

Much Ado About Nothing (Spring 2012)

One reason we return to Shakespeare's plays, even the lesser ones, is to hear the echoes between them. *Much Ado About Nothing* compares as fruitfully to *The Taming of the Shrew*, with its contrasting lovers—one pair conventional and superficially matched, the other self-knowing and exquisitely matched—as to *Othello*, with its jealous hero and inscrutable villain. And in the apparent miracle of its ending—the restoration of a lady believed dead to a (perhaps undeserving) man—*Much Ado* anticipates the romances of Shakespeare's late period.

Yet for me the most interesting comparison is to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for both romantic comedies tilt suddenly, perilously on the edge of tragedy. (*Midsummer* also compares beautifully to the contemporaneous *Romeo and Juliet*, whose sympathetic yet ineffective friar is a model, as we shall see, for *Much Ado*'s Friar Francis.) In Athens as well as Messina, the all-too-fallible lovers are saved by what David Bevington calls “a harmonizing force that works its will through strange and improbable means” [218]: in the earlier play, fairies; in the later play, “shallow fools” [V.i.225] tasked with keeping the peace.¹

Comedies endure so long as they make us laugh. Yet laughter and averted disaster play off each other—Bottom and his fellows, bumbling through their “Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisby,” lend an unexpected poignancy to the lovesick follies of *Midsummer*. In *Much Ado*, the direction reverses. Beatrice and Benedick cannot merely jest their way into each other's hearts; the proof of their love is

¹ It is no stretch to say that *Midsummer* and *Much Ado* end happily because their universes contain these “harmonizing forces,” whereas *Romeo and Juliet* ends tragically because its universe does not; the choices made by each play's characters are less crucial to the outcome.

in their compassionate response to the brutal slandering of Hero by Claudio. “[I]t is the seriousness of the central situation that sheds upon Benedick and Beatrice so much importance,” Mark Van Doren argues. “As the play stands, neither pair of lovers can do without the other” [119–20].

We shall consider each in turn, beginning, naturally, with the greater pair:

Beatrice and Benedick

Every interpreter of these wits must ask: What is the history between them? This question has no certain answer—Shakespeare offers only hints, and not very clear ones. The most tantalizing comes from Beatrice, after she has “allowed” a disguised Benedick to hear her insulting him; Benedick storms offstage—“I cannot endure my Lady Tongue,” he exclaims [II.i.259–60]—and Don Pedro, the charming Prince of Aragon, serves Beatrice the most loaded cue in the play:

Don Pedro: Come, lady, come, you have lost the heart of Signor Benedick.

Beatrice: Indeed, my lord, he lent it me awhile, and I gave him use for it—a double heart for his single one. Marry, once before he won it of me with false dice; therefore your grace may well say I have lost it.
[II.i.261–6]

The reflexive interpretation of these lines is that Benedick once wooed (and won) Beatrice with vows that eventually proved false; this makes Beatrice an easy object of sympathy—and explains the bitterness we sometimes sense in her—but what she actually says is more nuanced. The shifting meanings of “it” pose a challenge, so let us try to paraphrase. She begins simply enough: “Indeed, my lord, he lent *his heart* to me awhile, and I gave him use for *his heart*. . . .” As we saw repeatedly in Shakespeare’s prior comedy, *The Merchant of Venice*, “use” connotes interest paid on a loan, an apt metaphor

in this context. Beatrice gave Benedick something in return for his heart—presumably her own heart—but note what follows: “a double heart for his single one.”

Now, Beatrice may mean only that she gave more love—a *greater* heart—than she received. But “double” is another of those Shakespearean words that necessarily contain layers—when something is “double,” it is two things at once, and they are rarely consistent. A similar usage occurs late in the play when Don Pedro, extending a joke, describes a conversation he might have had with Beatrice about Benedick:

I'll tell thee how Beatrice praised thy wit the other day. I said thou hadst a fine wit: “True,” said she, “a fine little one.” “No,” said I, “a great wit.” “Right,” says she, “a great gross one.” “Nay,” said I, “a good wit.” “Just,” said she, “it hurts nobody.” “Nay,” said I, “the gentleman is wise.” “Certain,” said she, “a wise gentleman.” “Nay,” said I, “he hath the tongues.” “That I believe,” said she, “for he swore a thing to me on Monday night which he forswore on Tuesday morning. There's a double tongue; there's two tongues.”

[V.i.156–65]

Thus doubleness leads to duplicity. Yet by Beatrice's account, the “double heart” was hers, not Benedick's. Is she conscious of all she implies? She continues to Don Pedro: “Marry, once before he won it of me with false dice.” Previously “it” was Benedick's heart, but that makes little sense here—Benedick would not have won his own heart from Beatrice, with true or false dice. She has changed the meaning of *its* to *her* heart. The connection between these hearts might explain her “double” talk: I deceived him *because* once before he deceived me. Beatrice's acknowledged doubleness thus seems a defensive posture, allowing her to salvage some pride if in fact she once opened herself to Benedick in ways he proved unwilling or unable to requite.

In suggesting that Beatrice and Benedick once had a relationship more intimate than their so-called “merry war” [I.i.57], I do not necessarily mean they were lovers

(though I see no reason to reject this possibility). But they at least dallied with the possibility of romance before one or both retreated. Though Benedick has little patience when other men talk of women—being “a professed tyrant to their sex” [I.i.160–1]—he relishes the attention they pay him. “But it is certain I am loved of all ladies, only you excepted,” he is quick to remind Beatrice [I.i.118–9], and his friends paint a similar portrait. “I think this is your daughter,” Don Pedro says of Hero to Leonato, and Leonato’s reply betrays the standard Shakespearean anxiety of men about women: “Her mother hath many times told me so” [I.i.97–9]. When Benedick seizes the opportunity for an easy joke, Leonato and Don Pedro return the favor:

Benedick: Were you in doubt, sir, that you asked her?

Leonato: Signor Benedick, no, for then were you a child.

Don Pedro: You have it full, Benedick. We may guess by this what you are, being a man.

[I.i.100–4]

Why shouldn’t such a man be drawn to Beatrice, who is more than his match intellectually? Unquestionably he finds her attractive. “In mine eye she is the sweetest lady that ever I looked on,” Claudio says of Hero, and Benedick cannot resist the comparison: “There’s her cousin, an she were not possessed with a fury, exceeds her as much in beauty as the first of May doth the last of December” [I.i.179–84]. For the same reasons, why shouldn’t Beatrice be drawn to Benedick, who—as Ursula tells it (albeit with ulterior motive)—“For shape, for bearing, argument, and valor, / Goes foremost in report through Italy” [III.i.96–7]?²

² Don Pedro and Claudio likewise describe Benedick as “a very proper man” with “a good outward happiness” [II.iii.176–7], and Don Pedro’s messenger confirms that Benedick “hath done good service” in the wars that precede the play [I.i.44–5].

