

Much Ado About Nothing

Responses to Preparing for the Film

1. Viewers preparing to see a Shakespeare production often express concern that they will not understand Shakespeare's language. This film will pleasantly surprise such viewers because the diction is so clear. Students may also expect elaborate costumes of the Elizabethan period but be pleased to see clothing and sets that reflect their own time period. Some students may fear that they will be bored by Shakespeare's subject matter and long speeches, only to discover that they are immediately engaged and amused by the quick pace and relevant issues--love, sex, rivalry, romantic relationships, and fear of commitment. Students may also be surprised that this film is shot in black and white, but Joss Whedon explained that he admires the "timeless elegance" of black and white and wanted to create a "classic film noir" effect to distinguish his film from the sunny, brightly-colored look of Kenneth Branagh's 1993 production.
2. Students familiar with current "romcoms" will easily supply characteristics of the genre: male-female attraction develops, obstacles to their union emerge, a battle of wits often erupts, characters need to grow in self-awareness, friends often intervene or take sides, the relationship is tested, and crises evolve and get resolved, to varying degrees. Shakespeare doubles the intrigue here by focusing on two couples whose relationships contrast but also are fundamentally connected. For further discussion of the characteristics and history of romantic comedies and to see an analysis of Beatrice and Benedick's relationship, see David Denby's "A Fine Romance" in the *New Yorker* on July 23, 2007 (http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/07/23/070723fa_fact_denby).
3. Students will readily share dating challenges: finding the right match, getting to know the real person behind the image, learning to share control and decision-making, accepting someone's flaws, and overcoming a reluctance to take chances because of possible rejection, disappointment, or fear of betrayal.
4. Students will have no problem identifying some challenges for a director adapting this play to a film for a contemporary audience:
 - ensuring that Shakespeare's language is understandable, especially since there are no footnotes for viewers
 - deciding whether to set the film in Shakespeare's era or another time period and location
 - helping viewers catch the double entendres and malaprops (a word confused with another that sounds similar but has a very different meaning)
 - convincing viewers that Claudio would let the Prince (in disguise) woo Hero for him and that Claudio and Hero are truly in love
 - persuading today's viewers that Hero's chastity is significant to Leonato and to his reputation
 - recognizing that viewers may be appalled by Leonato's condemnation of Hero
 - getting viewers to understand that Hero loves and forgives Claudio

- finding actors who can play Beatrice and Benedick and master their quick repartee and can deliver Dogberry's malaprops and verbal blunders with his confidence and earnest demeanor
- deciding which words, lines, and scenes to delete as non-essential in order to tighten the pacing and shorten the length

Responses to Reflecting on the Film

1. The opening scene is powerful because it is surprisingly soundless--not even any opening music--and we are in a bedroom where a man is moving a woman's underwear to retrieve his pants. He sits and reflects as he looks at the nude back of the woman still in bed. He seems reluctant to leave and she appears to be asleep, but the camera catches her open eyes to show she is aware of his departure but chooses to feign sleep. The director is providing a backstory to Beatrice and Benedick's prior relationship. In 2.1.270-276, Beatrice acknowledges to the Prince that Benedick once "lent" his heart to her "awhile" and she "gave him use for it, a double heart for his single one." Indeed, she also acknowledges that "once before he won it of me with false dice." Joss Whedon's film visually depicts what Shakespeare's words imply--that Beatrice and Benedick had a prior relationship and that Beatrice feels slighted by Benedick's lack of commitment.
2. Students will find the upper middle-class home recognizable and attractive, and the clothing trendy and stylish. This familiar setting and dress ease the viewers' fear that they won't understand Shakespeare's language. Indeed, the actors' comfort with the dialogue as well as their use of body language make the words seem natural and understandable.
3. With its sensuous dance music and its focus on disguises, drinking, and dating rituals, the costume party is particularly engaging. It creates an inviting nighttime party atmosphere with characters partially hidden behind masks but still flirting and pairing up with each other. The costume party advances the plot since we see Don Pedro spending time with Hero (as he had promised Claudio) and Beatrice taunting Benedick, who thinks he can't be recognized, while she is simultaneously deflecting another man's advances. The exotic acrobats performing sensual stunts on a trapeze add to the intrigue and romance of this scene. Viewers familiar with contemporary Cirque du Soleil performances will also appreciate the magic and mystique of this scene as a few of their members perform at this party that was performed at Whedon's own home.
4. When the camera cuts from the party scene to Claudio in the pool by himself, he seems isolated and dejected, drinking to forget his anxiety. His snorkeling mask is out of place with all the colorful decorative masks intended to intrigue and interest others. The startling appearance of three other snorkelers from the deep is ominous as they lie to Claudio and confirm his fear-- that Don Pedro is wooing Hero for himself.
5. These two parallel scenes are a delight because both Benedick and Beatrice try to camouflage their eavesdropping by various contortions but are clearly captivated by what they hear. The Prince, Leonato, and Claudio are all aware that Benedick is hidden nearby when the Prince asks Leonato to verify an earlier comment that his "niece Beatrice was in

