

Hero exposes the
superficial nature of
the society
shakespeare creates
in this pl...

[Literature](#), [Play](#)



In *Much Ado About Nothing*, the young lovers Claudio and Hero are pulled apart by the devastating forces of malicious rumours. After having been denounced as a 'common stale' at her own wedding in IV: i, Hero collapses and is taken for dead. Claudio, upon learning that Hero was never guilty of adultery, agrees to marry her mysterious and unseen cousin as a form of compensation for the damage and distress he caused her family. None of the other characters are at all shocked that he should agree to marry a stranger, and only a few days after the death of his lover, but all is forgotten when the cousin turns out to be Hero herself, alive and innocent as ever.

Messina, the Italian city in which the play is set, is home to a naturally superficial society. There are strongly outlined codes of honour within the various sectors among the characters, particularly with the returning soldiers, and the Watch, whose systems of hierarchy emphasise this. Women are viewed simply as virgin, housewife or whore, and must fulfil whatever responsibilities fall within their category. Men also fall into stereotypes, such as father, soldier or friar, all with a higher social standing to the majority of the women, as would have been apparent in the world at the time *Much Ado About Nothing* was written. It is mainly the duty of men to maintain social order, ruling as they see just; two strongly upheld policies are jealousy – such as Claudio's easily provoked distrust of Don Pedro's intentions when he sets about wooing Hero: 'tis certain so; the Prince woos for himself' – and honour.

One of the characters who is most fiercely protective of his honour (and also, therefore, those whose honour is most greatly challenged) is Leonato,

especially where Hero is concerned. At her wedding, during her condemnation by Claudio, Leonato repeats that Hero is 'mine' five times in one breath, and that 'death is the fairest cover for her shame' to mask the fact that it is his pride that has suffered the greatest hurt. This is because he is intensely, even jealously, possessive of her, and must be insulted with Claudio's claims, and despair with her downfall. Yet, once the plan has been hatched to make Claudio 'hear she died upon his words' and marry them, with her under the guise of an unseen cousin, Leonato seems to forget his pain and anguish at such slander and resorts to trickery. A more harmless yet appealing example of honour is that of Benedick towards his companions and lover; he manages to remain loyal to both, and yet always keep his word: 'come, bid me do anything for thee' he implores.

Superficiality is a great underlying theme in every aspect of Messina society – the parties and revelry create an atmosphere of great celebrity, while slander and gossip carry the good humour. The masked ball in II: ii acts as a microcosm of the play in its entirety. Colourful masks the dancers wear symbolise the false faces that are put on in daily Messina life: Benedick and Beatrice put on the acts of despising one another, Don John spreads vicious rumours about Hero, yet at her wedding consoles the 'pretty lady', saying 'I am sorry for thy much misgovernment.' The ball also reflects how merry everyday life continues, despite despair, distrust and discomfort among the men and women. Superficiality, whether a trait of Claudio's by nature or not, would not have been shunned in this society.

Much Ado About Nothing is a very simply structured play, constituting four settings and just seventeen settings. There is constantly a sense of hurrying, and of time running out, that increases the tension in moments such as III: v, in which Dogberry and Verges produce such a jumbled and nonsensical message that Leonato loses patience, and the urgent news fails to scupper the plot. Yet, with the timing and structure similar to that of a tragedy, the audience discovers the sense that all events that are planned must occur before the characters can move on. The microcosm of the ball reappears, for the symmetry in which the structure is created produces the effect of dancing, complimented by the equal groups of characters (for example: the plotters, the soldiers, the elder men, the women). Dances are a constant theme, of which we are reminded by Beatrice in II: i: 'wooing, wedding, and repenting, is as a Scotch jig, a measure, and a cinquepace;'. Such activities illustrate the 'much ado' of the title.

Accompanying dancing is music: a song is played at two of the most crucial parts of the play; with lyrics to foreshadow the events and create an apt atmosphere for them to take place in. The first, Sigh No More, sung by Balthasar in II: iii, tells of the fickleness of men 'men were deceivers ever', but the joy that being in love with them can bring 'be you blithe and bonny'. Such a song symbolizes Claudio's inconstancy, yet the union of Beatrice and Benedick is also represented. The other, Pardon, Goddess of the Night, sung by Balthasar again, but in V: iii, is the reverse song. It apologises for such an inconstancy 'pardon...those that slew thy virgin knight', and heralds the renewal of love and reconciliation of friends.