Yet they also have reasons for caution, and not only because the world they inhabit gives a lady with a stained reputation two options only, regardless of her innocence: death or “some reclusive and religious life, / Out of all eyes, tongues, minds, and injuries” [IV.i.242–3]. Their friends acknowledge as much when they imagine the unrequited lovers pining for each other:

Don Pedro: It were good that Benedick knew of it by some other, if she will not discover it.

Claudio: To what end? He would make but a sport of it and torment the poor lady worse.

Don Pedro: An he should, it were an alms to hang him! She’s an excellent sweet lady, and (out of all suspicion) she is virtuous. . . .

Claudio: Hero thinks surely she will die, for she says she will die if he love her not, and she will die ere she make her love known, and she will die, if he woo her, rather than she will bate one breath of her accustomed crossness.

Don Pedro: She doth well. If she should make tender of her love, ’tis very possible he’ll scorn it, for the man (as you know all) hath a contemptible spirit.

[II.iii.150–75]

Ursula: Doth not the gentleman
Deserve as full as fortunate a bed
As ever Beatrice shall couch upon?

Hero: O god of love! I know he doth deserve
As much as may be yielded to a man.
But nature never framed a woman’s heart
Of prouder stuff than that of Beatrice.
Disdain and scorn ride sparkling in her eyes,
Misprizing what they look on, and her wit
Values itself so highly that to her
All matter else seems weak. She cannot love,
Nor take no shape nor project of affection,
She is so self-endear’d.

Ursula: Sure I think so,
And therefore certainly it were not good
She knew his love, lest she’ll make sport at it.

[III.i.44–58]

Though these lines are aimed to ensnare their eavesdropping subjects—to shame Beatrice and Benedick into admitting they love each other—they are no less true. So let

us cautiously suppose that some time in the play's backstory, before the men left for war, Benedick pursued Beatrice and she welcomed his advances. We need not blindly guess what happened next, for the play Shakespeare wrote includes two very characteristic reactions from which we may infer previous ones. Here is Benedick upon overhearing the "news" that Beatrice secretly loves him:

This can be no trick. The conference was sadly borne; they have the truth of this from Hero; they seem to pity the lady. It seems her affections have their full bent. Love me? Why, it must be requited. I hear how I am censured. They say I will bear myself proudly if I perceive the love come from her. They say too that she will rather die than give any sign of affection. I did never think to marry. I must not seem proud. Happy are they that hear their detractions and can put them to mending.

[II.iii.210–19]

These ramblings are endearingly disoriented; as Benedick cycles between pleasure and puzzlement, we hear him talking himself into what he wants to believe. At the same time, he cannot escape his reputation; after pausing to catalogue Beatrice's virtues—premises leading to the giddy conclusion, "for I will be horribly in love with her" [II.iii.219–23]—he falls back to rationalizing:

I may chance have some odd quirks and remnants of wit broken on me because I have railed so long against marriage. But doth not the appetite alter? A man loves the meat in his youth that he cannot endure in his age. Shall quips and sentences and these paper bullets of the brain awe a man from the career of his humor? No, the world must be peopled. When I said I would die a bachelor, I did not think I should live till I were married.

[II.iii.223–31]

Benedick will not admit to falling in love—that is for foolish boys like Claudio. He is simply changing "the career of his humor," outliving his expectations, helping to "people" the world. We sense he understands and enjoys these little self-deceptions—it is why he still charms us—but always he reserves a skeptical distance from his heart.

Compare this to Beatrice upon falling for the same trap:

What fire is in mine ears? Can this be true?
 Stand I condemned for pride and scorn so much?
 Contempt, farewell! and maiden pride, adieu!
 No glory lives behind the back of such.
 And, Benedick, love on, I will requite thee,
 Taming my wild heart to thy loving hand.
 If thou dost love, my kindness shall incite thee
 To bind our loves up in a holy band,
 For others say thou dost deserve, and I
 Believe it better than reportingly.

[III.i.107–16]

Is there a more telling contrast? Beatrice does not rationalize or doubt what she has heard—she fires no “remnants of wit” or “paper bullets.” In this unusually prose-heavy play, at this crucial moment and for all her supposed disdainfulness, Beatrice erupts into passionate verse.

One cannot know Shakespeare’s reasons for choosing verse or prose—for any particular moment he may have had no conscious reason. Yet as he matured he seemed increasingly to realize the power of prose, with its freedom from meter, as a vehicle not only for witty banter (as Beatrice and Benedick normally use it) or low comedy (as Dogberry and Verges misuse it), but also for intricate, sustained contemplation. It is tempting, then, to conclude verse conveys the opposite: the spontaneous overflow of emotion. This jibes with common assumptions in our culture about poetry, though good verse is anything but spontaneous. It is a highly structured form, even more so when it utilizes rhyme, as Beatrice’s love-speech does.

Thus, prose is a natural choice for expressing unexpected or confused thoughts—as Benedick’s seem to be—while verse efficiently expresses well-considered ones. We may reasonably suppose Beatrice has been secretly composing her poem for months—

even, perhaps, that she is revising an earlier draft. Let us return to our initial supposition, that Benedick pursued Beatrice once before. If she responds so passionately *now*, after countless mutual hostilities, how much more passionately might she have first responded to Benedick, appearing—in the initial blushes of romance—without blemish? And if the skeptical Benedick were suddenly dealt such passion, from a woman he had believed similarly skeptical, how might he have reacted? Badly, one suspects—by withdrawing and rejecting Beatrice at her most vulnerable. “An she were not possessed with a fury . . .,” he begins; “therefore your grace may well say I have lost it,” she concludes.

Have I speculated too far? Consider one final exchange, the capper to their first volley of wit:

Beatrice: I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me.

Benedick: God keep your ladyship still in that mind! So some gentleman or other shall scape a predestinate scratched face.

Beatrice: Scratching could not make it worse an ’twere such a face as yours were.

Benedick: Well, you are a rare parrot teacher.

Beatrice: A bird of my tongue is better than a beast of yours.

Benedick: I would my horse had the speed of your tongue, and so good a continuer. But keep your way, a God’s name! I have done.

Beatrice: You always end with a jade’s trick. I know you of old.

[I.i.124–39]

After Beatrice’s talk of “double” hearts, “I know you of old” is the second-most tantalizing line in the play—how can we *not* hear hints of something more intimate than Benedick’s odd preference for horse jokes? A jade is a broken-down or an ill-tempered horse—the kind you ought not rely on, lest he stubbornly refuse to take you where you wish or, even riskier, pull up short along the way. In the context of the scene, of course, Benedick has done just that—retreated from their verbal sparring before it got too heated.

But his “jade’s trick” is also an irresistible metaphor for an aborted romance, such that would make both lovers fear to try again.

