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opening extract from

Much Ado About Nothing

written by

William Shakespeare

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CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY

LEONATO, *Governor of Messina.*
INNOGEN, *his wife.*
ANTONIO, *Leonato's brother.*
HERO, *Leonato's daughter.*
BEATRICE, *Leonato's niece.*
MARGARET *and* URSULA, *gentlewomen attending Hero.*
DON PEDRO *(initially* DON PETER*), Prince of Arragon.*
CLAUDIO, *a gentleman, companion of Don Pedro.*
BENEDICK, *another gentleman, companion of Don Pedro.*
BOY *serving Benedick.*
BALTHASAR, *a singer attending Don Pedro.*
DON JOHN, *illegitimate brother of Don Pedro.*
BORACHIO *and* CONRADE, *followers of Don John.*
FRIAR FRANCIS.
DOGBERRY, *constable in charge of the Watch.*
VERGES, *the Headborough, Dogberry's partner.*
SEVERAL WATCHMEN.
SEXTON.
KINSMAN *of Leonato.*
LORDS, COURTIERS, SOLDIERS *and* ATTENDANTS.
MUSICIANS *and* SINGERS.

The general location: Messina in Sicily.

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING[1]

ACT I, SCENE I.

Leonato's garden.[2]

Enter LEONATO, *Governor of Messina,* INNOGEN (*his wife*), HERO (*his daughter*), *and* BEATRICE (*his niece*), *with a* MESSENGER.[3]

LEONATO I learn in this letter that Don Peter of Arragon[4] comes this night to Messina.

MESSEN. He is very near by this; he was not three leagues off when I left him.

LEONATO How many gentlemen have you lost in this action?

MESSEN. But few of any sort, and none of name.

LEONATO A victory is twice itself when the achiever brings home full numbers. I find here that Don Peter hath bestowed much honour on a young Florentine called Claudio.

MESSEN. Much deserved on his part, and equally remembered by Don Pedro. He hath borne himself beyond the promise of his age, doing in the figure of a lamb the feats of a lion. He hath indeed better bettered expectation than you must expect of me to tell you how.

LEONATO He hath an uncle here in Messina will be very much glad of it.

MESSEN. I have already delivered him letters, and there appears much joy in him, even so much that joy could not show itself modest enough without a badge of bitterness.

LEONATO Did he break out into tears?

MESSEN. In great measure.

LEONATO A kind overflow of kindness: there are no faces truer than those that are so washed. How much better is it to weep at joy than to joy at weeping!

BEATRICE I pray you, is Signior Mountanto[5] returned from the wars or no?

MESSEN. I know none of that name, lady. There was none such in the army of any sort.

LEONATO What is he that you ask for, niece?
HERO My cousin means Signior Benedick of Padua.
MESSEN. O, he's returned, and as pleasant as ever he was.
BEATRICE He set up his bills here in Messina and challenged Cupid at the flight, and my uncle's Fool, reading the challenge, subscribed for Cupid and challenged him at the birdbolt.[6] I pray you, how many hath he killed and eaten in these wars? But how many hath he killed? For indeed I promised to eat all of his killing.
LEONATO Faith, niece, you tax Signior Benedick too much, but he'll be meet with you, I doubt it not.
MESSEN. He hath done good service, lady, in these wars.
BEATRICE You had musty victual, and he hath holp to eat it: he is a very valiant trencher-man; he hath an excellent stomach.[7]
MESSEN. And a good soldier too, lady.
BEATRICE And a good soldier to a lady, but what is he to a lord?
MESSEN. A lord to a lord, a man to a man; stuffed with all honourable virtues.
BEATRICE It is so, indeed: he is no less than a stuffed man; but, for the stuffing – well, we are all mortal.
LEONATO You must not, sir, mistake my niece. There is a kind of merry war betwixt Signior Benedick and her: they never meet but there's a skirmish of wit between them.
BEATRICE Alas, he gets nothing by that. In our last conflict, four of his five wits went halting off, and now is the whole man governed with one: so that if he have wit enough to keep himself warm, let him bear it for a difference between himself and his horse; for it is all the wealth that he hath left, to be known a reasonable creature. Who is his companion now? He hath every month a new sworn brother.
MESSEN. Is't possible?
BEATRICE Very easily possible: he wears his faith but as the fashion of his hat: it ever changes with the next block.
MESSEN. I see, lady, the gentleman is not in your books.
BEATRICE No; and he were,[8] I would burn my study. But I pray you, who is his companion? Is there no young squarer now that will make a voyage with him to the devil?

MESSEN. He is most in the company of the right noble Claudio.

