

2015 Study Guide for *Much Ado about Nothing* by William Shakespeare

Before seeing/reading the play

1. What is prose? What is verse? In Shakespeare's plays, who usually speaks prose? Who usually speaks verse? These and other websites provide information:
<http://cla.calpoly.edu/~dschwart/engl339/verseprose.html>
<http://shakespeare.about.com/od/shakespeareslanguage/a/prose.htm>
2. What was the position of an unmarried Elizabethan woman? What degree of control did she have over her income, occupation and social status? How much self-expression was she allowed? To whom did she answer? On whom was she obliged to depend? These and other websites provide information:
<http://elizabethan.org/compendium/10.html>
<http://www.elizabethi.org/contents/women/>
3. Research Elizabethan courtship and marriage customs. These and other websites provide information:
<http://www.elizabethanenglandlife.com/courtship-marriages-and-divorces-during-elizabethan-era.html>
<http://www.elizabethanenglandlife.com/the-life-and-roles-of-elizabethan-era-women.html>
4. What is honor? What does honor mean in regards to a man? A woman? A family? How can one's honor be lost or tainted? How can one's honor be regained? This and other websites provide information:
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honor>
5. What is a cuckold? According to folklore, what physical characteristic distinguishes cuckolds? Why would an Elizabethan man find it shameful to be cuckolded? These

and other websites provide information:

http://www.answerbag.com/q_view/448058

<http://www.shmoop.com/much-ado-about-nothing/cuckold-horns-symbol.html>

6. Research Elizabethan music and dances, paying special attention to those mentioned in the play: the Scotch jig, the measure and the *cinquepace* (aka *galliard*). These and other websites provide information:

<http://www.bragod.com/bragod4-4.html>

<http://www.elizabethan-era.org.uk/elizabethan-music.htm>

<http://www.luminarium.org/renlit/orchestr.htm>

<http://www.elizabethan-era.org.uk/elizabethan-dance.htm>

7. What did the Elizabethans mean by “gulling”? This and other websites provide information:

<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/gulling>

8. Research the Elizabethan archetype of the “malcontent.” These and other websites provide information:

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/malcontent?s=t>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malcontent>

9. What is a malapropism? Why is it also called a Dogberryism? What is the French origin of the word? What is the dramatic origin? These and other websites provide information:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malapropism>

<http://grammar.about.com/od/words/a/What-Is-A-Malapropism.htm>

10. What do the names “Beatrice,” “Benedick,” “Hero,” “Claudio,” and “Borachio” mean? This and other websites provide information:

<http://www.sheknows.com/baby-names/name/beatrice>

<http://www.thinkbabynames.com/meaning/1/Benedick>

<http://www.babynames.com/name/HERO>

<http://www.sheknows.com/baby-names/name/claudio>

<https://www.wordnik.com/words/borachio>

11. Find at least five meanings of the word “nothing” of the play’s title. (Marjorie Garber in *Shakespeare After All*, pages 379-380, covers the subject thoroughly.) This and other websites provide information:

<http://dictionary.classic.reference.com/search?q=nothing>

12. What is the definition of noting? In what ways in *Much Ado about Nothing* a play about noting? These and other websites provide information.

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/noting>

<http://dsc.dixie.edu/shakespeare/muchess.htm>

Learn more about Shakespeare’s life and times at the following websites:

<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/>

<http://www.folger.edu/template.cfm?cid=865&CFID=6230886&CFTOKEN=25420173>

<http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare.html>

<http://www.bardweb.net/man.html>

After seeing/reading the play

1. Refer to your research on prose and verse in Shakespeare’s plays. Why, in *Much Ado about Nothing*, do Benedick and Beatrice speak in prose? What is Benedick’s opinion of verse? What happens when they venture out of prose into verse? Which characters speak in verse? Which speak in prose? Why?
2. The text shows evidence of a past relationship between Beatrice and Benedick before the play begins. How does each feel about their relationship as the play begins? In what ways do their feelings for each other change through the course of the play?
3. Consider the theme of war throughout the play. What is the war being fought before the play begins? Who is victorious? How does that victory set the tone for the play? Explain the “merry war” between Beatrice and Benedick. What weapons do they use to battle? Identify Beatrice’s initial assault on Benedick, before he comes onstage. How do her tactics change once he is present? How does he retaliate? Who wins the first battle? How does their war resolve? What other wars are fought during the play?