Why do they? The crucial emotion seems to be shame—in springing their traps, Don Pedro, Claudio, and Leonato on the one side, and Hero and Ursula on the other, make certain the wit-crackers overhear their worst selves. Benedick in particular seems sensitive to his faults even before they are explicitly noted. Hiding in Leonato’s arbor, he listens as Don Pedro’s minstrel, Balthasar, sings. The theme of the song is not subtle—one suspects Don Pedro has requested it specifically for Benedick’s ears:

Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more.
 Men were deceivers ever,
 One foot in sea, and one on shore,
 To one thing constant never.
 Then sigh not so,
 But let them go,
 And be you blithe and bonny,
 Converting all your sounds of woe
 Into Hey nonny, nonny.

[II.iii.60–8]

Feigning modesty, Balthasar apologizes for his performance. Don Pedro is gracious; Benedick, strangely hostile:

Don Pedro: By my troth, a good song.
Balthasar: And an ill singer, my lord.
Don Pedro: Ha, no, no, faith! Thou sing’st well enough for a shift.
Benedick [Aside]: An he had been a dog that should have howled thus, they would have hanged him, and I pray God his bad voice bode no mischief. I had as lief have heard the night raven, come what plague could have come after it.

[II.iii.74–82]

What prompts this? Perhaps Balthasar really has a bad voice, but then why should Don Pedro employ him (or directors ask audiences to listen)? Benedick may dislike any music set to the unmartial strains of “the tabor and the pipe” [II.iii.14], yet so extreme a reaction

suggests something unsettled within him—a guilty conscience, perhaps, to be reminded of his own inconstancies toward women, and one woman in particular.

In any event, Benedick hears his detractions and vows to mend them, and Beatrice instantly, ecstatically forswears her former contempt and pridefulness; Benedick also visits the barber, we are told, and subsequently “looks younger than he did, by the loss of a beard” [III.ii.44–5] (though productions rarely bother with this detail). Yet whether their interest, thus renewed, would by itself blossom into love we never learn. Before they can meet privately, the plot—which to this point has been mostly benign—intervenes again in the form of Don John, Don Pedro’s bastard brother, who tricks Claudio into rejecting Hero on their wedding day. Hero swoons; Claudio runs off, accompanied by Don John and, to his own shame, Don Pedro; Leonato—to his shame—condemns his innocent daughter to death; Beatrice weeps, outraged and helpless; and Benedick, to his everlasting credit, stays. “Would the two princes lie? and Claudio lie,” Leonato demands [IV.i.152], and Benedick is wise enough to know that yes, in fact, one would: “Two of them have the very bent of honor; / And if their wisdoms be misled in this, / The practice of it lives in John the Bastard, / Whose spirits toil in frame of villainies” [IV.i.186–9].

Thus calmed, Leonato agrees to the Friar’s plan to trick Claudio and Don Pedro into believing Hero dead, killed by their slander; he departs accompanied by all but Beatrice, who has said nothing for a hundred lines, and Benedick, who again remains. What follows sounds like nothing we have heard between them—plainspoken and achingly sincere:

Benedick: Lady Beatrice, have you wept all this while?

Beatrice: Yea, and I will weep a while longer.

Benedick: I will not desire that.

Beatrice: You have no reason. I do it freely.

Benedick: Surely I do believe your fair cousin is wronged.

Beatrice: Ah, how much might the man deserve of me that would right her!

Benedick: Is there any way to show such friendship?

Beatrice: A very even way, but no such friend.

Benedick: May a man do it?

Beatrice: It is a man's office, but not yours.

Benedick: I do love nothing in the world so well as you. Is not that strange?

Beatrice: As strange as the thing I know not. It were as possible for me to say I loved nothing so well as you. But believe me not—and yet I lie not. I confess nothing, nor I deny nothing. I am sorry for my cousin.

[IV.i.255–72]

Now Beatrice sounds bewildered, and Benedick, emboldened by his confession, finds space for one or two witty phrases as he presses for a surer answer. She stays guarded (is she remembering previous disappointments?), then all at once yields to a rush of passion that Benedick, for all his growth, shall never match:

Benedick: By my sword, Beatrice, thou lovest me.

Beatrice: Do not swear and eat it.

Benedick: I will swear by it that you love me, and I will make him eat it that says I love not you.

Beatrice: Will you not eat your word?

Benedick: With no sauce that can be devised to it. I protest I love thee.

Beatrice: Why then, God forgive me!

Benedick: What offense, sweet Beatrice?

Beatrice: You have stayed me in a happy hour. I was about to protest I loved you.

Benedick: And do it with all thy heart.

Beatrice: I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest.

[IV.i.273–86]

Benedick, with sweet naiveté, requests that she bid him “do anything” [IV.i.287], thinking perhaps of escorting her home or (more daring!) composing a sonnet. But passions shift easily between light and darkness—one reason Benedick mistrusts them, no doubt. With two words, Beatrice upends him:

Beatrice: Kill Claudio.

Benedick: Ha! not for the wide world!

[IV.i.288–9]

This may be the play’s most difficult line for an actor—what is Benedick’s intention for “Ha!” Is he stunned (if not speechless)? Laughing in disbelief or the hope she is joking?³ But she is deathly serious:

Beatrice: You dare easier be friends with me than fight with mine enemy.

Benedick: Is Claudio thine enemy?

Beatrice: Is a not approved in the height a villain, that hath slandered, scorned, dishonored my kinswoman? O that I were a man! What? bear her in hand until they come to take hands, and then with public accusation, uncovered slander, unmitigated rancor—O God, that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the marketplace.

[IV.i.297–305]

We might find a place for these lines in *Macbeth*, where they would frighten stronger men than Benedick—or at least the man of the first few acts, whom Beatrice so upsets with her mocks that he demands Don Pedro send him on “any service to the world’s end[.] I will go on the slightest errand now to the Antipodes that you can devise to send me on ... rather than hold three words’ conference with this harpy” [II.i.249–56]. But something changes in Benedick—he loves her, yes, but equally important, he fears he may not deserve her love. Thus when Beatrice finally rages to exhaustion, permitting him to complete a sentence after several failed attempts (“Hear me, Beatrice—”; “Nay, but Beatrice—”; “Beat—” [IV.i.306, 309 & 312]), he proves willing to bend to her will:

Benedick: Tarry, good Beatrice. By this hand, I love thee.

Beatrice: Use it for my love some other way than swearing by it.

Benedick: Think you in your soul the Count Claudio hath wronged Hero?

Beatrice: Yea, as sure as I have a thought or a soul.

³ Even Kenneth Branagh, as quintessential a Benedick as I have seen, in his delightful film adaptation can’t quite figure it out—in fact he cheats, revising “Ha!” to a prolonged exhalation (“hhhahhh”) so he can utter “not for the wide world” with great solemnity.

Benedick: Enough, I am engaged. I will challenge him. I will kiss your hand, and so I leave you. By this hand, Claudio shall render me a dear account. As you hear of me, so think of me. Go comfort your cousin. I must say she is dead—and so farewell.

