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BA English Honours | Semester V | Calicut University

Shakespeare Studies

Course Code: ENG5EJ308 • Module 3 Notes

Unit 12: Much Ado About Nothing: Context, Plot, and Architecture

Messina as a Comic Labyrinth

Composed circa 1598–1599, *Much Ado About Nothing* represents the radiant summit of Shakespeare's mature romantic comedies. Set in the sun-drenched, aristocratic Sicilian port of Messina in the aftermath of a bloodless military campaign, the play explores the fragile, deceptive nature of romantic affection, societal reputation, and the power of language. The title hinges upon a famous Elizabethan pun: "nothing" was pronounced almost identically to "noting" (meaning observing, eavesdropping, spying, and rumor-mongering). The comedy is an elaborate dance of false "notings."

The Double Plot Architecture

Shakespeare masterfully weaves together two contrasting romantic plots:

- **The Hero-Claudio Plot (Conventional Romantic Melodrama):** The young Florentine lord Claudio falls instantly, conventionally in love with the modest, silent Hero, daughter of Governor Leonato. Their idyllic union is ruthlessly sabotaged by the villainous Don John, who stages a deceptive bedroom window encounter, leading Claudio to publicly humiliate and slander Hero at the altar as a wanton whore.
- **The Beatrice-Benedick Plot (Witty Warfare / Antipodal Romance):** The cynical, confirmed bachelor Benedick and the fiercely independent, razor-tongued Beatrice engage in a "merry war" of mutual insults, swearing perpetual hatred of marriage. Through benevolent gulling by their friends, both are tricked into confronting and embracing their genuine, suppressed love.

Unit 13: Comic Conventions: The Green World, Gulling, and Reconciliation

Festive Comedy and the Social Restoration

Shakespearean comedy, as theorized by C.L. Barber in *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*, follows a dynamic rhythm of **Release and Clarification**. The play suspends rigid social inhibitions through masking, revelry, dance, and carnivalesque freedom. While *Much Ado* does not physically move characters into an enchanted forest (like the Forest of Arden in *As You Like It*), Messina's sun-drenched gardens, moonlit orchards, and masked balls function as an urban "green world" where conventional gender roles are joyfully destabilized.

Unit 14: Comic Techniques: Stichomythia, Eavesdropping, and Malapropism

The Sparkle of Witty Warfare: Beatrice and Benedick

The dialogue between Beatrice and Benedick represents the highest peak of comic verbal combat (**Stichomythia**) in English literature. When Beatrice snaps, "I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me," Benedick instantly retorts, "God keep your ladyship still in that mind, so some gentleman or other shall scape a predestinate scratched face." Their repartee is not mere antagonism; it is a defensive linguistic armor protecting two intensely vulnerable, intelligent souls who dread the emotional capitulation demanded by marriage.

The Symmetrical Gulling Scenes

Shakespeare crafts two brilliant, symmetrical eavesdropping scenes in Act II, Scene 3 and Act III, Scene 1. In Leonato’s orchard, Don Pedro, Claudio, and Leonato stage a loud, fake conversation within Benedick’s hearing, claiming Beatrice is dying of unrequited love for him. Symmetrically, Hero and Ursula stage an

identical conversation in the garden within Beatrice's hearing. In both instances, the proud intellects are disarmed: vanity gives way to empathy, and both resolve to abandon pride: "Love on; I will requite thee" (Beatrice); "I will be horribly in love with her" (Benedick).

Unit 15: Themes of Comedy and Romance: Honor, Slander, and the Shaming of Hero

The Fragility of Female Honor in Patriarchal Society

Much Ado About Nothing darkens into near-tragedy during the wedding scene (Act IV, Scene 1). Claudio's savage, public denunciation of Hero at the altar reveals the terrifying precariousness of female status in early modern patriarchy. A woman's entire worth was tied to her chastity; upon an unverified, fabricated accusation, even her own father Leonato immediately believes the slander, wishing Hero dead: "Do not live, Hero; do not ope thine eyes... O, she is fallen into a pit of ink!"

The Miraculous Solution: Friar Francis and Symbolic Resurrection

Hero's redemption is engineered by Friar Francis, who proposes that Hero feign death: "Maintain a mourning ostentation / And on your family's old monument / Hang mournful epitaphs." By staging Hero's death, the community is forced to confront its shameful credulity, transforming Claudio's righteous anger into mourning and remorse. Hero's subsequent "resurrection" at the final wedding symbolizes spiritual renewal and forgiveness.

