

Much Ado About Nothing

By William Shakespeare

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with Michael Poston and Rebecca Niles

Folger Shakespeare Library

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Audition Sides – March 9 & 10, 2026

Abridged by Sally Sprafka, Michael Lynch,
Michele Sweeney, William Hambric, and Alexandra Deary
for The Impossible Players, 2025

Characters in the Play

LEONATO, Governor of Messina
HERO, his daughter
BEATRICE, his niece
ANTONIO, Leonato's brother

Waiting gentlewomen to Hero:
MARGARET
URSULA

DON PEDRO, Prince of Aragon
COUNT CLAUDIO, a young lord from Florence
SIGNIOR BENEDICK, a gentleman from Padua

DON JOHN, Don Pedro's bastard brother
Don John's followers:
BORACHIO
CONRADE

DOGBERRY, Master Constable in Messina
VERGES, Dogberry's partner
GEORGE SEACOAL, leader of the Watch
FIRST WATCHMAN
SECOND WATCHMAN
SEXTON
FRIAR FRANCIS

MESSENGER to Leonato
MESSENGER to Don Pedro
BOY

Musicians, Lords, Attendants, Son to Leonato's brother

ACT 1

Scene 3

Side For: Don John, Conrade, Borachio

CONRADE What the goodyear, my lord, why are you thus out of measure sad?

DON JOHN There is no measure in the occasion that breeds. Therefore the sadness is without limit.

CONRADE You should hear reason.

DON JOHN And when I have heard it, what blessing brings it? I cannot hide what I am. I must be sad when I have cause, and smile at no man's jests; eat when I have stomach, and wait for no man's leisure; sleep when I am drowsy, and tend on no man's business; laugh when I am merry, and claw no man in his humor.

CONRADE Yea, but you must not make the full show of this till you may do it without controlment. You have of late stood out against your brother, and he hath ta'en you newly into his grace, where it is impossible you should take true root but by the fair weather that you make yourself.

DON JOHN I had rather be a canker in a hedge than a rose in his grace, and it better fits my blood to be disdained of all than to fashion a carriage to rob love from any. In this, though I cannot be said to be a flattering honest man, it must not be denied but I am a plain-dealing villain. I am trusted with a muzzle and enfranchised with a clog; therefore I have decreed not to sing in my cage.

DON JOHN (cont.) If I had my mouth, I would bite; if I had my liberty, I would do my liking. In the meantime, let me be that I am, and seek not to alter me. Who comes here?

Enter Borachio.

What news, Borachio?

BORACHIO I came yonder from a great supper. I can give you intelligence of an intended marriage.

DON JOHN Will it serve for any model to build mischief on? What is he for a fool that betroths himself to unquietness?

BORACHIO Marry, it is your brother's right hand.

DON JOHN Who, the most exquisite Claudio?

BORACHIO Even he.

DON JOHN A proper squire. And who, and who? Which way looks he?

BORACHIO Marry, on Hero, the daughter and heir of Leonato.

DON JOHN A very forward March chick! How came you to this?

BORACHIO I heard it agreed upon that the Prince should woo Hero for himself, and having obtained her, give her to Count Claudio.

DON JOHN Come, come, let us thither. This may prove food to my displeasure. That young start-up hath all the glory of my overthrow. If I can cross him any way, I bless myself every way. You are both sure, and will assist me?

CONRADE To the death, my lord.

DON JOHN Let us to the great supper. Their cheer is the
greater that I am subdued. Would the cook were o'
my mind! Shall we go prove what's to be done?

BORACHIO We'll wait upon your Lordship.

They exit.

ACT 2

Scene 3

Side For: Don Pedro, Claudio, Leonato

DON PEDRO Come hither, Leonato. What was it you told me of today, that your niece Beatrice was in love with Signior Benedick?

CLAUDIO O, ay. I did never think that lady would have loved any man.

LEONATO No, nor I neither, but most wonderful that she should so dote on Signior Benedick, whom she hath in all outward behaviors seemed ever to abhor.

BENEDICK, *aside* Is 't possible? Sits the wind in that corner?

DON PEDRO Maybe she doth but counterfeit.

CLAUDIO Faith, like enough.

LEONATO O God! Counterfeit? There was never counterfeit of passion came so near the life of passion as she discovers it.

DON PEDRO Why, what effects of passion shows she?

CLAUDIO, *aside to Leonato* Bait the hook well; this fish will bite.

LEONATO What effects, my lord? She will sit you—you heard my daughter tell you how.