[IV.i.322–33]

For a man as self-delighting as Benedick, his challenge to Claudio, two scenes later, is remarkably direct. Love has not made him serious so much as responsive to serious matters:

Benedick: Shall I speak a word in your ear?

Claudio: God bless me from a challenge!

Benedick: You are a villain. I jest not; I will make it good how you dare, with what you dare, and when you dare. Do me right, or I will protest your cowardice. You have killed a sweet lady, and her death shall fall heavy on you. Let me hear from you.

[V.i.141–7]

His farewell to Don Pedro is equally unsentimental:

My lord, for your many courtesies I thank you.⁴ I must discontinue your company. Your brother the bastard is fled from Messina. You have among you killed a sweet and innocent lady. For my Lord Lackbeard there, he and I shall meet, and till then peace be with him.

[V.i.183–8]

When next we see Benedick, however, he has resettled into the world of romantic comedy. In fact, he is writing Beatrice a love song, though he takes greater pleasure in deconstructing his verses than in composing them:

. . . Leander the good swimmer, Troilus the first employer of panders, and a whole book full of these quondam carpetmongers, whose names yet run smoothly in the even road of a blank verse—why, they were never so truly turned over and over as my poor self

⁴ This line seems to echo an earlier speech of Benedick's, also to Don Pedro, though in better humor: "That a woman conceived me, I thank her; that she brought me up, I likewise give her most humble thanks; but that I will have a recheat winded in my forehead, or hang my bugle in an invisible baldrick, all women shall pardon me" [I.i.227–31]. It therefore seems a tacit acknowledgment that Benedick has outgrown the company of "boys" (as increasingly Claudio and Don Pedro are called) for a maturer relationship.

in love. Marry, I cannot show it in rhyme. I have tried. I can find out no rhyme to “lady” but “baby”—an innocent rhyme; for “scorn,” “horn”—a hard rhyme; for “school,” “fool”—a babbling rhyme. Very ominous endings! No, I was not born under a rhyming planet, nor I cannot woo in festival terms.

[V.ii.30–41]

When Beatrice enters, she does her best to resist his charms; she, at least, cannot pretend all is well:

Benedick: Sweet Beatrice, wouldst thou come when I called thee?

Beatrice: Yea, signor, and depart when you bid me.

Benedick: O, stay but till then!

Beatrice: “Then” is spoken. Fare you well now. And yet, ere I go, let me go with that I came for, which is, with knowing what hath passed between you and Claudio.

Benedick: Only foul words, and thereupon I will kiss thee.

Beatrice: Foul words is but foul wind, and foul wind is but foul breath, and foul breath is noisome. Therefore I will depart unknissed.

[V.ii.42–52]

Finally he gives her what she wants: “But I must tell thee plainly, Claudio undergoes my challenge, and either I must shortly hear from him or I will subscribe him a coward” [V.ii.54–6]. And that, for Benedick, is that. In truth, I find his continual returning of the focus to himself distasteful—indicative perhaps of his lingering insecurity in love. “And I pray thee now tell me,” he insists, “for which of my bad parts didst thou first fall in love with me?” Beatrice plays along:

Beatrice: For them all together, which maintained so politic a state of evil that they will not admit any good part to intermingle with them.

But for which of my good parts did you first suffer love for me?

Benedick: Suffer love!—a good epithet. I do suffer love indeed, for I love thee against my will.⁵

Beatrice: In spite of your heart, I think. Alas, poor heart! If you spite it for my sake, I will spite it for yours, for I will never love that which my friend hates.

Benedick: Thou and I are too wise to woo peaceably.

⁵ Again, Benedick will not have the lights shine elsewhere for long—rather than name any of Beatrice’s parts, good or bad, he calls attention to his “suffering.”

Beatrice: It appears not in this confession. There's not one wise man
among twenty that will praise himself.

[V.ii.57–70]

Her wit remains superior, though one senses her heart is elsewhere. Benedick
eventually recognizes this, and he allows a moment of vulnerability:

Benedick: And now tell me, how doth your cousin?

Beatrice: Very ill.

Benedick: And how do you?

Beatrice: Very ill too.

Benedick: Serve God, love me, and mend.

[V.ii.82–7]

On the surface this sounds lovely, but its glibness rankles—if only mending were so
easy! Neither Benedick nor Beatrice yet knows that Hero's accusers have recanted (on
the following line, Ursula enters with the news); he still seems to think she can lose her
outrage and pain in the bubble of his love, which pleasant as it is cannot invest her with a
man's power or restore Hero's reputation.

I realize I'm being hard on Benedick, who is unquestionably the best man in
Messina. (Indeed, he is among the best in Shakespearean comedy.) But it aggravates to
witness how nearly pride undoes love, and not only his pride but Beatrice's as well. For
at last the other plot is resolved—the villains are captured, Hero is vindicated, Claudio
forgiven, and the goodhearted people gather once more for a wedding. Only one thread
remains loose; as Hero's bridesmaids escort her to the chapel, Benedick calls for
Beatrice. She steps forward aloofly, and suddenly his nerve fails. He will not—cannot—
take the lead, not publicly, nor will she take it from him:

Beatrice: I answer to that name. What is your will?

Benedick: Do not you love me?

Beatrice: Why, no, no more than reason.

Benedick: Why, then your uncle, and the prince, and Claudio
Have been deceived—they swore you did.

Beatrice: Do not you love me?

Benedick: Troth, no, no more than reason.

Beatrice: Why, then my cousin, Margaret, and Ursula
Are much deceived, for they did swear you did.

Benedick: They swore that you were almost sick for me.

Beatrice: They swore that you were well-nigh dead for me.

Benedick: 'Tis no such matter. Then you do not love me?

Beatrice: No, truly, but in friendly recompense.

[V.iv.73–83]

Thus would they leave themselves unsatisfied, each refusing to love the other first. Fortunately, their flawed friends prove their worth. Claudio displays “a halting sonnet,” “fashioned” by Benedick for Beatrice, and Hero reveals another, “writ in my cousin’s hand, stol’n from her pocket, / Containing her affection unto Benedick”

[V.iv.85–90]. With the evidence against them, the reluctant lovers embrace:

Benedick: A miracle! Here’s our own hands against our hearts. Come, I
will have thee; but, by this light, I take thee for pity.

Beatrice: 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.

Benedick: Peace! I will stop your mouth.

[V.iv.91–7]

Even to the end their ambivalence is unmistakable. Yet it contains wisdom, for neither love nor marriage is an elixir for life’s pain. Nor are they rewards for manly service, as Claudio initially thinks, having returned from battle to find “that war thoughts / Have left their places vacant” [I.i.285–6]. The Shakespearean universe is littered with unhappy marriages, in worlds both tragic (where the unhappiness is explicit) and comic (where it lingers in a backstory or seems destined to come). Beatrice and Benedick, “too wise to woo peaceably,” are also too wise to give themselves completely to another (or to expect such a gift in return). They know this, at least, unlike Claudio and Hero and scores of other couples, and so we leave them hopeful—or as hopeful as we may feel about any

two people's union. Harold Bloom says it well: "Two of the most intelligent and energetic of Shakespeare's nihilists, neither of them likely to be outraged or defeated, will take their chances together" [201]. What more can we really ask of each other?

