

11-14-2023

Laughter in the Shadows: Navigating Comedy and Tragedy in Much Ado About Nothing

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Recommended Citation

Kelly, Mary (2023) "Laughter in the Shadows: Navigating Comedy and Tragedy in Much Ado About Nothing," *Conspectus Borealis*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 3.

Available at: https://commons.nmu.edu/conspectus_borealis/vol9/iss1/3

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I. Introduction

Reading a play and watching an adaptation of that work on stage or on screen can be very different experiences. The author has a vision of a world that they have created in language via often meticulous attention to detail. On the other hand, a director interprets the text of the play and adapts it to a setting, characters, music, or lighting that they feel best represents the story. Shakespeare's works present a prime example of this difference, in particular the three plays that I read in preparation for their performances at the 2023 Stratford Theater Festival – *King Lear*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *Richard II*. Parts of the plays that seemed frightening on the page were equally as shocking - if not magnified - on stage, such as 3.7 of *King Lear*, in which the Duke of Gloucester's daughters accuse him of treason and pluck out his eyes (Kelly, 2023b). In a similar way, playwright and screenwriter Brad Fraser (alongside director Jillian Keiley) adapted a more traditional history play like *Richard II* in a wholly different light – with a 1970's disco theme, sequins galore, and overt sexuality (Kelly, 2023b).

This discrepancy between the original text and the on-stage adaptation was certainly the case in *Much Ado About Nothing*, with particular attention given to the comedic aspects of the play. Upon sitting down in the Festival Theater before the performance of *Much Ado*, I noticed three cacti on the stage (Kelly, 2023a). Why not? I thought, as cacti are native to Sicily (the setting of Shakespeare's play). On second glance, however, I realized that these cacti – one tall and thin and two smaller and spherical – were arranged in a rather phallic manner. I did not expect this representation at all, but the choice to put the cacti on stage in this way made sense, and given the play's exploration of masculinity, offered an excellent use of low comedy, which is generally defined as “slapstick” (Collins Dictionary, 2023b) – a most famous recent example of which would be the character of Kramer, in *Seinfeld*. The opposite of low comedy is high comedy, which is

often characterized by its emphasis on wit and language rather than exaggerated physical actions (Collins Dictionary, 2023a).

The characters of Beatrice and Benedick serve as purveyors of comedy in both Shakespeare's original text and in director Chris Abraham's 2023 Stratford adaptation. One quote from Phillipa Sheppard's program note stood out to me in particular: "[Beatrice and Benedick] have wielded their considerable wit to build a carapace around themselves that their friends conspire to crack open. They contrive opportunities for the comic pair to overhear that each is loved by the other, a fact they have buried for some time" (Sheppard, 2023e). This opinion certainly offers an interesting take on the play, and one that Sheppard does not elaborate on further in her program note. Given this lack of analysis, I feel it is necessary to explore her claim in greater detail. In this essay, I engage the text of the play and my own observations from the 2023 Stratford Festival production to discuss how *Much Ado About Nothing* (while a comedy at heart) borders on tragedy, especially as it pertains to the characters of Claudio and Hero. Having acknowledged the melancholy aspects of the play, I then explore the relationship between Beatrice and Benedick in the context of high comedy, both on stage and in the play text. A similar analysis follows in the context of low comedy, in which I pay particular attention not only to Beatrice and Benedick, but to Dogberry and the Watch as well. In the end, I argue that Dogberry's actions ultimately resolve the central conflict and tragic elements of the play, demonstrating a transition from low comedy to high.

II. Part 1

While generations have considered it one of Shakespeare's most beloved comedies (Garber, 2004), *Much Ado About Nothing* teeters on the border between comedy and tragedy. The subplot between Claudio and Hero, in particular, contains elements of betrayal and deception, which result

in serious consequences. These components are typical of Shakespearean tragedies, and are rooted in Don John's plot to "endeavor anything" (2.2.29) to ruin Claudio and Hero's impending marriage. In 2.2, John's underling and co-conspirator, Borachio, devises a scheme wherein Borachio will enter Hero's bedchamber and have sex with her chambermaid, Margaret (acting as Hero) while Don Pedro and Claudio watch from below, thus revealing Hero's apparent disloyalty and infidelity (2.2.29 – 45). Interestingly, this plot parallels (in a morbid way) Don Pedro's plan to bring Beatrice and Benedick together in 2.1. The aim of their plan, according to Borachio, is to "misuse the prince, vex Claudio, undo Hero, and kill Leonato" (2.2.26 - 27); we see that the scheme is not just about breaking up a marriage, but also to bring grave harm upon all those involved.