4. Describe the exact arrangement by which Hero is courted. Who misunderstands what is happening during her courtship? Who causes the misunderstanding? What are the results of each misunderstanding?
5. Although the play is full of talkers, several characters are relatively silent. Who are they? What causes them not to speak? What are the consequences of their silence?
6. One of the play's major themes is the conflict between appearance and reality. In what ways do appearances in the play accurately reflect reality? In what ways do they not? Why can some characters see the truth behind the appearance, and what blinds others from seeing the realities?
7. In what ways do characters wear literal masks? In what ways do they wear figurative masks? How do circumstances determine the kinds of masks that must be worn? In each case, what do the masks conceal?
8. *Much Ado about Nothing* takes place within a small, closed society. How does Don John feel about this tight-knit world? How do the actions of that one character impact the lives of every other character in the play?
9. What is Beatrice's attitude toward marriage? What is Benedick's? What would Beatrice lose by marrying? What would she gain? If Benedick married, what would he lose and gain? As the play begins, what does Beatrice claim might cause her to change her mind on the subject? What does, in fact, change the minds of both characters?
10. Describe the scene in which his friends "gull" Benedick. Describe the scene in which her friends "gull" Beatrice. What is the purpose of the deceptions? Why do the friends feel a more direct approach would fail? Compare the two gulling scenes: How are they similar? How do they differ?
11. What changes does love cause in Benedick's behavior and appearance? How does Beatrice change once she falls in love?

12. Refer to your research on the archetype of the “malcontent.” How does Don John reflect this pattern? What elements in her life account for her grudges? What explanation does she give for her disposition? How does having a woman play the role inform the character? What is Don John’s grievance against her brother, Don Pedro? Against Claudio? Against Hero? Why does she attack Don Pedro through Claudio by means of Hero, rather than confronting him directly? In what ways is this tactic successful? In what ways is it not?
13. How does Don John orchestrate the “evidence” against Hero in order to convince Don Pedro and Claudio she is unfaithful? How is her plot uncovered, and by whom? Why is it not immediately revealed to its victims?
14. Refer to your research on cuckolds. Why do the characters in the play find cuckoldry and horns such an entertaining source of jokes? Why do they tease the women with the threat of making their husbands cuckolds? What happens when cuckoldry converts from imaginary and humorous to an actual threat?
15. Refer to your research on malapropisms. Identify at least three malapropisms in Dogberry’s lines. What does he intend to say? What does he end up saying instead? Why is this funny?
16. How are Beatrice, Benedick, Claudio and Hero converted from the beginning of the play to the end? In what ways are their conversions external? In what ways are the conversions more internal in nature? In what ways are other characters of the play converted as well?
17. Explore the theme of deception in the play. In what ways are characters deceived by others? To what misunderstandings do these deceptions give rise? When are these deceptions benign? When are they malicious?
18. Consider the events in the wedding scene (Act IV, scene i). Describe the ties and loyalties at the beginning of the scene and follow them as they shift. Which relationships change and why? Which remain the same from beginning to end?

19. How does Claudio justify shaming Hero in public rather than in private? Why does Don Pedro agree? Why does Leonato ally himself with them rather than with his daughter? Why does Benedick refuse to join with his friends in attacking Hero?
20. Referring to the incidents in the play, answer these questions: On what does a woman's honor depend? A man's? Once a woman's honor is stained, what can restore it? What can restore a man's honor?
21. How does Benedick react when Beatrice tells him "Kill Claudio!?" How does she convince him to take action against Claudio and Don Pedro? What actions does he take? Why are his loyalties realigned?
22. Two duels are proposed although not fought in the play. Who are the duelists in each case? On whose behalf do they mean to fight? What is each intended to accomplish?
23. Refer to your research on Elizabethan beliefs about music and dance. At the masked ball near the beginning, who dances with whom? Who conspicuously does not dance? What is the symbolic meaning of Beatrice's comparisons of courtship and marriage with dances?
24. Taken symbolically, what is the meaning of Hero's "death"? Who and/or what has killed her? What is necessary to resurrect her? What does the reborn Hero have that the earlier Hero lacked?
25. How deep is Claudio's grief? His repentance? What acts of repentance must he perform? What are his principal concerns once Hero's reputation is rehabilitated? What must he do to deserve being received into Leonato's family? In your opinion, does he deserve forgiveness? Why or why not? If you were Hero, what would you do?
26. Refer to your research on the different meanings of the words, "nothing" and "noting." In what ways do the meanings of "nothing" appear in the play? In what ways does "noting" become important? In what ways is all the "noting" really "nothing"?

28. If you are also seeing *Guys and Dolls*, compare and contrast the lovers in *Guys and Dolls* – Nathan Detroit, Adelaide, Sky Masterson and Sarah Brown – to that of the lovers in *Much Ado about Nothing* – Benedick, Beatrice, Hero and Claudio. What role does deceit play in the relationships between Hero and Claudio, Beatrice and Benedick, Adelaide and Nathan, and Sarah and Sky? Why do these lovers ultimately forgive each other? What lessons do the characters learn?

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