BEATRICE O Lord, he will hang upon him like a disease: he is sooner caught than the pestilence, and the taker runs presently mad. God help the noble Claudio, if he have caught the Benedick: it will cost him a thousand pound ere a be cured.[9]

MESSEN. I will hold friends with you, lady.

BEATRICE Do, good friend.

LEONATO *You* will never run mad, niece.

BEATRICE No, not till a hot January.

MESSEN. Don Pedro is approached.

Enter DON PEDRO, CLAUDIO, BENEDICK, BALTHASAR *and* DON JOHN (*'the bastard'*).[10]

D. PEDRO Good Signior Leonato, are you come to meet your trouble? The fashion of the world is to avoid cost, and you encounter it.

LEONATO Never came trouble to my house in the likeness of your Grace; for trouble being gone, comfort should remain; but when you depart from me, sorrow abides, and happiness takes his leave.

D. PEDRO You embrace your charge too willingly. I think this is your daughter.

LEONATO Her mother hath many times told me so.

BENEDICK Were you in doubt, sir, that you asked her?

LEONATO Signior Benedick, no, for then were you a child.

D. PEDRO You have it full, Benedick; we may guess by this what you are, being a man. Truly the lady fathers herself.[11] Be happy, lady, for you are like an honourable father.

[*He talks privately with Hero and Leonato.*

BENEDICK If Signior Leonato be her father, she would not have his head on her shoulders for all Messina, as like him as she is.

BEATRICE I wonder that you will still be talking, Signior Benedick: nobody marks you.

BENEDICK What, my dear Lady Disdain! Are you yet living?

BEATRICE Is it possible Disdain should die, while she hath such meet food to feed it as Signior Benedick? Courtesy itself must convert to Disdain, if you come in her presence.

BENEDICK Then is Courtesy a turncoat; but it is certain I am loved of all ladies, only you excepted; and I would I could find in my heart that I had not a hard heart, for truly I love none.

BEATRICE A dear happiness to women – they would else have been troubled with a pernicious suitor. I thank God and my cold blood, I am of your humour for that; 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, and '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.[12]

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.

D. PEDRO That is the sum of all, Leonato. [*He turns.*] Signior Claudio and Signior Benedick, my dear friend Leonato hath invited you all. I tell him we shall stay here at the least a month, and he heartily prays some occasion may detain us longer. I dare swear he is no hypocrite, but prays from his heart.

LEONATO If you swear, my lord, you shall not be forsworn. [*To Don John:*] Let me bid you welcome, my lord: being reconciled to the Prince your brother,[13] I owe you all duty.

DON JOHN I thank you. I am not of many words, but I thank you.

LEONATO Please it your Grace lead on?

D. PEDRO Your hand, Leonato: we will go together.

[*Exeunt all except Benedick and Claudio.*

CLAUDIO Benedick, didst thou note the daughter of Signior Leonato?

BENEDICK I noted her not, but I looked on her.

CLAUDIO Is she not a modest young lady?

BENEDICK Do you question me as an honest man should do, for

my simple true judgement? Or would you have me speak after my custom, as being a professed tyrant to their sex?

CLAUDIO No, I pray thee speak in sober judgement.

BENEDICK Why, i'faith, methinks she's too low for a high praise, too brown for a fair praise, and too little for a great praise. Only this commendation I can afford her, that were she other than she is, she were unhandsome, and being no other but as she is, I do not like her.

CLAUDIO Thou thinkest I am in sport. I pray thee tell me truly how thou lik'st her.

BENEDICK Would you buy her, that you inquire after her?

CLAUDIO Can the world buy such a jewel?

BENEDICK Yea, and a case to put it into. But speak you this with a sad brow? Or do you play the flouting Jack, to tell us Cupid is a good hare-finder, and Vulcan a rare carpenter? Come, in what key shall a man take you to go in the song?[14]

CLAUDIO In mine eye, she is the sweetest lady that ever I looked on.

BENEDICK I can see yet without spectacles, and I see no such matter: there's her cousin, and she were not possessed with a fury, exceeds her as much in beauty as the first of May doth the last of December. But I hope you have no intent to turn husband, have you?

CLAUDIO I would scarce trust myself, though I had sworn the contrary, if Hero would be my wife.

BENEDICK Is't come to this? In faith, hath not the world one man but he will wear his cap with suspicion? Shall I never see a bachelor of threescore again? Go to, i'faith, and thou wilt needs thrust thy neck into a yoke, wear the print of it, and sigh away Sundays.[15]

Enter DON PEDRO.[16]

Look, Don Pedro is returned to seek you.