Then, in 4.1, Don John and Borachio's plot comes to a head, when Claudio falsely accuses Hero of infidelity before their wedding. This false accusation leads to Hero's public disgrace and ostensible death (although she is later revealed to be alive). The accusations and the subsequent shaming of Hero introduce elements of tragedy into the play. In lines 29-40, Claudio actually denounces Hero right at the altar, accusing her of infidelity just before their wedding:

CLAUDIO: Sweet prince, you learn me noble thankfulness. There, Leonato, take her back again. Give not this rotten orange to your friend. She's but the sign and semblance of her honor. Behold how like a maid she blushes here! O, what authority and show of truth Can cunning sin cover itself withal! Comes not that blood as modest evidence to witness simple virtue? Would you not swear, all you that see her, that she were a maid by these exterior shows? But she is none. She knows the heat of a luxurious bed. Her blush is guiltiness, not modesty. (4.1.29-30)

This scene portrays a darker side of the conventional love that we see between Claudio and Hero up until this point. Claudio's words are harsh and damning. He urges Leonato, Hero's father, to

take her back, comparing her to a "rotten orange," and claiming that she only presents the appearance of honor, not the reality. This denunciation serves as a significant blow to Hero and contributes to the tragic tone. From this observation, we also see that the theme of appearance versus reality is prominent in this passage. Claudio argues that Hero's external appearance, her "blush," is deceptive and conceals her alleged guilt. This theme is common in Shakespearean tragedies, where characters often grapple with the discrepancy between how things seem and how they truly are. Furthermore, the public nature of Claudio's accusations, and of Hero's disgrace, adds to the tragedy. Claudio makes this accusation in front of the entire wedding party, including family and friends. This public humiliation intensifies the emotional impact on Hero and contributes to the sense of tragedy in the play. Finally, Claudio questions the virtue and modesty of Hero, emphasizing the theme of trust and betrayal. The doubt he casts upon her virtue creates a tragic conflict, as it involves the rupture of a relationship that was expected to culminate in marriage. Claudio's words reflect the tragic aspects of the play, as the scene marks a pivotal moment where Hero's reputation is unjustly destroyed.

Hero is devastated by these accusations, and Leonato, her father, shockingly aligns himself with the other men, disowning her:

LEONATO: Do not live, Hero; do not ope thine eyes; For did I think thou wouldst not quickly die, Thought I thy spirits were stronger than thy shames, Myself would, on the rearward of reproaches, Strike at thy life. (123 - 27)

Leonato's reaction reflects the tragic consequences of the false accusations against Hero. Leonato is not only distraught by the allegations, but also disowns Hero in a moment of intense emotional turmoil. The line "Do not live, Hero; do not ope thine eyes" expresses a profound sense of agony. Leonato urges Hero to die, suggesting that the weight of the accusations is so unbearable that her

death seems preferable. Disheartened by the idea that Hero might endure shame and pain for an extended period, Leonato expresses the belief that a swift death would be better than a prolonged life filled with disgrace. He judges his daughter, voicing his expectation that Hero's inner strength should have been able to withstand the shame brought upon her. This scene highlights the impact of societal judgment on individuals, the fragility of reputation, and the profound sorrow experienced by characters when faced with betrayal. This whole situation presents as tragic, with Hero wrongly accused, publicly shamed, and rejected by her family.

And yet, *Much Ado About Nothing* also upholds the elements of both high comedy and low. High comedy is ubiquitous in this play, and even more so between Beatrice and Benedick. As Leonato observes early in Act 1, there is a “merry war” (1.1.58-59) at play between these two. The beginning of Beatrice and Benedick’s opening dialogue makes this observation clear:

BEATRICE. I wonder that you will still be talking, Signor Benedick. Nobody marks you.

BENEDICK. What, my dear Lady Disdain! Are you yet living? (1.1.110 – 14).

