

To be and not to  
seem in much ado  
about nothing



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Many characters in Shakespeare's plays disguise themselves in one way or another. An important component of many of his plays is the masked reveals. A character adopting a new outward persona is not at all unusual. This use of contrasting the apparent versus the real is put to very good use in *Much Ado About Nothing*, a play that greatly concerns itself with how human beings must struggle through life by dealing with the question of what is genuine and what is false. This struggle often takes the form of comic invention as shown in the subplot of Benedick and Beatrice, who start off the play by disguising their true feelings for one another through barbed ripostes aimed directly at the other. *Much Ado About Nothing* is a work of literature that considers the question of whether human beings are capable of dealing with the rest of the world in a totally honest way, or rather has the human race managed to exist as long as it has by welcoming — even embracing — some forms of deception." You seem to me as Dian in her orb / As chaste as is the bud ere it be blown; / But you are more intemperate in your blood / Than Venus, or those pamp'rd animals / That rage in savage sensuality" (385-386). Claudio directs this to the woman that he was to marry. These are the words of a man who has considered himself deceived, and at first glance it might seem as though they are fitting. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes readily apparent that it was Claudio who was deceiving himself all along. Diana is an important allusion because she is emblematic of virginity. Claudio has wished for himself a maiden untouched by sin. The question arises, how could he ever have known whether Hero fit that picture of his perfect bride? He has hardly ever spoken to the woman and came home from a battle to seemingly fall deeply in love almost at first sight. Claudio knows nothing about Hero except that she is

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pleasing to his eye. Upon her he imprinted all the expected qualities he demands in a flawless wife. His choice of Hero was made with the expectations of what she “seemed” to be and with hardly any consideration of what she might actually be. He has deceived himself into thinking that Hero will fit his ideal image and when that image is shattered, he falls to pieces and instead imprints upon her all the qualities that he would despise in a wife. Claudio declaims, “Hero itself can blot out Hero’s virtue” (386). Yet it is not Hero’s true virtue that is in question, but rather Claudio’s vision of what Hero’s virtue should be and therefore would be. Everything that Claudio does is marked by his deception of himself that he knew exactly what Hero was like. She was like his idealized image and nothing else. She was certainly not like her own “real” image, because he had no idea what that image was, having never taken the time to sit down and find out what kind of person Hero was. Claudio lives by the rule that one lives their life how it appears to be and not how it really is. For this, he pays dearly, yet he seems even after the violent wedding scene to be content, if not downright happy. Claudio still resides in his own lie to himself. Hero failed to match up to Claudio’s expectations, but he can carry on without her because he has already set out for himself to live as he lived before, living in his own falsely calculated perceptions. Thus, he can continue with Don Pedro the baiting and hooking of Benedick, while thinking that Hero is dead. Claudio is well at home in his self-deception of a simple black and white world. When he is to marry Hero again, it is through those eyes fogged over with a cloudy vision he calls clear. Other people exist in a world they create for themselves, never giving thought to the concept that they are not nearly what they think of themselves as being. The appearances of Dogberry, Verges and the

constabulary of Messina give this idea form. Here exist men who to all inward perspective are the epitome of the correct manner of being a law enforcement officer. Dogberry and Verges both look upon themselves and each other as being the highest degree possible in a policeman. They are doing their job and they are doing it most extremely well. If not, why would they still have their jobs? It is clear, however, that their “ seeming” has no direct relation to their actual “ being.” In Act III, scene 3, it becomes obvious that Dogberry and Verges are completely inept. Through a series of catechisms, they both reveal themselves to be almost completely in ignorance of the right manner of going about their police work. If a man will not stand in the Prince’s name, then release him and thank God you’re rid of the knave. (381)If people who have been drinking too heavily will not get to bed, then let them be until they are no longer drunk. (382)On and on it goes until one can no longer take seriously any police-like value in the characters. Yet, Dogberry and Verges are still of the opinion that they are above reproach. They live their lives in sweet, beautiful ignorance, never letting the whispers and tongues of the rest of the world threaten their wonderful bliss. This is a condition in which many people live. This is the kind of life that cannot be beaten down with the mere formality of external reality. Their view of their lives has been fashioned by their own corrupted minds to the point where even if they knew it was a lie, there would still be no threat of changing things. As Dogberry says of himself, “ I am a wise fellow, and which is more, an officer” (389). The man who thinks himself wise can never let a thing like doubt cloud his judgment. For these types of people, reality is as reality does. Then there are those people who are aware of their own falsity, but are so at home within it that they won’t easily let themselves be brought

out into the reality fashioned by what they hide inside. Benedick and Beatrice fit perfectly into this arena. Both are strong characters, probably the most entertaining characters in the entire play. They are both clever and witty to the extreme while also being selfish almost beyond all hope. What each of them wants is exactly what they are disguising themselves to be away from: happily wedded bliss. They certainly “seem” on the outside to desire nothing more from each other than the occasional entertaining battle of humorous repartee. Inside, however, lies their actual “being,” two characters who are lonesome for human contact that doesn’t rely on their intelligence but rather on simple human emotions. They embrace this deception because life would be too hard if they were to reveal their genuine selves. Benedick revels in his own lies and can’t allow himself to think what he might be should he drop the veil. “One woman is wise, yet I am well; another virtuous, yet I am well” (376). Benedick may truly believe these words as he speaks them, but it’s more probable that he is constructing yet more walls between his outward appearance and what lies beneath. What lies beneath is not the tyranny of his sex which he says he believes in, but rather a simple adult male who desires the company of an adult woman. His fear of marriage is a false front which he engages at every turn. He enjoys the front he’s presenting while knowing it is a lie. Similarly, Beatrice enjoys the lie while hiding the truth. She is just as tyrannous about her sex as Benedick is about his, but when forced into a situation she had not planned on, she is as helpless as Benedick in facing up to the principle of letting her hidden self be revealed. “Stand I condemn’d for pride and scorn so much? / Contempt, farewell, and maiden pride, adieu!” (380). She doesn’t know how to react because the false front has been lowered and she’s forced to deal

with the hard issues of what's inside and not with the soft issues of what she has thus far presented. Both Benedick and Beatrice can both be misconstrued as caricatures if one takes into account only their witty terrorizing of one another. Their characters take on dimension when seen in the light that they are individuals who put forward a disingenuous personality while keeping their honest emotions close to the heart. They accept the view that it's better to live in deception than be courageous and show the world how they really feel. Even after admitting how they feel, they instantly backtrack to their old ways at the end the play. That false front they have been showing is too comfortable to give up completely. It's highly probable that their marriage turns into a constant replay of their best matches of wits. It's doubtful that Benedick and Beatrice will ever turn into a Claudio and Hero, filled with love. The marriage of Benedick and Beatrice will probably not be only a constant battle of wits, but a constant battle to lower their defenses and live the truth instead of the lie. Much Ado About Nothing contains repeated references to "seeming" and "being." Taking place shortly after the beginning of the play is a dance where the participants wear masks, most of whom pretend to be other people hidden behind the mask. Hero is said to be dead when actually she is very much alive. The play contains a host of images leading one to question what is genuine and what is counterfeit. The theme of the play questions whether it is preferable to live a life knowing there is deception in the world or should one struggle — perhaps vainly — with the quest for all truth all the time. The answer is a simple one. Deception exists in the world and is often a positive thing; it lets people live their lives more simply and with fewer complications, as ironic as that may seem. Works Cited Shakespeare, William. Much Ado About Nothing. <https://assignbuster.com/to-be-and-not-to-seem-in-much-ado-about-nothing/>

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