The force of opposites with the play enhances the symmetry of the structure; malevolent and benevolent intentions upon the same acts create wildly different results. An example of this is Beatrice and Benedick's deliberate overhearing of their flattery of one another, a plot by their friends to bring them together: 'when Beatrice doth come...my talk to thee must be how Benedick is sick in love with Beatrice', says Hero to Ursula, III: I, thus uniting the pair; whereas in III: ii, Don John's describes to Claudio and Don Pedro how 'the lady is disloyal' which serves his intention of driving the couple apart. Yet the symmetry is completed in the final scene, for as the play began happily, it should end so.

There are four would-be protagonists within this play, as well as several minor characters without whom the story could not have been carried out in the way it was. These people - such as Hero's attendant Ursula; Dogberry and Verges of the Watch; and Don John's followers Conrade and Borachio - play crucial roles in pointing the main characters towards their final goal, with all the mishaps and misunderstandings upon the way, in the tragedy-style way this play is constructed.

While the central story is that of Claudio and Hero's relationship, it is the subplot of Benedick and Beatrice's love that maintains the energy and light heartedness of a comedy. Each of these four could be argued as main character. Claudio is shy and traditional, and extremely superficial. 'Can the world buy such a jewel?' he asks Benedick in referral to Hero, which displays the manner in which he can be easily charmed by beauty and also reveals a darker, more possessive side; a trait of Leonato's as well. Hero herself is

nave and sweet, vaguely aware of her attractiveness and the effect that can have on men, but openly innocent, especially with Beatrice and her attendants. Before her wedding, she sighs ' my heart is exceedingly heavy' at the prospect of losing her virginity, and even her fellow ladies tease her for such a remark. Yet such a comment also serves to remove any doubt in the audience's minds that Hero has been unfaithful.

She is honest and open, not falling prey to the superficiality of those around her, and praising what little she knows of Claudio's ' excellent good name', rather than his appearance; despite being a primary figure of Messina's society, she is not representative of the shallowness suggested. Beatrice seeks a lover in Benedick even before the interventions of their companions, yet resorts to superficial excuses as to why they can never be matched, as Hero notes ' If fair-faced, She would swear the gentleman should be her sister; If black, why, Nature, drawing of an antic, Made a foul blot; if tall, a lance ill-headed; If low, an agate very vilely cut'. But since we are aware of her true intentions in the matter, we can see that her shallow criticisms are poor attempts to hide her feelings, made in a manner she feels her companions should be well acquainted.

Benedick makes a private mockery of himself, by designing himself a mistress, describing only her properties which shall benefit himself: ' Rich she shall be, that's certain; wise, or I'll none; virtuous, or I'll never cheapen her; fair, or I'll never look on her; mild, or come not near me', but in this speech his conditions for a lover match those of Beatrice: they both seek to convince everyone, particularly themselves, that they are ill-matched. Of

these four, Claudio is most obviously victim to aesthetic values and it is he who performs the most superficial act of all, namely agreeing to marry another 'almost the copy' of Hero, thus personifying and magnifying the phoney ideals of that society.

For a pleasant, light-hearted comedy such as Shakespeare intended to create with *Much Ado About Nothing*, the backdrop must be basic and perfect, but with perfection comes superficiality. Such a thing originates as a side effect, but cannot be ignored and has ended as a central theme of the play. However, upon closer inspection of significant characters and events, we discover that such an issue perhaps isn't all that blatant or important at all. The major sources of shallow views arise from Claudio and Leonato, both in concern of Hero. Benedick and Beatrice both also present cases for their appraisals of false exteriors, 'she shall be...fair, or I'll never look on her' (Benedick II: iii) and Beatrice's extreme criticisms of any man other than the ideal in her mind's eye serve only as pretences. Claudio, also, upon agreeing to marry Antonio's daughter ('I do embrace your offer') could claim that he was seeking forgiveness for having wronged Hero, and making little sacrifice for the greater happiness of the community.

However, it is easier to condemn than to forgive such an action, especially in such a case as this. For a young, impressionable man to be persuaded that his fiancée was having an affair, denounce her at their wedding, seal her tomb in the knowledge of her innocence, and then to marry her cousin, of whom he has only heard, the easiest conclusion to come to is that there was never any love in the relationship. Lust, urged on by the approval of peers

and a pretty face, carried the engagement of the two strangers, both naïve and malleable, in a city where jealousy, possessiveness and superficiality are encouraged. All is well once the cousin has been revealed as the original fiancée, but it serves the intended purpose of highlighting how easily an entire community can be built of false values; the masked ball does the same.

In conclusion, I believe that Claudio's eagerness to redeem himself, while regaining almost an exact copy of what was originally his, allows the audience to see all too clearly just how superficial Messina's society was, and how selfishness was rarely condemned. In the final scene, Claudio is rewarded for his acceptance of his wrongs with 'another Hero', yet there is a bitter taste in the mouth that he did not receive sterner punishment. Yet all turns out well for the characters, as both couples are sent off to church.