This dialogue captures the essence of Beatrice and Benedick’s relationship throughout the play. Here, they engage in their “skirmish of wit” (1.1.58), demonstrating both their verbal dexterities. These characteristics contribute to the comedic effect of the scene. Beatrice’s remark, “I wonder that you will still be talking,” is also ironic, given that she is engaging in this banter as well. Benedick’s use of “Lady Disdain” to describe Beatrice has a teasing tone, but also points to Beatrice’s perceived contempt for Benedick. In this way, the dialogue reveals aspects of both Beatrice and Benedick’s characters. Shakespeare portrays Beatrice as quick-witted and sharp, while Benedick’s response is more sarcastic. One of the first instances of high comedy in the play,

this dialogue features verbal wit and irony, which contribute to character development and comedic aspects of the play.

It is also in this first encounter that Shakespeare hints at Beatrice and Benedick's resistance to love and emotional vulnerability:

BENEDICK. But it is certain I am loved of all ladies, only you excepted, and I would I could truly 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 humor for that. I had rather my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me. (1.1.118 – 25)

Benedick's statement that he is loved by all women except Beatrice is, of course, ironic. Beatrice is the only woman whom Benedick claims does not love him, yet she engages in this witty exchange with him. Furthermore, Benedick's self-deprecating remark about truly loving no one highlights an attempt to retain his pride while also acknowledging his status as a single man. Beatrice's response, too, carries a touch of satire. She could have accepted Benedick's rejection but instead turns the tables, suggesting that his personality is harmful to women and that she is perfectly satisfied as an independent woman. Ultimately, this scene hints at both characters' public resistance to love. Benedick's boastful declaration of his independence from women contrasts with Beatrice's more composed dismissal of romance.

In these first few scenes, we also discover that Beatrice and Benedick have a history. Beatrice's statement "I know you of old" (1.1.138), voiced at the conclusion of their initial encounter, suggests this type of familiarity. Their prior relationship arises again at the beginning of Act 2, when Beatrice tells Don Pedro, "[Benedick] lent [his heart] me awhile, and I gave him

use for it – a double heart for his single one” (2.1.263 - 64). Here, we see an example of Beatrice’s clever wordplay. She claims that once before she’d borrowed Benedick’s heart, but she failed to return the sentiment. Beatrice accepts blame for treating Benedick falsely in the past, while also critiquing his resistance towards love and courtship.

We see Benedick’s introspection with regard to marriage, on the other hand, further into 1.1., where he makes his position quite clear:

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 baldrick, all women shall pardon me. 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.
(1.1.227 – 34)

Benedick begins the play determined to be single forever, and wholeheartedly rejects marital conventions. His use of exaggerated language is also apparent. Benedick uses the word “recheat” (1.1.229 – footnote #2) to suggest that he will reject women’s attempts to catch him as hunting dogs do their prey. Furthermore, the use of “bugle” and “baldrick” indicate that Benedick is determined not to be tied down in a relationship. He declares his distrust of women and skepticism of romantic relationships, perhaps as a reaction to prior events. Benedick’s statement that he will “live a bachelor” (1.1.234) further reinforces his aversion to marriage. Also of note here is the difference in his portrayal between the text and the stage. In the text, Benedick states this oath with conviction; on stage at the 2023 Stratford Festival production, however, Graham Abbey’s Benedick not only said the line, but danced briefly with much swaying of the hips – this choice added an element of low comedy to an otherwise witty scene (Kelly, 2023a).

Benedick details his aversion towards romance a bit further as 1.1. progresses:

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 vilely painted, and in such great letters as they write 'Here is a good horse to hire,' let them signify under my sign 'Here you may see Benedick the married man. (1.1.249 – 55)

The “savage bull” (1.1. 249) here is a metaphor for the wild aspects of men. Benedick indicates that even if the manliest of men were to pursue marriage, he would not do the same. Also utilized here is hyperbole when describing the act of putting horns on his head, being “vilely painted” (1.1. 251), and advertised as a married man as horses are for sale (1.1. 253 – 55). “Horns” (1.1. 252) signify a cuckold, or a man whose wife is sleeping around. While humor is an effect of this declaration, Benedick's uses this exaggerated language and imagery to frame his strong resistance to marriage and thus strengthen the wall around his emotions.

