

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

Enduring Relevance of 'Much Ado About Nothing'

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Unlike the modern era, Shakespeare's comedies are difficult to classify because they overlap in style with other genres and many of his plays can be termed as tragic comedies because they mix equal measures of tragedy and comedy. For example, Much Ado About Nothing starts as a comedy but takes on some of the characteristics of a tragedy when Hero is disgraced and fakes her own death, though of course, it reaches a happy ending like all Shakespearean comedies.

All in all, it is a breezy comedy interlaced with acerbic bits of witticisms and merry twists and turns of fortunes that lead to a happy ending. One would not be wrong in saying that many a Bollywood film has taken its wings from this cherubic comedy of William Shakespeare.

At the very outset let's briefly revisit the broad story of this famous play:

The play is set in the house of a respectable nobleman Leonato who lives in the Italian town of Messina along with his lovely daughter, Hero, his clever niece Beatrice, and his older brother, Antonio who is Beatrice's father. The play begins with Leonato all set to welcome home some friends who are back from a war. These include his close friend Don Pedro and his two fellow soldiers: Claudio, a young but respected nobleman and Benedick, a clever man who makes witty jokes but often at the expense of his friends. Don Pedro's illegitimate brother, Don John a surly troublemaker is also part of the crowd.

Soon after the soldiers arrive at Leonato's home, Claudio falls in love with Hero. Also, Benedick and Beatrice resume their war of witty insults which they have carried on even in the past. Claudio and Hero soon decide to marry. In the week before their wedding, the lovers and their friends strive to get Beatrice and Benedick who seem made for each other, to stop arguing and fall in love. Their tricks succeed and Beatrice and Benedick also fall in love with each other.

But Don John is keen to disrupt everyone's happiness and gets his companion Borachio to make love to Margaret, Hero's serving woman in the darkness of the night, and he brings Don Pedro and Claudio to watch. Believing that he has seen Hero being unfaithful to him, the enraged Claudio humiliates Hero, accuses her of lechery on their wedding day and abandons her at the altar.

Hero's stricken family members now pretend that she has died of shock and grief but, hide her away hoping that the truth about her innocence will soon come to light. After the dramatic rejection, Benedick and Beatrice confess their love for each other. Luckily, the night watchman soon overhears Borachio bragging about his deceitful crime. Once informed, the police arrests both Borachio and Conrad, Don John's followers. Everyone realizes that Hero is innocent and Claudio who thinks she is dead, grieves for her.

In the final phase, Leonato tells Claudio that as punishment, he should tell everyone in the city how Hero was totally innocent. He also asks Claudio to marry his 'niece' - a girl who, he says, looks very similar to the dead Hero. Claudio goes to church preparing to marry the mysterious, masked woman he thinks is Hero's cousin. But when Hero reveals herself as the veiled woman, Claudio is thrilled with joy. Also, Benedick asks Beatrice to marry him and after some arguing, they agree. The joyful lovers finally celebrate their double wedding with a lot of dancing!!

The characters in the play are some of Shakespeare's best-loved comedy creations. Whether it is Beatrice and Benedick's bickering or Dogberry's slapstick antics, the characters in Much Ado About Nothing are what makes this play so memorable. Beatrice and Benedick are both young, funny and locked in a love-hate relationship with one another but are also committed to each other. Since both have sensitive, vulnerable sides to their put-on hardened exteriors, their jibes and interactions are extremely enjoyable. Though Claudio and Hero's romantic track is one of its own kind, their "muted" love-relationship is but a counterfoil to Benedick and Beatrice's somersaulting romance.

Beyond these young couples, is the individual characterization. Here's a brief glimpse of some of the major characters of the play:

Leonato is a much-respected, well-off and elderly noble at whose home in Italy, the action is set. As the father of Hero and the uncle of Beatrice, he plays a vital role in giving momentum to the play. As governor of Messina, Leonato is second only to Don Pedro in terms of social power.

