

Study Guide

SEATTLE

REPERTORY THEATRE

WSAC Washington State Arts Commission

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Study Guide for The Seattle
Repertory Theatre's production of

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

By William Shakespeare
Directed by Stan Wojewodski, Jr.
Scenic design by Derek McLaine
Costume design by Catherine
Zurber
Lighting design by Stephen
Strawbridge

About The Seattle Repertory Theatre

Recipient of the 1990 Tony Award
for Outstanding Regional Theatre,
the Seattle Repertory Theatre
operates with a professional
company of actors, designers and
stage technicians from its home
base in the Bagley Wright Theatre
at Seattle Center. Each student
matinee is attended by 850 high
school students from school
districts throughout the Northwest.

This study guide was written by
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department at Saint Martin's
College in Lacey, Washington.

Characters in the Play

Leonato's House:

Leonato: Governor of Messina,
Sicily

Antonio: his brother, an old man

Hero: Leonato's daughter

Beatrice: Leonato's niece

Guests at Leonato's House:

Don Pedro: Prince of Aragon

Claudio: a young lord in his service

Benedick: a young lord in his
service

Don John: Don Pedro's bastard
brother

Attendants and Servants:

Borachio: follower of Don John

Conrade: follower of Don John

Dogberry: a constable (policeman)

Verges: a petty constable
(Dogberry's assistant)

Balthasar: attendant on Don Pedro

Margaret: gentlewoman attending
on Hero

Ursula: gentlewoman attending on
Hero

Friar Francis

Messengers, Watch

Synopsis

Leonato, Governor of the city of
Messina in Sicily, is visited by
Don Pedro, Prince of Aragon (a
part of Spain which rules Sicily),
who is returning from the wars.
With the Prince are Claudio, a
young lord who has distinguished
himself in battle; Don John, the
Prince's illegitimate brother who
bitterly resents Claudio's success;
and Benedick, a confirmed
bachelor who is extremely vocal
in his criticism of women and
marriage. Benedick is engaged in
an ongoing war of words with
Beatrice, Leonato's high-spirited
niece, who is just as outspoken in
her criticism of men.

Despite Benedick's objections,
Claudio decides that he wants to
marry Hero, Leonato's daughter.
Don Pedro approves of the match
and promises that he will help
arrange it by making Claudio's
intentions known both to Hero
and her father. Don John, how-
ever, gets wind of the scheme and
swears to thwart the marriage.
That evening, at a masked ball,
despite some initial attempts by
Don John to spread malicious
rumors, the marriage is arranged
and the wedding set for the
following week.

During the ball, Beatrice and
Benedick, under cover of masks,
manage to insult each other in
unusually brutal terms. His ego is
slightly wounded in the exchange,
but she emerges relatively un-
scathed. The Prince speculates
that Beatrice and Benedick would
actually make a good match and,
in collusion with Leonato, con-
cocts a secret plan to make them

fall in love merely by spreading rumors: it will be arranged for Benedick to overhear that Beatrice is in love with him and for Beatrice to overhear that Benedick is in love with her.

Meanwhile, Don John and his henchmen, Borachio and Conrade, have come up with a more insidious scheme to stop Claudio's marriage. On the night before the wedding, they stage a scene that proves to Don Pedro and Claudio that Hero is unfaithful. The following day, Claudio denounces Hero in the church. Too shocked to defend herself, she faints, and Claudio and Don Pedro exit. The Friar, who senses Hero's innocence, suggests that if the young woman is hidden and reported to have died of grief, Claudio may repent and change his mind about her. Leonato accepts his advice.

By this time, Don Pedro's plan has been so successful that, left alone with Beatrice, Benedick swears his love for her. She tells him that, if he truly does love her, he will kill Claudio for slandering her cousin. Benedick reluctantly agrees to challenge him to fight.

Happily, Don John's plot is discovered in time by the watch, an inept crew of locals presided over by Dogberry, a self-important and obtuse constable. They have overheard Don John's lackeys boasting of the success of their deception. Borachio and Conrade are now in prison, and their boss has fled. Claudio, now convinced that Hero has died by his cruelty, vows to Leonato that he will marry another daughter, sight unseen, to expiate his sin. Leonato's "other" daughter, of course, turns out to be Hero herself. The lovers are reconciled, as are Benedick and Beatrice, who decide to abandon their "merry war" and get married.