Certainly not perfection, as our next couple must learn:

Hero and Claudio

As lovers, Hero and Claudio are not very interesting. Though he seems genuinely attracted to her, marriage demands other criteria, which he quickly establishes:

Claudio: Hath Leonato any son, my lord?
Don Pedro: No child but Hero; she's his only heir.

[I.i.278–9]

We may surmise that, had Hero a brother, Claudio would have found another lady to pursue.

Likewise, Hero seems pleased with Claudio, though as Beatrice wryly notes, "It is my cousin's duty to make curtsy and say, 'Father, as it please you'" [II.i.49–50]. When Leonato hears rumors that Don Pedro might propose, Hero seems equally amenable to that match, even flirting with the prince at the masked ball:

Don Pedro: Lady, will you walk a bout with your friend?
Hero: So you walk softly and look sweetly and say nothing, I am yours for the walk; and especially when I walk away.
Don Pedro: With me in your company?
Hero: I may say so when I please.
Don Pedro: And when please you to say so?
Hero: When I like your favor, for God defend the lute should be like the case!
Don Pedro: My visor is Philemon's roof; within the house is Jove.
Hero: Why then, your visor should be thatched.
Don Pedro: Speak low if you speak love.⁶

[II.i.80–93]

⁶ Don Pedro is masked, but Hero has reason to identify her suitor—immediately before the maskers enter, Leonato tells her the prince might "solicit you in that kind" [II.i.62].

Claudio's falling for, and sudden disillusionment with, Hero seems a routine instance of the pedestal trap—his language at their wedding makes clear that in rejecting Hero he is trading one goddess for another:

Out on thee seeming! I will write against it.
 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 pampered animals
 That rage in savage sensuality.

[IV.i.55–60]

Earlier in the scene, Claudio chooses even more revealing words:

Claudio: She knows the heat of a luxurious bed;
 Her blush is guiltiness, not modesty.
Leonato: What do you mean, my lord?
Claudio: Not to be married,
 Not to knit my soul to an approved wanton.
Leonato: Dear my lord, if you, in your own proof,
 Have vanquished the resistance of her youth
 And made defeat of her virginity—
Claudio: I know what you would say. If I have known her,
 You will say she did embrace me as a husband,
 And so extenuate the forehead sin.
 No, Leonato,
 I never tempted her with word too large,
 But, as a brother to his sister, showed
 Bashful sincerity and comely love.

[IV.i.40–53]

One longs to hear Benedick or Beatrice skewer such “brotherly” love. Clearly, Claudio is a boy in ways more meaningful than beardlessness. We might expect him to mature by play's end, as Orlando or even Romeo matures—they are different men in Act Five than in Act One. Is Claudio? Friar Francis expects as much when he outlines his plan for Hero's feigned death:

She dying, as it must be so maintained,
 Upon the instant that she was accused,
 Shall be lamented, pitied, and excused

to death by villains” [V.i.87–8]—and Don Pedro at least acknowledges their grief before turning coldly away:

Don Pedro: Gentlemen both, we will not wake your patience.
 My heart is sorry for your daughter’s death,
 But, on my honor, she was charged with nothing
 But what was true, and very full of proof.
Leonato: My lord, my lord—
Don Pedro: I will not hear you.

[V.i.102–7]

Throughout, Claudio says little. Perhaps he needs time to absorb the shock, though he earns little sympathy—and shows no remorse—when Leonato and Antonio exit and Benedick enters:

Don Pedro: See, see! Here comes the man we went to seek.
Claudio: Now, signor, what news?
Benedick: Good day, my lord.
Don Pedro: Welcome, signor. You are almost come to part almost a fray.
Claudio: We had liked to have had our two noses snapped off with two old men without teeth.

[V.i.110–16]

Following this, as we have heard, Benedick challenges Claudio and takes his leave of Don Pedro. Still Claudio seems unconcerned with Hero, and Don Pedro squanders on a wisecrack any good will we might have lent him:

Don Pedro: He is in earnest.
Claudio: In most profound earnest, and, I’ll warrant you, for the love of Beatrice.
Don Pedro: And hath challenged thee?
Claudio: Most sincerely.
Don Pedro: What a pretty thing man is when he goes in his doublet and hose and leaves off his wit!

[V.i.189–95]

The watchmen then enter with a bound Conrad and Borachio, who confesses to Claudio and Don Pedro his villainy: “how Don John your brother incensed me to slander the Lady Hero; how you were brought into the orchard and saw me court Margaret in

Hero's garments; how you disgraced her when you should marry her" [V.i.227–30]. Only now does the friar's prediction come true, and only partly, for Claudio—moved not by Hero's death but by knowledge of her innocence—returns her to her pedestal, sighing, "Sweet Hero, now thy image doth appear / In the rare semblance that I loved it first" [V.i.242–3].

Leonato and Antonio re-enter—they too have learned the truth—and Claudio, seconded by Don Pedro, begins to sound like a man:

Claudio: I know not how to pray your patience;
 Yet I must speak. Choose your revenge yourself;
 Impose me to what penance your invention
 Can lay upon my sin. Yet sinned I not
 But in mistaking.

Don Pedro: By my soul, nor I!
 And yet, to satisfy this good old man,
 I would bend under any heavy weight
 That he'll enjoin me to.

Leonato: I cannot bid you bid my daughter live—
 That were impossible—but I pray you both,
 Possess the people in Messina here
 How innocent she died, and if your love
 Can labor aught in sad invention,
 Hang her an epitaph upon her tomb,
 And sing it to her bones—sing it tonight.
 Tomorrow morning come you to my house,
 And since you could not be my son-in-law,
 Be yet my nephew. My brother hath a daughter,
 Almost the copy of my child that's dead,
 And she alone is heir to both of us.
 Give her the right you should have giv'n her cousin,
 And so dies my revenge.

[V.i.262–83]

This is either a brilliant impulse by Leonato or—more likely—the friar has added to his plan since last we heard it. Claudio happily agrees, though before declaring him penitent we should make several caveats. First, in offering his "niece," Leonato

substantially enlarges her dowry—Claudio will now inherit Antonio’s property as well as Leonato’s.⁸ Second, consider the epitaph hung on Hero’s tomb:

Done to death by slanderous tongues
Was the Hero that here lies.
Death, in guerdon of her wrongs,
Gives her fame which never dies.
So the life that died with shame
Lives in death with glorious fame.

[V.iii.3–8]

Never mind whether such hackneyed sentiments are capable of bestowing “glorious fame”—Claudio is careful not to identify *whose* “slanderous tongues” killed Hero.