Don Pedro – also sometimes referred to as "Prince"- is an important nobleman from Aragon who is an old and close friend of Leonato. He is the most politically and socially powerful character in the play. Don Pedro is a courteous, considerate and intelligent man with a warm and friendly attitude towards his friends. He is also fond of and close to the soldiers who have been fighting under him, especially the young guns, Benedick and Claudio. However, he is quick to believe evil of others and rather hasty in seeking revenge.

Don John is the illegitimate brother of Don Pedro who is sometimes called "the Bastard." As the villain of the play, John is melancholy and sullen by nature. He creates a devious scheme to ruin the happiness of Hero and Claudio and his evil actions are motivated by envy for his brother's socio-political authority.

Beatrice is Leonato's niece who is shown to be 'a pleasant-spirited lady' with a sharp tongue. She is generous and loving, but like Benedick, she constantly mocks other people with elaborately spun jokes and puns. She wages a regular and enjoyable war of wits with Benedick and often wins the battles. At the outset of the play, she appears content never to marry.

Benedick is the aristocratic soldier who has recently been fighting a war under Don Pedro who in turn is rather friendly towards him as is Claudio. As an extremely witty character, Benedick is forever cracking jokes and creating puns. He has a constant but "merry war" of wits with Beatrice. Ironically, at the start of the play Benedick, like Beatrice, has strong reservations about falling in love or marrying.

Claudio is shown to be a bright, young soldier who has won great acclaim fighting under Don Pedro during some recent wars. On his return to Messina, he promptly falls in love with Hero. However, Claudio has a suspicious nature which makes him believe evil rumours and he seems rather hasty to despair and to seek revenge.

Besides these major characters, three others play noteworthy roles:

Margaret is Hero's serving woman, who unknowingly helps Borachio and Don John deceive Claudio into thinking that Hero is unfaithful. Margaret is lower class but honest. However, she does have some dealings with the villainous world of Don John as her lover is the mistrustful and easily bribed Borachio. A special feature is that Margaret loves to break decorum, especially with bawdy jokes and teases.

Borachio is, of course, a close associate of Don John and Margaret's lover. The two men conspire to trick Claudio and Don Pedro into thinking that Hero is unfaithful to Claudio. Interestingly, his name means "drunkard" in Italian which could serve as a useful direction for any actor who plays this character.

Dogberry is the chief policeman of Messina. He is an extremely earnest and sincere man who takes his job seriously. However, he has a habit of using just the wrong word to convey his meaning. Dogberry is one of the few middle-class characters in the play but his desire to

speak formally and elaborately like the high-class noblemen becomes an occasion for parody.

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Over time society has changed and the views and perceptions of people have also changed. Many of the finest writers try to keep up with a constantly evolving society, using themes and languages that aid them to inspire even modern audiences. Similarly, Shakespeare's themes and messages continue to have significance and relevance to modern readers/viewers though his language may be old fashioned and dated. The themes discussed in *Much Ado About Nothing* focus attention on relationships, the importance of trust (in maintaining relationships), friendship, love, loss of honour and the role and status of women in society.

Much Ado About Nothing expresses meanings and messages which have lots of relevance even today. Before women's liberation began, a woman's position in society was quite different and rather subservient. What feels quite natural now must have been shocking at the time Shakespeare wrote this play. For him to draw a woman as an equal player in her romantic destiny (and her own emotional confusion) was no small statement. The point is made clearer by the contrast between Beatrice and her partner Benedick and the other leading couple in the play: the timid and subservient Hero who, enters an arranged marriage with the equally emotionally immature Claudio.