'Much Ado' and Elizabethan England

Central to this comedy of love and marriage is a struggle between the old and the new, between tradition and rebellion. The conventional attitudes of Claudio, Don Pedro, Leonato and Hero are pitted against the maverick ideas of Benedick and Beatrice. To gain a better understanding of what is going on in *Much Ado About Nothing*, it is therefore useful to know a few things about popular attitudes and beliefs about love, marriage and the place of women in Shakespeare's England.

It may be difficult for a modern audience to comprehend the degree of importance Elizabethan society attached to a woman's chastity. We might very well see Claudio's condemnation of his betrothed at the altar as an act of excessive cruelty. Shakespeare's audience, however, (though they might have blamed him for his haste in jumping to conclusions) would not have faulted the young nobleman for the severity of his revenge. The "cuckolded" husband or fiancé was an object not of pity but of contempt. Claudio's engagement to an unchaste woman might mean social ostracism and severe damage to his career. He therefore feels he must break that engagement in the strongest possible terms. At the end of the play, his agreement to marry a woman whom he knows nothing about would, to the Elizabethans, seem a fittingly heavy atonement for his errors.

Most Elizabethan writers saw a woman's chastity as her chief virtue. Whatever her talents or accomplishments, she was worthless without it. No man would knowingly marry an unchaste woman, and such a woman would be doomed to a life of drudgery or worse. According to a widely circulated treatise on the proper education of young women, a woman's virginity had such "marvellous honor in it that wild lions"



Queen Elizabeth I

regarded it with reverence. But if she lost her virginity before marriage, the rest of her life would be, "sorrowful and heavy, wailing and mourning, and angry and displeasureful."

One reason for this heavy emphasis on sexual propriety was economic: property could only be passed on to legitimate offspring. (This of course often made those born out of wedlock liable to be resentful and perhaps, like *Much Ado's* Don John, even inclined to vengeful "mischief." Illegitimate offspring had comparatively few legal rights, and were generally regarded with suspicion.) Further, though a woman could inherit property, whatever she possessed passed to her husband when she married.

This made marriage a much more businesslike affair than it is in our society. Parents, mindful not only of their children's happiness, but of the financial future of the entire family, took a great deal of interest in arranging suitable unions. Love was not emphasized so much as duty. Often, parents would prearrange a wedding long before a child was old enough to marry (boys could wed at 14, girls at 12). Usually, children were not compelled to marry someone they strongly

objected to, and people frequently married for love. However, in general, marriage was seen by everyone, including the prospective bride and groom, as a contract. If certain financial and familial responsibilities were not attended to in this contract, its terms could prove burdensome and even ruinous to all involved. Besides, real love, insisted the authorities on the subject, developed after marriage, not before.

Thus, when Claudio makes arrangements to woo Hero, his attraction to her is as practical as it is romantic. As he tells Benedick near the beginning of the play, now that he has returned from the wars, he is at a good place in his career to consider taking a wife. Claudio is not above making financial inquiries before pursuing the object of his affection. When he asks Don Pedro, "Hath Leonato any son, my lord?" he is essentially asking who will inherit Leonato's fortune. As Hero has no brother, whoever marries her has a lot to gain. The Elizabethans did not approve of fortune hunting — to win Hero's father's consent, Claudio probably has not only considerable social standing, but also substantial financial resources of his own. Until his head is turned by Don John's wicked rumors, Claudio is, by Elizabethan standards, a thoroughly conventional young nobleman.

Indeed, he is "doing the right thing" in his society. A young man in Elizabethan England had a duty to marry. Marriage was seen not only as a way of settling inheritances, but also as a means of propagating the English race and as a protection against sin. In fact, just before Shakespeare's time, the church had even tried to force men into marriage by imposing heavy taxes on bachelors and denying them municipal offices.

Naturally, laws like this met with considerable resistance.

Indeed, by the time Shakespeare wrote *Much Ado About Nothing*, a heated controversy had developed over the desirability of marriage and the nature of womankind.

Benedick, as the play's principal misogamist (marriage-hater) and misogynist (woman-hater) has adopted a rebellious attitude very much in fashion in 16th-century England. A popular pun in the misogynist writings of the time is that woman derived her name from the fact that she was a woe to man. "Wedlock is a padlock;" "Honest men marry soon; wise men not at all;" and "Women in mischief are wiser than men," were other typical sayings.

The misogynist/misogamist position was not a new one; the debate over whether women were in any respect the equals of men can be traced back to medieval arguments over whether women, like men, had souls or, like animals, had none. But in Elizabethan times, the argument against women had resurfaced with new vehemence. In part, this was because women were asserting themselves in ways previously unheard of. Higher education for upper-class women had become more respectable since Katherine of Aragon, daughter of Queen Isabella (one of the most learned women of her time), came to England to marry Henry VIII in 1509. Of course, parents still had the final say over what their daughters might be taught. But by Shakespeare's time, the education of women was accepted and even fashionable.