Another component to Benedick's “carapace of wit” (Sheppard, 2023e) is the vision he proposes of an ideal woman. In 2.3, he opens himself up to love by fantasizing the “perfect” woman:

BENEDICK: But till all graces be in one woman, one woman shall not come in my grace. Rich shall she be, that's certain; wise, or I'll none; virtuous, or I'll never cheapen her; fair, or I'll never look on her; mild, or come not near me; noble, or not I for an angel; of good disclosure, an excellent musician, and her hair shall be of what color it please God (2.3.27 – 33).

Benedick here avoids the idea of marriage by constructing an idealized woman. He sets high standards – perhaps too high – including wealth, intelligence, virtue, beauty, and exceptional musical talent; this list suggests that Benedick is seeking a well-rounded, if unattainable,

companion. While the statement is generally playful, Benedick's idealized list is ironic and suggests that his standards are likely impossible to meet. By exaggerating the qualities that he wants in a woman, he further shields himself from romantic advances.

In a similar way to Benedick, Beatrice makes her standards clear to the public in 2.1, while also suggesting that she will never find love:

BEATRICE: He that hath a beard is more than a youth, and he that hath no beard is less than man; and he that is more than a youth is not for me; and he that is less than a man, I am not for him (2.1.31-37).

This passage introduces the concept of beards as symbols of male maturity. The tone here is sharp, yet playful – characteristic of Beatrice's speaking style. Her standards are, in a way, paradoxical as well. Older men who "hath a beard" and are "more than a youth" are unfit for her. By contrast, those suitors who lack beards and are "less than a man" are much too young for her liking. In this way, Beatrice suggests that the presence of facial hair does not make a suitable partner, jabbing at traditional conventions of masculinity. Beatrice also asserts her independence in this passage. By crafting her "ideal man" (like Benedick's "perfect woman"), she sets impossible standards and isolates herself from romantic entanglements.

The theme of deception soon makes its way into Beatrice and Benedick's relationship, specifically during the masquerade:

BEATRICE (to a masked Benedick) "Why, [Benedick] is the prince's jester, a very dull fool. Only his gift is in devising impossible slanders. None but libertines delight in him, and the commendation is not in his wit, but in his villainy, for he both pleases men and angers them, and then they laugh at him and beat him. I am sure he is in the fleet. I would he had boarded me. (2.1.131 – 37)

Beatrice employs sharp wit and verbal dexterity to both mock and to criticize Benedick. Beatrice herself appears to know she is speaking to Benedick: in disguise, yet present and listening. The exaggeration and hyperbole used by Beatrice heightens the humor in this scene. She describes Benedick as the prince's jester, a dull fool with the only skill of devising impossible slanders. The notion of Benedick being a jester suggests his place in the social hierarchy as a clown. Furthermore, jesters were typically expected to entertain and amuse, yet Beatrice presents him as a "dull fool," critiquing his wit. Beatrice's commentary on Benedick's ability both to please and anger people, leading to them laughing at him and beating him, is a comically paradoxical situation and plays into the theme of mistaken identity and the absurdity often present in high comedy. In addition, Beatrice suggests that while Benedick's wit may be sharp, it can also be hurtful, implying that humor can have a dark side. By insulting him, Beatrice attempts to distance herself from Benedick and further justify why he is not the one for her, while also engaging in playfully sexual discourse.

Through a combination of verbal irony, unfailing wit, and sharp exaggerations, Beatrice and Benedick attempt to prove that neither of them has feelings for the other. Having fortified themselves against love (for now), they unknowingly leave room for Don Pedro and others to bring them together. These opportunities for eavesdropping are staged with low comedy in mind during the second half of the play.

Low comedy certainly offers an additional perspective on Shakespeare's works. At the 2023 Stratford Festival production, the relationship between Beatrice and Benedick, as well as the actions of Dogberry and the Watch, offered remarkable elements of low comedy. Don Pedro serves as the man behind Beatrice and Benedick's future, as the one who plots to bring them together:

PEDRO: I will in the interim undertake one of Hercules' labors, which is, to bring Signor Benedick and the Lady Beatrice into a mountain of affection th' one with th' other. (2.1.344 – 47).