Finally, the man who appears next morning at Leonato’s house seems to have reverted to his juvenile state:

Leonato: Good morrow, prince; good morrow, Claudio.
We here attend you. Are you yet determined
Today to marry with my brother’s daughter?
Claudio: I’ll hold my mind, were she an Ethiope.

[V.ivs.35–8]

If we ought not judge this reply by modern standards of bigotry, we can at least say it ill befits the solemnity of the occasion. Throughout the scene, Claudio’s attitude toward marriage seems less than serious; as he waits for his bride, he cannot resist a few more jokes at Benedick’s expense:

Don Pedro: Good morrow, Benedick. Why, what’s the matter
That you have such a February face,
So full of frost, of storm, and cloudiness?
Claudio: I think he thinks upon the savage bull.
Tush, fear not, man! We’ll tip thy horns with gold,
And all Europa shall rejoice at thee,
As once Europa did at lusty Jove
When he would play the noble beast in love.
Benedick: Bull Jove, sir, had an amiable low,

⁸ Whether Hero is in fact heir to both men is never confirmed, but I see no reason to doubt it—had Hero a male cousin, he, not Benedick, should have challenged Claudio.

And some such strange bull leaped your father's cow
 And got a calf in that some noble feat
 Much like to you, for you have just his bleat.

[V.iv.40–51]

Claudio is saved from further straining his wit by the women, who enter veiled. “Here comes other reck'nings,” he says. “Which is the lady I must seize upon?” [V.iv.52–3]. Claudio's language reflects his mercenary mindset but does not faze Leonato, to whom wives and daughters mean little more.⁹ Still, Leonato demands Claudio swear to marry the lady sight unseen. Claudio does, and Hero reveals herself:

Claudio: Give me your hand before this holy friar.

I am your husband if you like of me.

Hero [unmasks]: And when I lived I was your other wife;

And when you loved you were my other husband.

Claudio: Another Hero!

Hero: Nothing certainer.

One Hero died defiled; but I do live,

And surely as I live, I am a maid.

Don Pedro: The former Hero! Hero that is dead!

Leonato: She died, my lord, but whiles her slander lived.

[V.iv.58–66]

Though we are prepared for this revelation, the moment is unexpectedly moving. We may debate whether Claudio deserves his second chance or if he has learned enough to comprehend it, but the spectacle of forgiveness makes for powerful drama, and Hero plays her part flawlessly. Indeed, Hero throughout hints at deeper depths than she is permitted to explore. We have seen her flirtatious as well as forgiving, but she is most

⁹ We should note that the Quarto text of *Much Ado* twice mentions Leonato's wife, “Innogen” (see the stage directions that open I.i and II.i). Though she is rarely included in modern editions or productions of the play, such a character would add an intriguing dimension to our view of Leonato's household, and an imaginative director could make much of her shadowy presence—as a foil to Beatrice, an image of Hero's future role, or a silent censure of her husband and his friends.

interesting juxtaposed with her charismatic cousin. As she prepares her handmaids to trick Beatrice, Hero speaks some of the best poetry in the play:

Good Margaret, run thee to the parlor.
 There shalt thou find my cousin Beatrice
 Proposing with the prince and Claudio.
 . . . Say that thou overheard'st us,
 And bid her steal into the pleached bower,
 Where honeysuckles, ripened by the sun,
 Forbid the sun to enter—like favorites,
 Made proud by princes, that advance their pride
 Against the power that bred it.

[III.i.1–11]

This may partly be Shakespeare flattering Queen Elizabeth (he wrote the play shortly before her one-time favorite, the Earl of Essex, rebelled). But Hero's speech is not mere ornament, for the image of lesser "lights" resisting a greater is a fair metaphor for the scene. The radiance of Beatrice's personality—and beauty, if we may trust Benedick—continually outshines those around her; how could demure, obedient Hero not resent such a woman? Beatrice "is too disdainful," Hero tells Ursula. "I know her spirits are as coy and wild / As haggards of the rock" [III.i.34–6]. And later:

I never yet saw man,
 How wise, how noble, young, how rarely featured,
 But she would spell him backward. 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;
 If speaking, why, a vane blown with all winds;
 If silent, why, a block moved with none.
 So turns she every man the wrong side out
 And never gives to truth and virtue that
 Which simpleness and merit purchaseth.

[III.i.59–70]

This is excellent satire—Benedick could hardly do better—and Beatrice, alone at the end of the scene, concedes the point. But how do these lines reveal Hero? How many

men have preferred her cousin's coy and wild spirits to her own simple virtue? We might easily imagine Hero growing jealous as suitor after suitor is drawn to—and promptly rejected by—Beatrice. “No,” Hero insists, stumbling a bit on the syntax, “not to be so odd, and from all fashions, / As Beatrice is, cannot be commendable.” Suddenly she seems to realize her dilemma:

But who dare tell her so? If I should speak,
 She would mock me into air, O, she would laugh me
 Out of myself, press me to death with wit!
 Therefore let Benedick, like covered fire,
 Consume away in sighs, waste inwardly.
 It were a better death than die with mocks,
 Which is as bad as die with tickling.

[III.i.72–80]

Of course, each speech is a performance delivered expressly to push Beatrice toward love, and Hero's “tickling” conclusion helps to soften whatever resentment may motivate her lines. I am not suggesting Hero *dislikes* Beatrice—the play, for all its shadings, is too genial for such an interpretation. But Hero can love Beatrice while still wishing Beatrice were more like her ... or perhaps that she were more like Beatrice, who has hardened herself to romance, clinging to whatever freedom her position as an unmarried woman affords, precisely because she fears “consuming away in sighs.” We leave hopeful she will suffer no such fate with Benedick, but we feel less so for Hero, and this—as much as any scheme of Don John's—darkens the play's festivities.

Don Pedro

Before proceeding to John the Bastard, let us devote some space to his legitimate brother, the prince. Perhaps I simply cannot erase the image of Denzel Washington, who plays the role in Branagh's film, but I find Don Pedro more complex and substantially less callow than Claudio. Shakespeare often seems ambivalent toward the highest-

ranking men in his comedies—the archetype is *Measure for Measure*'s Duke Vincentio. To a less developed extent, Don Pedro's meddling in the affairs of his followers creates nearly as many problems as it solves. We delight in his scheme to unite Benedick and Beatrice; more troubling is his self-appointed role in Claudio's courtship of Hero.

It is easy to blame Claudio for so readily believing the worst of his friends. "Signor, you are very near my brother in his love. He is enamored on Hero," Don John insinuates, pretending to mistake Claudio for Benedick [II.i.155–6]. Claudio accepts the lie without hesitation:

'Tis certain so. The prince woos for himself.
 Friendship is constant in all other things
 Save in the office and affairs of love.
 Therefore all hearts in love use their own tongues.
 Let every eye negotiate for itself
 And trust no agent, for beauty is a witch
 Against whose charms faith melteth into blood.