In a broad sense, *Much Ado About Nothing* is Shakespeare's offbeat commentary on the battle of the sexes. The play revisits the issue of power struggles in courtship in a refreshing double plot. The heroine of the more conventional story, Hero, is wooed by the respectable young aristocrat named Claudio who has won his spurs in war and now considers it his pleasant duty to take a wife. But he knows so little about Hero that he gullibly accepts the contrived evidence of the play's villain, Don John, that she has had many lovers, including one on the evening before the intended wedding. Other men as well, including Claudio's senior officer, Don Pedro, and Hero's father, Leonato, are all too ready to believe the slanderous accusation. Only comic circumstances rescue Hero from her accusers and reveal to the men that they have been fools.

In contrast, Hero's cousin, Beatrice, finds it hard to overcome her scepticism about men, even when she is wooed by Benedick, who is also sceptical about marriage. Here the barriers to romantic understanding are inner and psychological and must be defeated by

the good-natured plotting of their friends, who see that Beatrice and Benedick are made for one another in their wit and candour if only they can overcome their fear of being outwitted by each other.

The relationship between Benedick and Beatrice is complex, yet at a deeper level it is also straightforward: they are a pairing of sexual and intellectual equals, who can recognize themselves in one another. What they like about themselves, they like about the other. It is a relationship based on self-respect – and that’s a role model every young reader even today would like to have. Their pairing is quite influential to our understanding of the modern male-female relationship; and inevitably, that kind of combative couple keeps popping up time and again in popular culture.

No wonder, Beatrice is regarded by many as one of Shakespeare’s most admired and well-loved heroines. Her strength of spirit, sense of independence, and fierce wit place her among the most powerful female characters Shakespeare ever created. But her self-sufficiency does not prevent her from accepting love. Although both she and Benedick have vowed that they will never marry, they change their minds eventually and both decide that marriage is better than being single.

In contrast, Claudio and Hero do not enjoy the strong and egalitarian relationship that Benedick and Beatrice do. Hero’s plight reminds us that a woman in the Renaissance era was vulnerable to all kinds of accusations or bad treatment by men—including by her own male relatives. Leonato, in his grief, gives orders to let his daughter die after Claudio abandons her and but for the intervention of Beatrice and the friar, it is not clear what might have happened to Hero.

The other important lesson from the play is that it’s possible to experience the emotion we call “love” as irritation, frustration and hatred. It takes a mature mind indeed to distinguish fascination from disgust, for there’s little difference between them. The witty battle of the sexes between Benedick and Beatrice is amusing and complicated. But their eventual accommodation finds something much closer to mutual respect and equality between men and women – something that’s bound to appeal to all sensitive souls in the modern era.

The play contains many themes which remain relevant; among them trust and loyalty. Shakespeare manages to focus attention on trust and its importance in the way he delineates the alleged betrayal by Hero. As trust is seemingly betrayed in the play, both the young Claudio and even Hero’s father Leonato are led to believe that Hero has been

unfaithful. Given notions of honor and betrayal, Claudio is virtually left with no choice but to abandon Hero. At a deeper level, it seems that Claudio never thought that Hero would cheat and be unfaithful to him but as his own brother says so and he believes what he saw with his own eyes, his trust gets shaken. Shakespeare eventually clears the misunderstanding and reunites Claudio and Hero, but he uses the episode of these star-crossed lovers to underline that trust and loyalty are important in all human relationships.

In a nutshell, *Much Ado About Nothing* is a delightful and empowering lesson in love. Shakespeare's comedy of romance between equals is joyously liberating for every generation. While Beatrice is clearly a woman of today, it's worth noting that even Benedick, the man who acknowledges and yet discards some of the pleasures and entitlements of being born male in order to be with her, has lessons for young men even today. This witty and combative couple remind us that the strongest partnerships are always based on the mind – an enduring truth as significant today as in Shakespeare's times!!

Questions for discussion:

1. Many feel the Benedick- Beatrice relationship is a model one for couples even today. Would be great to know your views on this.
2. Share your ideas about the male characters in the play. Do they all seem rather flawed?
3. In the pantheon of Shakespearean plays where would you place/ rank *Much Ado About Nothing* as a text for College / University students?