love with Signior Benedick" (2.3.95-7). Anticipating Benedick's disbelief, Don Pedro and Claudio both admit that this seems unlikely since Beatrice often vows to love no man and seems to "abhor" Benedick's behaviors, but Leonato claims that "she loves him with an enraged affection" (2.3.108-9). When both men suggest that she might have been faking it, Leonato claims that his daughter Hero heard it directly from Beatrice. Throughout their talk, we see Benedick outside the window, bending to get out of sight but trying to hear better, rolling on the ground, and hiding behind a branch, all hilarious examples of slapstick. Leonato reveals that Beatrice will never admit her love to Benedick and Claudio agrees that Benedick "would make a sport of it and torment the poor lady worse" (2.3.164) and that she would rather die than reveal her affection. All acknowledge that Beatrice is beautiful, virtuous, and "exceeding wise--in everything but in loving Benedick," and the Prince adds that he wishes that Beatrice would bestow her love on him. These comments are designed to heighten Benedict's appreciation of Beatrice and his desire for her. His friends also claim that Benedick is a very proper man, with a happy disposition, and very wise, but that he is still "unworthy so good a lady" (2.3.210). Their strategies work on Benedick. When they leave, we hear his reasoning. He is convinced that this can't be a trick because they have heard all of this from Hero who definitely has Beatrice's trust. He feels that Beatrice's love "must be requited" and that even though he was always against marriage, people change. He acknowledges that he will be teased for falling in love but that Beatrice is fair and virtuous and deserving and that "the world must be peopled" (2.3.244). He concludes that "I do spy some marks of love in her" (247) and now everything that she says seems to have a double meaning for him. He even tries to show off his muscles by doing push-ups while she talks to him and posing unnaturally, just so that he looks manly and fit.

Similarly, Beatrice is shocked when she overhears Ursula ask Hero, "But are you sure that Benendick loves Beatrice so entirely?" (3.1.38). The scene is especially funny as Beatrice nearly falls down some stairs as she hears this and then also tries to hide under counters and behind walls as Hero claims that she has heard of Benedick's love from both Claudio and Don Pedro. Hero claims that she told them never to let Beatrice know because "she cannot love" but that only "disdain and scorn ride sparkling in her eyes" (3.1.53). Hero fears that Beatrice would only "mock" and "laugh" at her if Hero were to tell her of Benedick's love. Hero claims that she will tell Benedick "to fight his passion" even though Beatrice would be lucky to have a gentleman who has such a sharp wit and "excellent good name" (3.1.103). After overhearing their conversation, Beatrice, like Benedick, vows to "requite" this love. She also bids farewell to her previous scorn and contempt and wants Benedick to "love on" (3.2.116). Just as Benedick changed, Beatrice is now considering marriage and is ready to show kindness and to "bind" up their loves in a "holy" bond (3.2.118).