[II.i.166–72]

The middle line of this excerpt is a good lesson—which naturally Claudio forgets at his wedding, when he again allows Don John to speak through him—but the rest is mere cynicism posing as sophistication. Still, has Don Pedro done nothing to distort his friend's view? Claudio initially is reluctant even to admit he desires Hero:

Claudio: If my passion change not shortly, God forbid it should be otherwise.

Don Pedro: Amen, if you love her, for the lady is very well worthy.

Claudio: You speak this to fetch me in, my lord.

[I.i.208–12]

Thus from the start these comrades in arms do not fully trust each other. Yet rather than mock Claudio, Don Pedro supports him:

Don Pedro: If thou dost love fair Hero, cherish it,
 And I will break with her and with her father,
 And thou shalt have her. Was't not to this end

That thou began'st to twist so fine a story?
Claudio: How sweetly you do minister to love,
 That know love's grief by his complexion!

[I.i.292–7]

To this point, Don Pedro has offered Claudio just what he needs. The prince's next offer is more ambiguous:

I know we shall have reveling tonight.
 I will assume thy part in some disguise
 And tell fair Hero I am Claudio,
 And in her bosom I'll unclasp my heart
 And take her hearing prisoner with the force
 And strong encounter of my amorous tale.
 Then after to her father will I break,
 And the conclusion is, she shall be thine.
 In practice let us put it presently.

[I.i.304–12]

Claudio may well be grateful for Don Pedro to woo on his behalf. We cannot know this, however, because Shakespeare does not write Claudio a reply. Regardless, a sizable gap divides where Don Pedro begins (“I will break with [Hero] and with her father”) from where he ends. Claudio is young and inexperienced—how could he not feel anxious to imagine a more powerful man “unclasping” his heart in Hero’s bosom, imprisoning her hearing with an “amorous tale”? He never assents to this twist in the plot—Don Pedro may exit before Claudio can say anything. The scene’s conclusion—“In practice let us put it presently”—suggests the prince views love as just another sport with which to pass the peacetime hours. In this respect, he is uncomfortably like the play’s villains, dissembling an affection he does not himself experience.

“Get thee a wife,” Benedick advises Don Pedro at play’s end [V.iv.120]. But who, if anyone, does Don Pedro love? Not Hero, we can assume, and we hear nothing of prospective brides in Aragon. What of his offer to Beatrice, coming on the heels of

Claudio and Hero's engagement—he's not seriously proposing to marry the orphaned niece of a provincial governor ... is he?

Beatrice: Good Lord, for alliance! Thus goes everyone to the world but I, and I am sunburned. I may sit in a corner and cry "Heigh-ho for a husband!"

Don Pedro: Lady Beatrice, I will get you one.

Beatrice: I would rather have one of your father's getting. Hath your grace ne'er a brother like you? Your father got excellent husbands, if a maid could come by them.

Don Pedro: Will you have me, lady?

Beatrice: No, my lord, unless I might have another for working days; your grace is too costly to wear every day.

[II.i.300–10]

This may be played any number of ways: glibly, as a public joke or simply an extension of Beatrice's metaphor; or solemnly and privately, revealing an unexpected vulnerability in the prince that Beatrice does her best to protect:

Beatrice: But I beseech your grace pardon me. I was born to speak all mirth and no matter.

Don Pedro: Your silence most offends me, and to be merry best becomes you, for out o' question you were born in a merry hour.

Beatrice: No, sure, my lord, my mother cried, but then there was a star danced, and under that was I born.

[II.i.311–7]

She then exits; a dozen lines later Don Pedro unveils his plot to pair her with Benedick, and Shakespeare makes no further mention of this brief tangent. Yet such moments are crucial to earning Don Pedro our sympathy; they distinguish him not only from Claudio, whom I cannot imagine absorbing rejection with such grace, but from his half-brother as well:

Don John

Though each man's villainy is linked to his bastardy, Don John is no Edmund. Unlike *King Lear's* natural man, who wields a wry sense of humor in his several

soliloquies, Don John is by his own admission “not of many words” [I.i.150]. He is also not much of a schemer, leaning instead on his henchman Borachio (from the Spanish word for “drunk”) to spin the web that ultimately snares Claudio:

Don John: It is so. The Count Claudio shall marry the daughter of Leonato.
Borachio: Yea, my lord, but I can cross it.
Don John: Any bar, any cross, any impediment will be medicinal to me. I am sick in displeasure to him, and whatsoever comes athwart his affection ranges evenly with mine. How canst thou cross this marriage?
Borachio: Not honestly, my lord, but so covertly that no dishonesty shall appear in me.
Don John: Show me briefly how.
Borachio: I think I told your lordship, a year since, how much I am in the favor of Margaret, the waiting gentlewoman to Hero.
Don John: I remember.
Borachio: I can, at any unseasonable instant of the night, appoint her to look out at her lady’s chamber window.
Don John: What life is in that to be the death of this marriage?
Borachio: The poison of that lies in you to temper. Go you to the prince your brother, spare not to tell him that he hath wronged his honor in marrying the renowned Claudio (whose estimation do you mightily hold up) to a contaminated stale, such a one as Hero.
Don John: What proof shall I make of that?
Borachio: Proof enough to misuse the prince, to vex Claudio, to undo Hero, and kill Leonato.¹⁰ Look you for any other issue?
Don John: Only to despite them I will endeavor anything.

[II.ii.1–29]

Edmund does not request—let alone require—such handholding. Actually, these lines remind me of another Shakespearean devil, Iago, who in *Othello*’s backstory loses his place to a less-experienced fighter. A similar indignity apparently motivates Don John’s hatred of Claudio. “That young start-up hath all the glory of my overthrow,” Don John broods. “If I can cross him any way, I bless myself every way” [I.iii.59–61].

¹⁰ It’s worth noting how casually Borachio adds murder to the list of desired outcomes. As we saw also in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, some dark shadows fringe Shakespearean comedy.

Presumably Conrad means this “overthrow” when he reminds Don John, “You have of late stood out against your brother, and he hath ta’en you newly into his grace” [I.iii.18–20]; earlier Leonato hints at the same rebellion and reconciliation [I.i.147–9]. Reasons for Don John’s rebellion are never given, but we may assume he instigated the wars that happen before the play begins, when Don Pedro “bestowed much honor” on Claudio [I.i.10], another link between the upstart’s rise and the bastard’s fall. Don John rides with his victorious half-brother and Claudio to Messina, where he chafes against the perceived bonds of their suspicion:

I had rather be a canker in a hedge than a rose in his grace, and it better fits my blood to be disdained of all than to fashion a carriage to rob love from any. In this, though I cannot be said to be a flattering honest man, it must not be denied but I am a plain-dealing villain. I am trusted with a muzzle and enfranchised with a clog, therefore I have decreed not to sing in my cage. If I had my mouth, I would bite; if I had my liberty, I would do my liking.
[I.iii.24–32]

The irony, of course, is that Don Pedro and Claudio never suspect Don John of anything. They believe his lies because, like Leonato, they value rank and the appearance of honor over—to return to Hero’s fine phrase—simpleness and merit.