CLAUDIO She did indeed.

DON PEDRO How, how I pray you? You amaze me.

BENEDICK, *aside* I should think this a gull but that the white-bearded fellow speaks it. Knavery cannot, sure, hide himself in such reverence.

DON PEDRO Hath she made her affection known to Benedick?

LEONATO No, and swears she never will. That's her torment. She'll be up twenty times a night, and there will she sit in her smock till she have writ a sheet of paper. My daughter tells us all.

CLAUDIO Now you talk of a sheet of paper, I remember a pretty jest your daughter told us of.

LEONATO O, when she had writ it and was reading it over, she found "Benedick" and "Beatrice" between the sheet?

CLAUDIO That.

LEONATO O, she tore the letter into a thousand halfpence, railed at herself that she should be so immodest to write to one that she knew would flout her

CLAUDIO Then down upon her knees she falls, weeps, sobs, beats her heart, tears her hair, prays, curses: "O sweet Benedick, God give me patience!"

LEONATO She doth indeed, my daughter says so. My daughter is sometimes afeared she will do a desperate outrage to herself. It is very true.

DON PEDRO It were good that Benedick knew of it.

CLAUDIO To what end? He would make but a sport of it
and torment the poor lady worse.

DON PEDRO An he should, it were an alms to hang him.
She's an excellent sweet lady, and, out of all suspicion,
she is virtuous.

CLAUDIO And she is exceeding wise.

DON PEDRO In everything but in loving Benedick.
I pray you tell Benedick of it, and hear
what he will say.

LEONATO Were it good, think you?

CLAUDIO Hero thinks surely she will die, for she says
she will die if he love her not, and she will die ere
she make her love known, and she will die if he woo
her.

DON PEDRO She doth well.

CLAUDIO He is a very proper man.

DON PEDRO He hath indeed a good outward happiness.

CLAUDIO Before God, and in my mind, very wise.

DON PEDRO He doth indeed show some sparks that are like
wit.

CLAUDIO And I take him to be valiant.

DON PEDRO . And in the managing of quarrels you may say
he is wise, for he avoids them with great discretion. I love
Benedick well,

DON PEDRO (cont.) and I could wish he would modestly
examine himself to see how much he is unworthy so good a
lady.

LEONATO My lord, will you walk? Dinner is ready.

ACT 3

Scene 1

Side For: Hero, Ursula

HERO

Now, Ursula, when Beatrice doth come,
As we do trace this alley up and down,
Our talk must only be of Benedick.
When I do name him, let it be thy part
To praise him more than ever man did merit..
Now begin, for look where Beatrice like a lapwing runs
Close by the ground, to hear our conference.

Enter Beatrice, who hides in the bower

HERO, *aside to Ursula*

Then go we near her, that her ear lose nothing
Of the false sweet bait that we lay for it.—

They walk near the bower.

No, truly, Ursula, she is too disdainful..

URSULA But are you sure

That Benedick loves Beatrice so entirely?

HERO

So says the Prince and my new-trothèd lord.

URSULA

And did they bid you tell her of it, madam?

HERO

They did entreat me to acquaint her of it,
But I persuaded them, if they loved Benedick,
To wish him wrestle with affection
And never to let Beatrice know of it.

URSULA

Why did you so? Doth not the gentleman
Deserve as full as fortunate a bed
As ever Beatrice shall couch upon?

HERO

O god of love! I know he doth deserve
As much as may be yielded to a man,
But Nature never framed a woman's heart
Of prouder stuff than that of Beatrice.
Disdain and scorn ride sparkling 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.

URSULA Sure, I think so,

And therefore certainly it were not good
She knew his love, lest she'll make sport at it.

HERO

Why, you speak truth. I never yet saw man,
How wise, how noble, young, how rarely featured,
But she would spell him backward.

URSULA

Sure, sure, such carping is not commendable.

HERO

But who dare tell her so? If I should speak,
She would mock me, press me to death with wit.
Therefore let Benedick, like covered fire,
waste inwardly. It were a better death than die with mocks,

URSULA

Yet tell her of it. Hear what she will say.

HERO

No, rather I will go to Benedick
And counsel him to fight against his passion.

URSULA

O, do not do your cousin such a wrong!
She cannot be so much without true judgment,
Having so swift and excellent a wit
As she is prized to have, as to refuse
So rare a gentleman as Signior Benedick.

HERO

He is the only man of Italy,
Always excepted my dear Claudio.

URSULA

When are you married, madam?