6. Leonato initially reveals that Don John has just recently been reconciled to his half-brother Don Pedro, so Leonato is now willing to welcome Don John to his home. Don John seems surly, but he claims that he is a man "not of many words" so he just curtly thanks Leonato (1.1.155). Soon afterwards, in private, Don John reveals to his lover Conrade (who is a male companion in Shakespeare's play) that "it must not be denied but I am a plain-dealing villain" (1.3.29-30) When Don John finds out from Borachio that Don Pedro plans to woo Hero for Claudio, Don John can't wait to defeat or "overthrow"

their plans (1.3.64). Shortly after this, Beatrice admits that whenever she sees Don John, "I am heartburned an hour after," and Hero agrees "he is of a very melancholy disposition" (2.1.3-5).

Shakespeare doesn't provide any specific motive or reason for Don John's malevolence, other than Don John is the "bastard" half-brother of Don Pedro so he may resent the prince because he feels illegitimate and not equal to his brother. But Don John seems evil for no real reason except to cause pain to others. He pays Borachio to assist him in a deception that will be evil enough "to misuse the Prince, to vex Claudio, to undo Hero, and kill Leonato" (2.2.28-29). When Don John lies about Hero's infidelity to Claudio, Don John doesn't appear to have any regrets or remorse, even when Hero is so publicly humiliated at her wedding. Eventually, when the truth is revealed, Don John flees but is eventually captured and punished.

7. The villains Borachio and Conrade are improbably caught by Leonato's security guards that chance on them as they gloat on the success of their scheme to implicate Hero in a sexual encounter with Borachio. Shakespeare uses slapstick and malaprop to create humor in Dogberry's scenes. The physical bumping and awkwardness occur in part because of the disparity in size between Dogberry and Verges. Dogberry is humorously characterized by his bumbling of words, his apparent denseness contributing humor because of the improbability of his actually catching the villains at their game and bringing them to jail. When Dogberry sends his men off to guard Leonato's estate, he advises them to "be vigilant," a made-up word; he probably means "vigilant."

Dogberry's loquacious blabbering and incoherent speech to Leonato the next morning bewilder Hero's father who dismisses him so he can get on to his daughter's wedding—not knowing, of course, that what Dogberry has to say is important. Dogberry tries to describe to Leonato that his men "comprehended" (rather than "apprehended") the two "auspicious" (rather than "suspicious") persons caught up in "lechery" (rather than "treachery"—an apt pun especially considering that Joss Whedon casts Conrade as an attractive woman in an amorous relationship with Don John). When Leonato complains that Dogberry is "tedious," Dogberry assumes this is a compliment, perhaps thinking Leonato means that he is "rich," for he replies, "If I were as tedious as a king, I could find in my heart to bestow it all [on] your Worship," thereby creating more humor in the scene. He is an incompetent fool but kind, an "ass" as Conrade calls him, but well-meaning. At the station house, when Dogberry is trying to get statements from Borachio and Conrade, it falls to the Sexton—played as a woman in Whedon's film—to take over and get a coherent report to bring back to Leonato.

The effect of these scenes is to provide comedy and levity, as the plot of *Much Ado* is about to become incongruously quite serious.

8. Right before the wedding, we see Hero anticipating her union to her love, deeply happy and at ease, teasing Beatrice about Benedick. This merriment and deep joy contrast with the wedding scene when the friar immediately asks Claudio, "You come hither, my lord, to marry this lady?" and Claudio answers, "No." Leonato tries to make light of this, but Claudio remains grim as he harshly asks Hero if she knows of any impediments to their union. Hero is clearly troubled and shocked, especially as the director has him physically shove Hero toward Leonato, ordering him to "take her back again. / Give not this rotten