Dogberry

Thus we conclude with the simplest of all, the prince’s eminently meritorious constable.¹¹ Dogberry is a strange beast, even when not riding (per Branagh’s direction) an imaginary horse. Harold Bloom calls him “one of Shakespeare’s few failures at comedy” [195], and if one hears only his malapropisms, one may be tempted to agree:

¹¹ Though Dogberry also defers to Leonato—he even requests Leonato be present for the examination of Conrad and Borachio [III.v.43–6]—he refers to himself as “the prince’s officer” [IV.ii.69] and clearly derives (or at least claims to derive) his authority from Don Pedro.

First, who think you the most desertless man to be constable?
 [III.iii.9–10]
 You are thought here to be the most senseless and fit man for the
 constable of the watch ... This is your charge: you shall
 comprehend all vagrom men ... [III.iii.23–6]
 Our watch, sir, have indeed comprehended two aspicious persons
 ... [III.v.43–4]
 Only get the learned writer to set down our excommunication, and
 meet me at the jail. [III.v.60–1]
 Is our whole dissembly appeared? [IV.ii.1]
 Thou wilt be condemned into everlasting redemption for this.
 [IV.ii.54–5]

“Neighbors, you are tedious,” Leonato cries as Dogberry chatters with Verges, the local constable, and they are, whether Shakespeare intends it or not.¹² Dogberry does better with his reply:

Dogberry: It pleases your worship to say so, but we are the poor duke’s officers; but truly, for mine own part, if I were as tedious as a king, I could find it in my heart to bestow it all of your worship.
Leonato: All thy tediousness on me, ah?
Dogberry: Yea, an ’twere a thousand pound more than ’tis, for I hear as good exclamation on your worship as of any man in the city, and though I be but a poor man, I am glad to hear it.
 [III.v.17–26]

Therein lies the genuine humor of the man—when Dogberry responds, simply and seriously, to the gravity of those around him, he is an unwittingly successful clown. (In other words, he is funnier the less Shakespeare tries to be funny.) Given the lead he stumbles, as when he walks Don Pedro through Conrad and Borachio’s crimes:

Marry, sir, they have committed false report; moreover, they have spoken untruths; secondarily, they are slanders; sixth and lastly, they have belied a lady; thirdly, they have verified unjust things; and to conclude, they are lying knaves.
 [V.i.208–12]

¹² Dogberry’s tediousness does serve the dramatic purpose of delaying the revelation of Don John’s villainy—a more direct constable would have told Leonato the truth prior to the wedding, thereby averting crisis and prematurely ending the play.

Yet the scene in which Dogberry discovers these crimes is a riot, mainly because other characters set the pace. Their unwillingness to give him what he wants, combined with their incredulousness, make plenty of obstacles for Dogberry to bounce off:

Dogberry: What is your name, friend?

Borachio: Borachio.

Dogberry: Pray write down Borachio. Yours, sirrah?

Conrad: I am a gentleman, sir, and my name is Conrad.

Dogberry: Write down Master Gentleman Conrad. Masters, do you serve God?

Both: Yea, sir, we hope.

Dogberry: Write down that they hope they serve God; and write God first, for God defend but God should go before such villains! Masters, it is proved already that you are little better than false knaves, and it will go near to be thought so shortly. How answer you for yourselves?

Conrad: Marry, sir, we say we are none.

Dogberry: A marvelous witty fellow, I assure you, but I will go about with him. Come you hither, sirrah. A word in your ear. Sir, I say to you, it is thought you are false knaves.

Borachio: Sir, I say to you we are none.

Dogberry: Well, stand aside. 'Fore God, they are both in a tale. Have you writ down that they are none?

Sexton: Master constable, you go not the way to examine. You must call forth the watch that are their accusers.

Dogberry: Yea, marry, that's the efast way. Let the watch come forth. Masters, I charge you in the prince's name accuse these men.

[IV.ii.9–36]

These lines, though thick with illogic, are malapropism-free. Dogberry's inability to grasp the significance of what is said makes him a lousy constable, but a hilarious chorus:

First Watchman: This man said, sir, that Don John the prince's brother was a villain.

Dogberry: Write down Prince John a villain. Why, this is flat perjury, to call a prince's brother villain.

Borachio: Master constable—

Dogberry: Pray thee, fellow, peace. I do not like thy look, I promise thee.

Sexton: What heard you him say else?

Second Watchman: Marry, that he had received a thousand ducats of Don John for accusing the Lady Hero wrongfully.

Dogberry: Flat burglary as ever was committed.

[IV.ii.37–48]

Despite mounting evidence to the contrary, the lawman retains cheerful faith in his competence—an abundant, if easy, source of laughs. At the same time, the illiterate Dogberry treats the act of writing—and the “learned writer” who graciously guides him through the examination—with a kind of reverence. He may not know the next question to ask, but whatever it is and whatever the answer, he makes sure all is writ down. This obsession is integral to the comedy, particularly after the sexton exits. Dogberry orders the prisoners “opinioned” [IV.ii.65], and Conrad—understandably exasperated (he actually had nothing to do with the plot against Hero)—resists:

Conrad: Off, coxcomb!

Dogberry: God’s my life, where’s the sexton? Let him write down the prince’s officer coxcomb. Come, bind them.—Thou naughty varlet!

Conrad: Away! you are an ass, you are an ass.

[IV.ii.67–71]

Should I ever be so humiliated in my profession, I can only hope to salve my bruised ego as deftly as Dogberry does his:

Dost thou not suspect my place? Dost thou not suspect my years?
O that he were here to write me down an ass! But, masters,
remember that I am an ass. Though it be not written down, yet
forget not that I am an ass. No, thou villain, thou art full of piety,
as shall be proved upon thee by good witness. I am a wise fellow;
and which is more, an officer; and which is more, a householder;
and which is more, as pretty a piece of flesh as any is in Messina,
and one that knows the law, go to! and a rich fellow enough, go to!
and a fellow that hath had losses; and one that hath two gowns and
everything handsome about him. Bring him away. O that I had
been writ down an ass!

[IV.ii.72–84]

In an seriousness, I admire Dogberry’s stubborn insistence on his self-worth. Say what you will about his shortcomings, he is as content in his way as Bottom in his; they are Shakespeare’s least self-conscious clowns, incapable of irony, let alone malice, and

free to live wholly in the moment. Dogberry shall never know the glittering pleasures that gentlemen take for granted; he shall probably not even have a transcendent “dream” such as Bottom’s; but he will live out his life taking his gains with his losses, convinced he is “as pretty a piece of flesh” as any in town. There are worse fates. Excepting Beatrice and Benedick, I doubt anyone in Messina makes so much of nothing.

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