HERO

Why, every day, tomorrow. Come, go in.
I'll show thee some attires and have thy counsel
Which is the best to furnish me tomorrow.

They move away from the bower.

URSULA, *aside to Hero*

She's limed, I warrant you. We have caught her,
madam.

HERO, *aside to Ursula*

If it prove so, then loving goes by haps;
Some Cupid kills with arrows, some with traps.

Hero and Ursula exit.

ACT 3

Scene 2

Side For: Don John, Don Pedro, Claudio

DON JOHN My lord and brother, God save you.

DON PEDRO Good e'en, brother.

DON JOHN If your leisure served, I would speak with you.

DON PEDRO In private?

DON JOHN If it please you. Yet Count Claudio may hear, for what I would speak of concerns him.

DON PEDRO What's the matter?

DON JOHN, *to Claudio* Means your Lordship to be married tomorrow?

DON PEDRO You know he does.

DON JOHN I know not that, when he knows what I know.

CLAUDIO If there be any impediment, I pray you discover it.

DON JOHN You may think I love you not. Let that appear hereafter, and aim better at me by that I now will manifest

DON PEDRO Why, what's the matter?

DON JOHN I came hither to tell you the lady is disloyal.

CLAUDIO Who, Hero?

DON JOHN Even she: Leonato's Hero, your Hero, every man's Hero.

CLAUDIO Disloyal?

DON JOHN The word is too good to paint out her wickedness. Go but with me tonight, you shall see her chamber window entered, even the night before her wedding day. If you love her then, tomorrow wed her. But it would better fit your honor to change your mind.

CLAUDIO, *to Prince* May this be so?

DON PEDRO I will not think it.

DON JOHN If you will follow me, I will show you. And when you have seen more and heard more, proceed accordingly.

CLAUDIO If I see anything tonight why I should not marry her, tomorrow in the congregation, there will I shame her.

DON PEDRO And as I wooed for thee to obtain her, I will join with thee to disgrace her.

DON JOHN I will disparage her no farther till you are my witnesses. Bear it coldly but till midnight, and let the issue show itself.

They exit.

ACT 3

Scene 5

Side For: Leonato, Dogberry, Verges

LEONATO What would you with me, honest neighbor?

DOGBERRY Marry, sir, I would have some confidence with you that decerns you nearly.

LEONATO Brief, I pray you, for you see it is a busy time with me.

DOGBERRY Marry, this it is, sir.

VERGES Yes, in truth, it is, sir.

LEONATO What is it, my good friends?

DOGBERRY Goodman Verges, sir, speaks a little off the matter. An old man, sir, and his wits are not so blunt as, God help, I would desire they were, but, in faith, honest as the skin between his brows.

VERGES Yes, I thank God I am as honest as any man living that is an old man and no honester than I.

DOGBERRY Comparisons are odorous. *Pocas Palabras*, neighbor Verges.

LEONATO Neighbors, you are tedious.

DOGBERRY It pleases your Worship to say so, but we are the poor duke's officers. But truly, for mine own part, if I were as tedious as a king, I could find in my heart to bestow it all of your Worship.

LEONATO All thy tediousness on me, ah? I would fain know what you have to say.

VERGES Marry, sir, our watch tonight, excepting your Worship's presence, ha' ta'en a couple of as arrant knaves as any in Messina.

DOGBERRY A good old man, sir. He will be talking. As they say, "When the age is in, the wit is out. Well said, i' faith, neighbor Verges.—Well, God's a good man. An two men ride of a horse, one must ride behind. All men are not alike, alas, good neighbor.

LEONATO Indeed, neighbor, he comes too short of you.

DOGBERRY Gifts that God gives.

LEONATO I must leave you.

DOGBERRY One word, sir. Our watch, sir, have indeed comprehended two aspicious persons, and we would have them this morning examined before your Worship.

LEONATO Take their examination yourself and bring it me. I am now in great haste, as it may appear unto you.

DOGBERRY It shall be suffigance.

LEONATO Drink some wine ere you go. Fare you well.

Enter a Messenger.

MESSENGER My lord, they stay for you to give your daughter to her husband.

LEONATO I'll wait upon them. I am ready.

He exits, with the Messenger.

DOGBERRY Go, good partner. We are now to examination
these men.

VERGES And we must do it wisely.

DOGBERRY We will spare for no wit, I warrant you.
Meet me at the jail.

They exit.