With education had come greater power for women to speak up for themselves, and they were cautiously beginning to test the limits of their freedom. *Much Ado's* Beatrice is such a woman. At one point, for example, she talks casually about disobeying a parent's wishes:

Yes, faith, it is my cousin's duty to make curtsy, and say "Father, as it please you." But yet for all that, cousin, let him be a handsome fellow, or else make an-

other curtsy and say "Father, as it please me."

That she can even joke about such a thing is a sign both of her rebelliousness and the freedom accorded her by her elders. From 1524 to 1640 more than 50 women became published authors on a wide range of subjects. Many wrote extensive defenses against the popular misogynist attacks.

But then, as is often the case today, women who were outspoken and unmarried were considered a threat to the established order. Some Elizabethan men compared a woman with education to a madman with a sword. Others, like Benedick (and perhaps Claudio, as well), believed that women were inherently licentious and morally weak; that is, unable to control their sensual desires and so bound to betray their husbands. Therefore, the only way to keep an assertive woman (or "shrew") under control, reasoned the misogynists, was with a firm hand and an ever-watchful eye.

This battle of the sexes was a hot topic in the 16th century, and Shakespeare wrote about it time and again in many different contexts. Often, in his tragedies, an aggressive woman (like Lady Macbeth) or a jealous man (like Othello) causes horrible suffering. But *Much Ado About Nothing* is a comedy, and in order to keep his audience laughing, Shakespeare had to find ways not only to resolve the Claudio/Hero misunderstanding before any real damage is done, but also to defuse the Benedick/Beatrice debate before it explodes.

He accomplished this by planting the suggestion early on that neither Beatrice nor Benedick are the revolutionaries they pretend to be. For all his blustering against women and marriage, when he is asked by Claudio for his opinion of Hero, Benedick responds:

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

In other words, Benedick acknowledges that, in his denunciations of women, he is playing a role.

The same Beatrice who mocks the conventions of marriage is the one who, when her sister is betrothed, laments,

Good Lord, for alliance! Thus goes everyone to the world but I, and I am sunburnt [i.e., everyone gets a husband but me, and I am ugly]. I may sit in a corner and cry "Heigh-ho for a husband!"

The merry war of wits is not a mortal combat. Beatrice and Benedick flout convention only to give in to it as soon as they realize its advantages. Everyone around them recognizes that they are perfect for each other; and to some extent, they themselves recognize it. In a sense, Beatrice and Benedick are like young people realizing for the first time that people of the opposite sex are not so icky after all: they capitulate and fall in love at the drop of a hint.

However, taking into consideration that the play's conventional lovers, Claudio and Hero, are the ones who very nearly come to grief, Beatrice's and Benedick's objections to established standards of behavior do not seem so childish. Playing by the rules does not prevent Claudio from making a nearly disastrous mistake. Nor do the rules teach him patience, humility and trust.

The true path to lasting love and fulfilling marriage, Shakespeare implies, is neither by thoughtless conformity nor by blind rebellion. In the end, when Benedick announces that he intends to marry, he proclaims that "a college of wit-crackers" cannot make him change his mind. And though Beatrice

consents to marry him, it is obvious that she will not compromise her independent spirit, nor muzzle her wit to do so. She jokes,

I would not deny you; but, by this good day, I yield upon great persuasion, and partly to save your life, for I was told you were in a consumption.

After much ado, the play's two couples have discarded both fashion and convention; they are ready to make decisions for themselves and to go about their married lives with maturity and dignity.

What was so great about Shakespeare?

There was nothing remarkable about William Shakespeare's background. On April 26, 1564, Shakespeare was baptized in Stratford, a country village 90 miles west of London. His father was a glove-maker and minor local official, his mother the daughter of a landowner. They were financially comfortable, neither rich nor poor. Shakespeare attended the local grammar school and received no further formal education. Yet, out of these rather ordinary middle-class circumstances emerged a man who was to become England's most popular dramatist.

Shakespeare's plays were the "hits" of his time. By 1598, when he wrote *Much Ado About Nothing*, Shakespeare's theatre company had built and installed itself in London's newest and finest theatre, the Globe. At 34, the playwright was at the height of his creative powers. In order to make his living, Shakespeare did not write solely for his noble patrons, nor for the wealthy, nor the well-educated, nor any other isolated segment of Elizabethan society. Rather, Shakespeare wrote for all English men and women who could afford the (inexpensive) price of admission. It was in his financial interest to do so.

