don Pedro visits the Governor of Messina, Leonato on his way home.

- In Messina, Claudio falls even more deeply in love with Hero, Leonato’s daughter.

- His officer, Benedick, trades barbs and witty insults with the Leonato’s niece, Beatrice.

There’s More…

- Leonato notes the merry war of words these two have...

- In love with Hero, Claudio seeks Benedick’s opinion.

- Benedick teases him about her, making Claudio even more determined to marry her.

- Knowing Claudio loves Hero, Don Pedro nobly arranges to court Hero on Claudio’s behalf.
  - Seems a bit weird, doesn’t it?
But That’s Not All…

- Playing matchmakers, Don Pedro, Leonato and Claudio decide to try to make the lifelong bachelor Benedick fall in love with Beatrice, who is equally opposed to any marriage.

- Hero also helps to match-make with the aide of her waiting women, Ursula and Margaret.

- The plan is to trick both Benedick and Beatrice into thinking each has declared his/her deep love for the other!

Don John is Not Happy…

- Meanwhile, Claudio’s marriage to Hero is planned but though Don Pedro has made peace with his brother Don John, Don John is:
  - Still not a nice guy
  - Jealous of Claudio’s reputation and determined to cause him harm...

- The same night during a masked party, Don John mischievously allows Claudio to overhear that he believes Don Pedro actually wants Hero for himself.
  - Claudio (the wuss) easily falls for Don John’s trick and pouts.
  - Devastated, Claudio runs off before Don Pedro can tell him the good news that Claudio and Hero will be married.
  - Beatrice finds Claudio and makes him see reason. The marriage will happen.

But Don John’s Not Done…

- Learning of Claudio and Hero, Don John is foiled.
  - He then uses Hero’s waiting woman (Margaret) and his aide Borachio to make it look like Hero is cheating on him.

- Claudio hears what he thinks is Hero (really Margaret) in the throes of passion with another man (Borachio).

- Claudio takes the bait, rejecting and denouncing a heartbroken Hero on the altar!

Hero’s Journey…

- Friar Francis, believing in Hero’s virtue, helps the grief-stricken Hero hide away with Leonato’s help.
- After Leonato is convinced that Hero is innocent and not a ‘contaminated stale’,
  - Leonato then announces the death of his daughter from grief at being rejected by Claudio.
  - He must now play the role of grieving father. He doesn’t have to pretend to be angry, however.

The ‘Wine Bottle’ Speaks

- Borachio, however, has drunkenly boasted not only of his part in Don John’s plan but also about the ducats he’s received from his boss.
  - He reveals his bad deeds to Conrad in the middle of the town square and is apprehended by constables.

- His subsequent confession restored Hero’s virtue and good name. Too bad everyone thinks she’s dead!

Claudio’s Apology

- A public apology is demanded from Claudio by Leonato professing Hero’s good virtue.
  - He feels so bad about shunning her, that he’s willing to do anything in her honor.

- Additionally, an epitaph (a poemish cloth) is to be hung at Hero’s grave then sung by Claudio.
  - He gets Balthasar to do it since he’s a much better singer.
In return, Leonato allows Claudio to marry one of his ‘nieces’ instead of Hero as his punishment for his bad deeds. Of course, the niece is Hero in disguise.

The ‘niece’ just so happens to be an almost exact copy of his dead daughter. And she’s ready to forgive and forget Claudio’s poor behavior.

The Finale…

This niece reveals herself to be none other than Hero. The planned wedding now has two couples:

- Claudio and Hero;
- Benedick and Beatrice.

The Final Thoughts

- At the wedding Benedick and Beatrice question why neither declared their love to each other directly.
  - They learn that they were tricked but realize they loved each other all along.

- Meanwhile news comes that Don John who had gone into hiding has been captured, the play ending with Benedick telling Don Pedro, now single amongst his friends to “Get thee a wife, get thee a wife!”
  - At the end of the play, Don Pedro seems sad. Is it because he’s lonely or that he’s going to miss his buddies?