The use of the term "Hercules' labors" suggests that Don Pedro sees this task as a legendary undertaking. This choice of words adds a humorous and exaggerated tone to his sentiment, emphasizing the perceived complexity of bringing Benedick and Beatrice together. Furthermore, the phrase "mountain of affection" is a metaphorical expression that conveys the magnitude of the emotional connection Don Pedro hopes to create between Benedick and Beatrice. It suggests a vast and overwhelming amount of love, highlighting the desired outcome of his matchmaking efforts. The passage captures Don Pedro's playful side as he attempts to orchestrate a connection between Benedick and Beatrice, while also emphasizing the challenges and humor involved with love.

III. Part 2

There are some parts of the play text that read as high comedy, but that take shape on the Stratford stage as full of low comedic moments. 2.3 offers a prime example of this difference. After describing his "ideal woman" in the text, Benedick hides himself "in the arbor" (2.3. 34). When I read this scene, I found it difficult to imagine what Benedick's hiding spot might look like on stage. There is no detail other than "*He hides*" (2.3. 34). During the 2023 Stratford Festival production, however, Graham Abbey (as Benedick) utilized a large, human-sized, moveable potted plant as his primary shelter of choice (Kelly, 2023a). As Claudio, Leonato, and Don Pedro moved about the stage and spoke of Beatrice's love for Benedick, we saw Abbey mirror their movements with the plant so as not to be seen. At one point, Abbey climbed a tree on stage to eavesdrop on the conversation below, before promptly falling off and causing a stack of metal plates to scatter, comically (and loudly), across the stage (Kelly, 2023a). Once Claudio, Leonato, and Don Pedro

departed the stage, Maev Beatty (as Beatrice) entered. Upon seeing her, Abbey took his shirt off, lifted a (seemingly full) 20 or so gallon jug of water with one hand, and let out a guttural yell to attract her attention (Kelly, 2023a). Yet another example of low comedy inserted into the text of the play, this scene offered a hyper-masculine element of Benedick's character and put into action what he spoke of in his monologue just beforehand. It is at this moment where we finally see Benedick attempt to grab Beatrice's attention and show her how he now suddenly feels; this interaction also foreshadows their romantic developments in the play and contributes to both the low and high comedic effect.

Per Don Pedro's plan, supporting characters also set up Beatrice to overhear Benedick's feelings about her in 3.1. This time, Margaret, Ursula, and Hero take the lead. In the text of the play, Hero remarks (knowing that Beatrice is hiding nearby):

HERO: "But nature never framed a woman's heart of prouder stuff than that of Beatrice. Disdain and scorn sparkle 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 or affection. She is so self-endear'd. (49-56)

Hero emphasizes Beatrice's pride, which she claims surpasses that of other women. The passage also suggests that disdain and scorn are evident in Beatrice's personality, implying a sharp and critical perception of the world around her. Beatrice's tendency to be skeptical further contributes to her strength and independence as a character. Additionally, the Stratford production highlighted her wit as a key aspect of her character. Her intelligence and quickness of mind were portrayed as so highly valued by herself that everything else appears weak in comparison. Furthermore, the phrase "She is so self-endear'd" encapsulates the overall theme of Beatrice's independence and self-sufficiency. It suggests that Beatrice relies on herself, perhaps as a defense mechanism. All of

these characteristics make Beatrice the unconventional female figure in the play.

While Hero is talking with Ursula and Margaret in the production, we see a similar pattern of behavior in Beatrice compared to Benedick just moments before. Beatrice relies on the potted plants and tree as a hiding spot, but also branches off into different methods of concealment. At one point, she rushed across the stage – out of eyeshot of the three women – and hid underneath the kitchen table (complete with tablecloth and dishes). Crawling across the stage with table in tow, Beatrice knocked additional dishes onto the ground, causing laughter from the audience (Kelly, 2023a). Beatrice's behavior here was characteristic of low comedy, which (as previously established) typically involves exaggerated, physical, and often absurd actions that aim to provoke audience laughter through simple and sometimes crude means. In this case, Beatrice's antics, including crawling across the stage and causing a commotion, contribute to the humor.