orange to your friend" (4.1.31-2). Hero's horror is intensified as she hears Claudio, Don Pedro, and Don John publicly accuse her of being with another man the night before her wedding and on many other occasions. Hero's innocent and humble demeanor contrast so dramatically with these vile charges. Moreover, she is overwhelmed when her father turns on her as well and asks, "Hath no man's dagger here a point for me?" (4.1.114). Hero faints and we see Claudio start to go toward her but then reconsider and leave with Don Pedro and Don John. Even Hero's collapse doesn't prevent Leonato from adding, "Death is the fairest cover for her shame / That may be wished for" (4.1.122-3). Even when Hero is conscious again, Leonato charges: "Do not live, Hero, do not open thine eyes," and he adds that he would take her life himself, regretting that he had a child. Unable to believe that two princes and Claudio would lie, Leonato therefore turns on his daughter and insists, "Let her die!" (4.1.164). Her father's condemnation of her compounds the anguish for the audience. Hero's humiliation and pain are visibly evident, especially when only Beatrice defends her by claiming, "O, on my soul, my cousin is belied!" The camera often cuts to both Hero and Beatrice, capturing their anguish and frustration.

9. Although Hero's humiliation is a tragedy, her unjust suffering unites Beatrice and Benedick in a pact to defend her honor and to confront Claudio to seek retribution. Outraged by Claudio's accusations against her cousin, Beatrice comes to Hero's defense, and Benedick supports her. However, Beatrice insists that if Benedick really loves her, he must "kill Claudio," and Benedick responds, "Not for the world" (4.1.303-305). Beatrice claims, "You kill me to deny it. Farewell," giving Benedick an ultimatum and insisting he prove his love. Ultimately, Benedick agrees to challenge Claudio to a duel, revealing his deep commitment to Beatrice and to defending Hero's honor. Benedick's courage here and his trust in Beatrice's view of Hero convince Beatrice that he no longer is afraid of commitment. Benedick's stance in this scene contrasts with his behavior in Whedon's opening scene when Benedick sneaks out on Beatrice. Once Beatrice and Benedick have joined forces to help Hero, they also are ready to join their hearts and hands in marriage.

Hero also has seen during the requiem scene that Claudio is deeply repentant for his accusations against her and is willing to do whatever Hero's father requests in reparation for his actions. The film underscores Claudio's love for Hero, when she collapses at the ceremony after his accusations and he starts to move toward her, before he stops himself and turns away. Although Hero clearly doesn't deserve this humiliation and pain, her love for Claudio has survived this challenge and has possibly made both lovers more aware of unforeseen obstacles and of the need to talk through their troubles.

10. After Claudio proves his deep remorse and his willingness to satisfy Leonato's request to marry his niece, Claudio takes her hand and vows, "I am your husband if you like of me" (5.4.60). Hero then lifts her veil and reveals her identity, and both are overjoyed to be reunited, and they embrace. The audience feels satisfied that two people who love each other are able to reunite, and they can overlook Claudio's naivete and bad judgment in confronting Hero publicly at their wedding. Because Hero is willing to forgive and embrace Claudio, the audience can forgive him, too.

The mood lightens further as Benedick asks which masked woman is Beatrice and she lifts her veil and reveals herself. Earlier Benedick has arranged with the friar to marry

them. However, both suddenly seem reluctant to publicly admit their love for each other as they slide back into earlier patterns of verbal sparring. The audience finds delight in Claudio and Hero's turn at intervention as they reveal writings by both Benedick and Beatrice, each confessing love for the other. Benedick then admits, "A miracle! Here's our own hands against our hearts" and they kiss (5.4.102). Benedick suggests a dance before they are married, to "lighten our own hearts" as well as the audience's spirit--and to provide an opportunity for celebration and festivity rather than concluding with a wedding ceremony. Benedick's new attitude about marriage is clear when he notes that Don Pedro seems sad, and Benedick urges him to "get thee a wife, get thee a wife" (5.4.126). His advice to Don Pedro underscores Benedick's new sense that marriage can bring joy and prompt celebration rather than apprehension. Now, without the masks and disguises worn earlier, the couples are partying freely and dancing, signifying the couples' growth and commitment by the end of the film.