English society in the time of Queen Elizabeth was exceptionally

fragmented. Acutely conscious of class and occupation, the Elizabethans avoided (and often feared) associating with people above or below their social station. Yet people from all walks of life gathered together to see Shakespeare's plays.

A successful actor as well as a playwright, Shakespeare was in constant contact with his public, and therefore learned first hand (and perhaps by hard experience) what pleased and did not please them. Satisfying such a diverse gathering was no mean feat, but the playwright had several things going for him. First and foremost was his eloquence. The Elizabethans took great pride in their language, and no one did more than Shakespeare to remake and stretch the possibilities of that language. In the 16th century, there was no such thing as "standard" English. There were no English dictionaries. Both spelling and grammar were, to some extent, matters of individual taste. When a writer like Shakespeare wanted to express something for which there seemed to be no specific word in English, he simply made up a new one (usually based on a word or words from other languages, such as Latin or Greek). It has been estimated that the average intelligent person today uses a total of about 17,000 different words in a lifetime. Shakespeare's complete works contain about 34,000 words — many of which he invented. There is a sense of play and love for the spoken word in Shakespeare's work which is unparalleled in anything before or since.

Shakespeare's facility with language was so important to his audience because, visually, the Elizabethan theatre was not very "realistic." There was not much attempt at illusion; Elizabethan dramas were played on a relatively bare stage without elaborate settings. Since women were prohibited by law from appearing on the stage (such behavior was



William Shakespeare

thought immodest), boys played the female roles. Elizabethan dramatists relied on poetic description and the audience's imagination to supply the background to the actors. Shakespeare's audience preferred his plays because they could "see" them better.

Another of Shakespeare's assets was his ability to incorporate major sympathetic characters from different classes. Elizabethans of all sorts were fascinated with power, and so many of Shakespeare's major characters are drawn from the ruling classes. But Shakespeare's plays are not elitist. Many of his most memorable characters are not of noble birth. In fact, in *Much Ado About Nothing*, it is the lower-class characters who save the day. Dogberry and his comrades, for all their comic ineptitude, are the play's most stolid defenders of virtue.

Finally, without sacrificing the dramatic unity of his work, Shakespeare was able to include many different types of entertainment in each of his plays. He could therefore appeal to a wide range of tastes. Besides making ample use of music and dance, Shakespeare often employs several types of dramatic writing within a single play. The Dogberry subplot of *Much Ado* is clearly a different type of comedy

from the Beatrice-Benedick war of words, and Claudio's precarious love affair with Hero brings the play very near to tragedy.

In a sense, Shakespeare was just giving the crowd the variety it wanted. The same spectators who might marvel at the power of a poetic turn of phrase were not above enjoying the bloody spectacle of bear-baiting (a popular sport in which a bear would be chained to a stake and several dogs would try to kill it before it killed them). In response to popular demand, Shakespeare could have simply spliced together skits and songs like unrelated pieces of film. However, part of the brilliance of his writing was to take all these disparate elements and incorporate them into a thematically unified and satisfying whole.

All of *Much Ado's* characters, though socially and stylistically diverse, belong to the same thematic world. True, the plot binds them together, but more importantly, they share some common characteristics. Certain amounts of vanity and gullibility, for example, are shared among all the play's protagonists: Beatrice and Benedick are easily induced to fall in love through appeals to their vanity; Claudio is just as easily duped into thinking the worst of Hero (and is vain and hotheaded enough to take the most drastic measures against her); and, for his part, Dogberry, not the most astute of policemen, sometimes seems less concerned with the crimes committed by Borachio and Conrade than with their lack of respect for his petty office.

The playwright, then, makes similar points on several different levels. The thematically related subplots bump and jar against one another, inviting comparison, contrast and more profound examination of the play as a statement about human nature.

A note on the setting of 'Much Ado About Nothing'

There is no such thing as a "historically accurate" production of a Shakespeare play. There is a lot that we still do not know about the exact layout of Shakespeare's theatre (our only illustration of an Elizabethan playhouse is a copy of a sketch made by a visiting foreigner). Nor, do we know how Elizabethan English was actually pronounced. Further, Shakespeare himself was not concerned with accuracy, but with imagination. When he set his plays in countries other than England, Shakespeare was less interested in the depiction of foreign customs than in finding a more exotic locale for dramatic action. The "Sicily" of *Much Ado About Nothing* was not an actual place. (In fact, it is unlikely that Shakespeare ever visited or knew much about Sicily.) Shakespeare made it up. Therefore, most contemporary theatres neither attempt to reproduce Elizabethan performance conditions nor to recreate 16th-century Sicily.