Perhaps the most well-known examples of low comedy in *Much Ado About Nothing* are the characters of Dogberry and the Watch. These characters dominated the 2023 Stratford Festival production with their hilarious physical comedy. We first encounter these characters in 3.3, just after Don John alerts Claudio of Hero's alleged infidelity. In this way, Dogberry and the Watch serve as comic relief to an otherwise sobering situation. Dogberry's malapropisms, or misuse of words, are one of the defining examples of his character:

DOGBERRY: You are thought to be the most senseless and fit man for the constable of the watch. Therefore bear you the lantern. This is your charge: you shall comprehend all vagrom men; you are to bid any man stand, in the prince's name. (3.3.23 – 27)

Dogberry believes he is providing the Watch with clear instructions, but his words are filled with malapropisms, creating both moments of verbal irony and humor. Here, he misuses three words:

“senseless” for “sensible”, “comprehend” for “apprehend”, and “vagrom” for “vagrant.” Dogberry's confidence in his own perception and judgment is comically misplaced. His misuse of words and his attempt to sound authoritative create a humorous dissonance, emphasizing the gap between his perception of his role and the reality of his incompetence. Dogberry's instructions to "comprehend all vagrom men" and to "bid any man stand, in the prince's name" are delivered in a disorganized and confusing manner. This aspect of Dogberry's character contributes to the overall comedic effect of the scene, as the audience realizes the absurdity of entrusting such responsibilities to someone so incompetent.

The Watch also contributes its share of low comedy, primarily in 3.3 while listening in on Borachio and Conrad's conversation. Here, Borachio reveals to Conrad that he deceived Claudio and Don Pedro by making them believe that Hero was unfaithful:

BORACHIO: The devil my master knew she was Margaret, and partly by his oaths, which first possessed them, partly by the dark night, which did deceive them, but chiefly by my villainy, which did confirm any slander that Don John had made, away went Claudio enraged, swore he would meet her, as he was appointed, next morning at the temple, and there, before the whole congregation, shame her with what he saw o'ernight and send her home again without a husband. (153 - 61)

Borachio continues to confess the details of the deceitful plot to Conrad. He begins by admitting that Claudio and Don Pedro were deceived into thinking that Hero was unfaithful. He implicates himself as an agent in this deception, emphasizing the role he played in misleading them. Additionally, Borachio claims that "the devil my master knew she was Margaret," indicating that Don John was aware that the woman involved in this encounter was Margaret, not Hero. This reveals a characteristically sinister motive on the part of Don John to cause trouble and disrupt the

planned marriage. We also see Borachio acknowledge his own "villainy," emphasizing his role in confirming John's accusations; this moment underscores the malicious intent behind the plot and the willingness of characters to exploit the trust of others for their own ends.

The Watch responds to Borachio's confession, stating:

FIRST WATCHMAN: We charge you in the prince's name, stand!

SECOND WATCHMAN: Call up the right Master Constable. We have here recovered the most dangerous piece of lechery that ever was known in the commonwealth. (3.3.163 – 66)

This passage serves as an additional example of low comedy and the use of malapropism. Here, the word "lechery" is used in place of "treachery". Ironically, "lechery" (lust) is what Claudio accuses Hero of later in 4.1. In the 2023 Stratford Festival production, this particular scene involved a clever use of the entire stage to create a moment of low comedy. When the members of the Watch confronted Borachio and Conrad, they ultimately ran across the stage, down a passageway, and underneath the seats, and then out the back on the other side via a tunnel (Kelly, 2023a). This action began a chase between the Watch and the accused that lasted a few minutes and was filled with yelling and physical humor. Of special note was one of the watchmen, a woman, who played a deaf older woman holding a brass ear horn. While the other characters raced around the stage, she shuffled along calmly (Kelly, 2023a). This contrast between the frantic actions of Conrad, Borachio, and the majority of the Watch against the older woman contributed a great deal to the low comedy elements within the play – not to mention many of the audience members crying-laughing for minutes. The use of the Watch (an authoritative body in the eyes of Dogberry) in a situation such as this, that turns out to be more comedic than serious, also lends itself to low comedy.