D. PEDRO What secret hath held you here, that you followed not to Leonato's?

BENEDICK I would your Grace would constrain me to tell.

D. PEDRO I charge thee on thy allegiance.

BENEDICK You hear, Count Claudio. I can be secret as a dumb

man; I would have you think so; but, on my allegiance (mark you this, on my allegiance) – [*to Don Pedro:*] he is in love! With who? Now that is your Grace's part. Mark, how short his answer is: with Hero, Leonato's short daughter.

CLAUDIO If this were so, so were it uttered.

BENEDICK Like the old tale, my lord. 'It is not so, nor 'twas not so; but indeed, God forbid it should be so.'[17]

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

D. PEDRO Amen, if you love her, for the lady is very well worthy.

CLAUDIO You speak this to fetch me in, my lord.

D. PEDRO By my troth, I speak my thought.

CLAUDIO And in faith, my lord, I spoke mine.

BENEDICK And by my two faiths and troths, my lord, I spoke mine.

CLAUDIO That I love her, I feel.

D. PEDRO That she is worthy, I know.

BENEDICK That I neither feel how she should be loved, nor know how she should be worthy, is the opinion that fire cannot melt out of me; I will die in it at the stake.

D. PEDRO Thou wast ever an obstinate heretic in the despite of beauty.

CLAUDIO And never could maintain his part, but in the force of his will.

BENEDICK 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 baldric, all women shall pardon me.[18] Because I will not do them the wrong to mistrust any, I will do myself the right to trust none: and the fine is (for the which I may go the finer) I will live a bachelor.

D. PEDRO I shall see thee, ere I die, look pale with love.

BENEDICK With anger, with sickness, or with hunger, my lord; not with love. Prove that ever I lose more blood with love than I will get again with drinking, pick out mine eyes with a ballad-maker's pen, and hang me up at the door of a brothel-house for the sign of blind Cupid.[19]

D. PEDRO Well, if ever thou dost fall from this faith, thou wilt prove a notable argument.

BENEDICK If I do, hang me in a bottle like a cat and shoot at me, and he that hits me, let him be clapped on the shoulder and called Adam.[20]

D. PEDRO Well, as time shall try:
'In time the savage bull doth bear the yoke.'[21]

BENEDICK The savage bull may, but if ever the sensible Benedick bear it, pluck off the bull's horns and set them in my forehead, and let me be vildly painted; and in such great letters as they write, 'Here is good horse to hire', let them signify under my sign, 'Here you may see Benedick the married man.'

CLAUDIO If this should ever happen, thou wouldst be horn-mad.

D. PEDRO Nay, if Cupid have not spent all his quiver in Venice, thou wilt quake for this shortly.

BENEDICK I look for an earthquake too, then.

D. PEDRO Well, you will temporize with the hours.[22] In the meantime, good Signior Benedick, repair to Leonato's, commend me to him, and tell him I will not fail him at supper; for indeed he hath made great preparation.

BENEDICK I have almost matter enough in me for such an embassage, and so I commit you –

CLAUDIO To the tuition of God; from my house if I had it –

D. PEDRO The sixth of July; your loving friend, Benedick.

BENEDICK Nay, mock not, mock not. The body of your discourse is sometime guarded with fragments, and the guards are but slightly basted on neither. Ere you flout old ends any further, examine your conscience; and so I leave you.[23] [*Exit.*

CLAUDIO My liege, your Highness now may do me good.

D. PEDRO My love is thine to teach. Teach it but how,
And thou shalt see how apt it is to learn
Any hard lesson that may do thee good.

CLAUDIO Hath Leonato any son, my lord?

D. PEDRO No child but Hero; she's his only heir.
Dost thou affect her, Claudio?

CLAUDIO O my lord,
When you went onward on this ended action,

I looked upon her with a soldier's eye,
That liked, but had a rougher task in hand
Than to drive liking to the name of love;
But now I am returned, and that war-thoughts
Have left their places vacant, in their rooms
Come thronging soft and delicate desires,
All prompting me how fair young Hero is,
Saying I liked her ere I went to wars.

D. PEDRO Thou wilt be like a lover presently,
And tire the hearer with a book of words.
If thou dost love fair Hero, cherish it,
And I will break with her, and with her father,
And thou shalt have her.[24] 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![25]
But lest my liking might too sudden seem,
I would have salved it with a longer treatise.

D. PEDRO What need the bridge much broader than the flood?
The fairest grant is the necessity.[26]
Look, what will serve is fit: 'tis once, thou lovest,
And I will fit thee with the remedy.
I know we shall have revelling 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.

[*Exeunt.*