In the Rep's production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, while Shakespeare's words will remain unaltered, the visual aspects of the production will be very different from those of Elizabethan times. As director Stan Wojewodski notes, each time one of Shakespeare's works is staged, it is necessary to re-imagine it — to find what is essential to the spirit of the play and then create a visual world that the audience will relate strongly to. Therefore, in working with his designers, Wojewodski is likely to transport the action of *Much Ado* to a place and time that he hopes will add further dimension to the audience's experience of the play.

Pre-Play Activities

1. Have students read *Much Ado About Nothing* to familiarize themselves with the story and the language.
2. Divide the class into groups of four or five and have students choose a favorite scene to rewrite in their own words and read for the class.
3. When produced, Shakespeare's plays are often placed in non-traditional times and settings. Discuss with students where and when they might choose to set *Much Ado About Nothing* if they were designing or directing the play. What is it about the play's themes and characters that leads them to make this choice?
4. Have students (or groups of students) choose one of the following topics to investigate and report on to the class:
 - a. The role of women in the 15th-16th centuries.
 - b. The history of theatre in the late 1500s in England.
 - c. The marital practices of people in the 15th-16th centuries.
5. We have little information available to us on Shakespeare and his day-to-day life. He is believed to have come from an average family with an unremarkable background. Have students write a fictitious page from Shakespeare's diary at ages 12, 16, 18. What do you imagine he did for fun? Did he fight with his parents? Hang out with friends?
6. Shakespeare's plays were "hits" in England and were attended by people from all walks of life. What artists today can you think of whose work is seen or heard or read by people of many different classes in our country?
7. Do you feel that you are expected to marry someday? Do you want to marry? What pressures to marry or to remain single are placed on you by parents, friends, society?

Post-Play Activities

1. The central theme in this comedy is the struggle between old and new, between tradition and rebellion. Make a list of each character and on one side of the paper list the old ways or traditions which drive their behavior, and on the other side the new or rebellious ideas for which they are struggling. Which character is most rooted in the past? Which in the future?
2. At what point do you think Benedick and Beatrice fall in love? When they first meet? Do you think they were talked into it? Would they ever have become a couple if they had not been tricked? Do you think they make a good couple? Will they live happy lives together?
3. Why do you think Beatrice and Benedick give each other such a hard time?
4. Compare and contrast Beatrice and Hero. How do they relate to the men in their lives?
5. Do you think Beatrice is an outspoken woman? Do you think she was a feminist in her day? Would she be a feminist today?
6. If you had children who were thinking of marrying would you want their potential spouse to be secure financially? How far would you go to keep your child from marrying someone who was not? Would you want them to marry for love alone?
7. Why does Don John hate Claudio?
8. The characters in this play seem to meddle in each other's lives a lot. What characters meddle the most? Is meddling OK when the outcome is good? What would have happened if they had left each other alone? Would anyone be getting married?
9. Do you think Claudio was cruel in the way he dealt with Hero at the altar? Would you have done the same thing or handled the situation differently?
10. Currently, Joseph Papp, a New York producer, is staging all of Shakespeare's plays, regularly casting such stars as Kevin Kline and Tracey Ullman. Mel Gibson is starring in a film of *Hamlet* with Glenn Close, and a British film of *Henry V* was recently released to glowing reviews. If you could make a movie and cast *Much Ado About Nothing* using "stars," who would you cast? Why?
11. Who is the most virtuous character in the play? Who is the most villainous?
12. What do you think the title *Much Ado About Nothing* reveals about the play?
13. The word "nothing" in the title of the play was a pun on the word "noting," which was a homonym in Shakespeare's day, suggesting the play's focus on the ability to discern between appearance and reality. Which characters had the most problem recognizing what was really happening? Was it Claudio, who believed Margaret was Hero? Was it Beatrice or Benedick, who believed it was the other who had fallen in love with them?
14. *Much Ado About Nothing* is referred to as one of Shakespeare's romantic comedies. Do you agree with this label? Which scene or character did you find to be the funniest? Which the most romantic? Why?
15. How do the elements of the set, costumes and lighting define the mood and atmosphere of the play?
16. *Much Ado About Nothing* was written in 1598 in England. What do we, living in Washington hundreds of years later, share with Shakespeare and his culture that enables us to appreciate the play?