The Watch shows up again in 4.2, this time as comic relief after the failed wedding between Claudio and Hero. Conrad, having been arrested, calls Dogberry an “ass” (4.2. 71). Dogberry responds:

DOGBERRY: 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! (4.2.72-84)

Dogberry's repeated exclamation that he is an ass adds an element of verbal low comedy. Humor emerges as Dogberry repeats the insult, emphasizing his unintentional self-deprecation. Also present in this passage is an element of irony. Dogberry fails to recognize that he is, in fact, the ass; the audience, however, sees the humor in the situation as Dogberry unknowingly fulfills the very thing he wishes to avoid. Additionally, Dogberry's attempt to assert his wisdom while acting like a complete fool contribute to the comedic nature of the passage. Dogberry's character also serves as a satirical commentary on the misuse of authority. In theory, he is expected to be a figure of authority as the head of the Watch, but his lack of self-awareness and continual misuse of language highlight the absurdity of those in positions of power who are unfit for their roles. His overall personality and mannerisms throughout the play incorporates elements that contribute to the atmosphere of low comedy.

Despite the mountain of low comedy and ineptitude that Dogberry and the Watch contribute to the play, it is ultimately these characters (and specifically Dogberry) who save the day. In 5.1, Dogberry provides Don Pedro, Claudio, and Leonato with crucial information about the allegations against Hero:

DOGBERRY: Marry, sir, [Borachio and Conrad] 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. (5.1.208 – 12)

Here, Dogberry reveals to the others that Borachio and Conrad (along with Don John) were involved in a plan to bring shame upon Hero and ruin her marriage to Claudio. The passage is an example of low comedy by way of malapropisms. Dogberry skips about, going from “secondarily” to “sixth and lastly” and then “thirdly” – classic Dogberry material. Also of note in this scene is the cruelty that Don Pedro and Claudio display towards Dogberry:

PEDRO: First, I ask thee what they have done; thirdly, I ask thee what’s their offense; sixth and lastly, why they are committed; and, to conclude, what you lay to their charge.

CLAUDIO: Rightly reasoned, and in his own division; and, by my troth, there’s one meaning well suited. (213-218)

Don Pedro and Claudio mock the convoluted nature of Dogberry’s speech. In doing so, they continue to peddle Don John and Borachio’s lies and consequently misuse their authority. However, this scene also contributes significantly to the high comedy at the conclusion of the play. Hero and Claudio, as well as Beatrice and Benedick, are married, and the central conflict surrounding the former is resolved. In this way, Dogberry's actions inadvertently resolve the

central conflict of the play by bringing important information about Hero to light, even if his convoluted behavior initially obscures the gravity of the situation.

IV. Conclusion

In this essay, I set out to engage the text of the play and observations from the 2023 Stratford Festival production to discuss how *Much Ado About Nothing* contains elements of tragedy and comedy, and how low and high comedy contribute to the outcome of the play. Ultimately, it is Dogberry's discovery and communication of the lies against Hero that resolve the central conflict and tragic elements of the play, demonstrating a transition from low comedy to high. Though presented traditionally, the adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing* at the 2023 Stratford Festival contained additional text - Beatrice's prologue focused on female independence and women's ability to "strum their private lute" (Hoile, 2023d) at the outset of the play, and Hero's speech before the final wedding in 5.4, expressing her anger towards Claudio for believing Borachio and Don John's scheme (Hoile, 2023d). This restructuring of the play gives the female characters a stronger voice, while also offering commentary on female sexuality and the relationships between gender and power – all issues that should be explored further in the context of this play.

Much Ado About Nothing is a play that skillfully navigates the delicate balance between comedy and tragedy. While the central plot involving Claudio and Hero introduces elements of betrayal, deception, and public humiliation, the play maintains a comedic tone throughout. The characters of Beatrice and Benedick contribute to the high comedy through their witty banter, resistance to love, and eventual romantic developments. The tragic elements are most evident in the false accusations against Hero, leading to her public shaming at the wedding. Hero and Leonato's emotional turmoil in 4.1 underscore the profound impact of societal judgment and the

fragility of reputation. The juxtaposition of this tragedy with the comedic moments involving Beatrice and Benedick, as well as Dogberry and the Watch, creates a complex emotional and physical environment. Low comedy, embodied by characters like Dogberry and the Watch, provides moments of comic relief and absurdity. Dogberry's malapropisms and social unawareness offer a welcome break from the more serious moments. However, it is through Dogberry's unveiling of the truth that the conflict surrounding Hero's sexuality is resolved, demonstrating that the heroes among us might not always be whom we expect.

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