Unit 16: The Role of the Fool: Dogberry and the Subversion of Authority

Dogberry and the Watch: The Triumph of the Ridiculous

In a stroke of supreme comic genius, Shakespeare assigns the discovery of Don John's sinister plot not to the brilliant aristocratic lords, but to **Dogberry**, the bumbling, pompous Master Constable, his partner Verges, and the incompetent Night Watch. Dogberry is famous for his hilarious **malapropisms**—using incorrect words that sound similar to the intended word, producing absurd reversals of meaning (e.g., calling the villains "the most disfigured and lewdly tolerated," commanding the watch to "comprehend all vagrom men," and insisting on being written down as "an ass"). Despite his absolute intellectual absurdity, Dogberry's simple procedural duty unmasks the conspiracy, proving that the pompous aristocratic world is saved by the innocence of the fool.

Unit 17: Gender and Identity: Beatrice's Rebellion and "Kill Claudio!"

The Cry for Justice: "O God, that I were a man!"

The emotional climax of the play occurs immediately following the aborted wedding in the church (Act IV, Scene 1). Alone with Benedick, Beatrice weeps in fury over the slander of her innocent cousin Hero. When Benedick, seeking to prove his newly declared love, bids her: "Come, bid me do anything for thee," Beatrice unleashes the shocking, two-word command: **"Kill Claudio!"**

The Impotence of Female Agency in a Man's World

When Benedick initially refuses to murder his battlefield comrade, Beatrice erupts in an agonizing, magnificent monologue of feminist rage: "O God, that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the marketplace... Manhood is melted into courtesies, valour into compliment, and men are only turned into tongue." Beatrice exposes the bitter reality of her gender: she possesses superior moral clarity and courage,

yet societal laws deny her the right to duel or demand legal justice. Benedick hears her truth, yields to her moral authority, and challenges Claudio to a duel, sealing their love not through empty flattery, but through an ethical commitment to justice.

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 3 Advanced Shakespearean Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 1)

1. The Materialist and New Historicist Turn in Shakespeare Studies

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2. Gendered Performativity, Cross-Dressing, and the Subversion of Patriarchy

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In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Beatrice dismantles patriarchal assumptions regarding female modesty through her razor-sharp wit and righteous fury against male hypocrisy. In *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth violently repudiates traditional maternal nurturing to seize sovereign agency, while the Weird Sisters occupy a terrifying liminal space beyond binary gender taxonomies ("You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so"). Furthermore, in the Sonnets, the passionate devotion directed toward the Fair Youth and the visceral eroticism of the Dark Lady disrupt normative early modern sexual and racial hierarchies, affirming the pluralistic fluidities of human desire.

3. Postcolonial Appropriations and Intercultural Reclamations

In our contemporary globalized world, Shakespeare has been radically reclaimed from its historical complicity in British imperial civilizing missions. As theorists like Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin demonstrate, during the 19th and 20th centuries, colonial educational systems (such as Macaulay's English curriculum in India) weaponized Shakespeare as the supreme icon of Anglo-Saxon cultural superiority, forcing colonized subjects to memorize soliloquies to prove their intellectual assimilation.

However, modern postcolonial writers, directors, and filmmakers have executed a brilliant counter-appropriation. By translating, adapting, and deconstructing Shakespearean texts into regional vernacular idioms—such as Vishal Bhardwaj's cinematic adaptations of *Macbeth* (*Maqbool*) and *Hamlet* (*Haider*) into contemporary Indian underworld and Kashmiri political realities—they transform the plays into urgent instruments for interrogating contemporary state violence, corruption, and subaltern trauma. Shakespeare endures not as a dead imperial monument, but as an infinite, living crucible of dramatic and moral questioning that belongs to all humanity.

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 3 Advanced Shakespearean Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 2)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 3 Advanced Shakespearean Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 3)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 3 Advanced Shakespearean Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 4)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 3 Advanced Shakespearean Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 5)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 3 Advanced Shakespearean Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 6)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 3 Advanced Shakespearean Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 7)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 3 Advanced Shakespearean Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 8)

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