

“A Kind of Merry War”: *Much Ado About Nothing* and its Afterlives

Much Ado About Nothing, widely regarded as one of Shakespeare’s most beloved comedies, tells the story of the valiant Claudio and the beautiful young Hero. Claudio, Prince Don Pedro, and the rest of their regiment have just won a small military skirmish; they retreat to Leonato's villa in Messina for rest and relaxation. When Claudio spots Leonato's daughter, the fair Hero, he falls in love with her and they are engaged later that evening. Unfortunately, Claudio's jealousy gets the better of him when he believes that Hero has been unfaithful. He brings these allegations against Hero and leaves her at the altar. While this is the main plot for *Much Ado About Nothing*, it is not the most commonly recognized one.

The popular subplot tells the story of Beatrice and Benedick who simultaneously love and scorn one another. They are too hot-tempered to hide their disdain and too proud to admit their attraction. When Claudio, Don Pedro, and Hero hatch a scheme that forces them to face their feelings, they come together with very little sentimentality and plenty of laughs. Shakespeare anticipated Beatrice and Benedick’s feuding romance with Kate and Petruchio in *Taming of the Shrew* (ca. 1591) as well as Rosaline and Berowne in *Love’s Labours Lost* (pub. 1598). Adding Beatrice and Benedick to this trifecta secured the feuding lovers as a full-blown trope in Renaissance, Restoration, melodramatic, and contemporary performance.

Beatrice and Benedick’s endless battle of wits have been restaged and reimagined for over 400 years. *Much Ado About Nothing* most likely received its original staging in 1598 at the Curtain Theatre in London although there is no extant record of this event. Originally published in 1600, the quarto frontispiece notes that the play had been “sundrie times publikely acted by the right honourable, the Lord Chamberlaine his servants” before it went to print. The first two recorded productions of the play took place in the winter of 1613 to celebrate the engagement and marriage of Princess Elizabeth (James I’s eldest daughter) to Frederick V, Elector Palatine.

Professional actresses appeared on the stage in 1660 – over half a century after the original staging of *Much Ado*. Therefore, this famous battle of the sexes originally

took place not between a man and a woman, but between a man and a boy trained to act the part of a woman. When women were finally permitted to tread the boards of the public playhouses, *Much Ado* continued to have a strong influence on Restoration comedies, namely in the form of Beatrice and Benedick. The famous actor, Charles Hart, and his even more famous protégé, Nell Gwynn, popularized ‘the gay couple,’ inspired by the feuding pair. In her monograph, *The First English Actresses* (1992), Elizabeth Howe reveals the popularity of the gay couple as made famous by Hart and Gwynn. According to Howe, the gay couple “consists of a pair of lively, witty lovers whose love contains an element of antagonism – each desires the other but is wary of commitment.”¹ Many scholars have traced the roots of this popular Restoration trope directly to *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Beatrice and Benedick continued to have a strong influence on adaptations and appropriations of Shakespeare’s work through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Hector Berlioz’s 1862 opera, *Béatrice et Bénédict*, removes the Claudio-Hero jealousy plot in order to focus on the title characters. Playing to great success in Germany for several decades, the opera had its French debut in 1890 and continues to be performed throughout the world. The most recent American production of note took place at Opera Boston in 2011.

The influence of Shakespeare’s quarrelling duo has even made its way into popular culture *via* mainstream Hollywood romantic comedies such as: *His Girl Friday* (1940); *Adam’s Rib* (1949); the *Star Wars* trilogy (1977, 1980, and 1983); *Moonstruck* (1987); and even the bluntly titled *Knocked Up* (2007). *Much Ado* has also seen many restagings and film adaptations of its own. Notable Beatrice and Benedick pairings include: Henry Irving and Ellen Terry at the Lyceum Theatre in 1891, as well as John Gielgud and Peggy Ashcroft at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in 1949. In 2011 David Tennant and Catherine Tate played the couple in the West End, followed by James Earl Jones and Vanessa Redgrave in 2013.

Perhaps the most well-known film version of the play was directed by Kenneth Branagh in 1993; Branagh played Benedick while his then-wife Emma Thompson

¹ Howe, Elizabeth. *The First English Actress: Women and Drama, 1660-1700*. Cambridge UP: 1992. 66.

played opposite him. A recent film adaptation of the play was released in the summer of 2013 and was directed by Joss Whedon. The film was shot over a period of twelve days in Whedon's home and retains most of Shakespeare's language. This contemporary adaptation of *Much Ado* is filled to the brim with actors from the Whedon canon including Nathan Fillion as Dogberry, the inept constable, and Sean Mayer as Don John, the Prince's malevolent brother.

While Beatrice and Benedick have had a major influence on romantic comedy, as we know it today, they are but one part of this "merry war." The officious Dogberry and his misfit crew of watchmen have charmed playgoers for centuries. Don John's transparent malignity baffles spectators, while the romance of Leonato's estate continues to breathe new-life into audiences weary from the daily grind of twenty-first century life. Despite the attention paid to Beatrice and Benedick over the years by adapters, composers, and directors, *Much Ado About Nothing* is a play that showcases a compelling cast of characters with incomparable wit. Our production seeks to sustain the Beatrice and Benedick subplot without giving short shrift to the many other moving parts that work together in this influential romantic comedy.

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