ACT 4

Scene 1

Side For: Friar, Leonato, Hero, Benedick

FRIAR Hear me a little,
For I have only silent been so long,
and given way unto this course of fortune,
by noting of the lady.
Trust not my reading nor my observations,
My reverence, calling, nor divinity,
If this sweet lady lie not guiltless here
Under some biting error.

LEONATO Friar, it cannot be.

FRIAR
Lady, what man is he you are accused of?

HERO
They know that do accuse me. I know none.
If I know more of any man alive
Than that which maiden modesty doth warrant,
Let all my sins lack mercy

FRIAR
There is some strange misprision in the princes.

BENEDICK
Two of them have the very bent of honor,
And if their wisdoms be misled in this,
The practice of it lives in John the Bastard,
Whose spirits toil in frame of villainies.

LEONATO
If they wrong her honor,
The proudest of them shall well hear of it.

FRIAR Pause awhile,
And let my counsel sway you in this case.
Your daughter here the princes left for dead.
Let her awhile be secretly kept in,
And publish it that she is dead indeed.

LEONATO
What shall become of this? What will this do?

FRIAR
She, dying, as it must be so maintained,
Upon the instant that she was accused,
Shall be lamented, pitied, and excused
Of every hearer.
So will it fare with Claudio.
When he shall hear she died upon his words,
Th' idea of her life shall sweetly creep
Into his study of imagination,
And every lovely organ of her life
Shall come appareled in more precious habit,
Than when she lived indeed. Then shall he mourn,
And wish he had not so accused her.
The supposition of the lady's death
Will quench the wonder of her infamy.

BENEDICK
Signior Leonato, let the Friar advise you.

LEONATO Being that I flow in grief,
The smallest twine may lead me.

FRIAR
'Tis well consented. Presently away,
Come, lady, die to live. This wedding day
Perhaps is but prolonged. Have patience and
endure.

ACT 4

Scene 1

Side For: Benedick, Beatrice

BENEDICK Lady Beatrice, have you wept all this while?

BEATRICE Yea, and I will weep a while longer.

BENEDICK I will not desire that.

BEATRICE You have no reason. I do it freely.

BENEDICK Surely I do believe your fair cousin is wronged.

BEATRICE Ah, how much might the man deserve of me that would right her!

BENEDICK Is there any way to show such friendship?

BEATRICE A very even way, but no such friend.

BENEDICK May a man do it?

BEATRICE It is a man's office, but not yours.

BENEDICK I do love nothing in the world so well as you. Is not that strange?

BEATRICE As strange as the thing I know not. It were as possible for me to say I loved nothing so well as you, but believe me not, and yet I lie not; I confess nothing, nor I deny nothing. I am sorry for my cousin.

BENEDICK By my sword, Beatrice, thou lovest me!

BEATRICE Do not swear and eat it.

BENEDICK I will swear by it that you love me, and I will make him eat it that says I love not you.

BEATRICE Will you not eat your word?

BENEDICK With no sauce that can be devised to it. I protest I love thee.

BEATRICE Why then, God forgive me.

BENEDICK What offense, sweet Beatrice?

BEATRICE You have stayed me in a happy hour. I was about to protest I loved you.

BENEDICK And do it with all thy heart.

BEATRICE I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest.

BENEDICK Come, bid me do anything for thee.

BEATRICE Kill Claudio.

BENEDICK Ha! Not for the wide world.

BEATRICE You kill me to deny it. Farewell.

She begins to exit.

BENEDICK Tarry, sweet Beatrice.

BEATRICE I am gone, though I am here. There is no love in you. Nay, I pray you let me go.

BENEDICK Beatrice—

BEATRICE In faith, I will go.

BENEDICK We'll be friends first.

BEATRICE You dare easier be friends with me than
fight with mine enemy.

BENEDICK Is Claudio thine enemy?

BEATRICE Is he not approved in the height a villain
that hath slandered, scorned, dishonored my kinswoman?
O, that I were a man! What, bear her in
hand until they come to take hands, and then, with
public accusation, uncovered slander, unmitigated
rancor—O God, that I were a man! I would eat his
heart in the marketplace.

BENEDICK Hear me, Beatrice—

BEATRICE Talk with a man out at a window! A proper
saying.

BENEDICK Nay, but Beatrice—

BEATRICE Sweet Hero, she is wronged, she is slandered,
she is undone.

BENEDICK Beatrice ----

BEATRICE Princes and counties!
He is now as valiant as Hercules
that only tells a lie and swears it. I cannot be a man
with wishing; therefore I will die a woman with
grieving.

BENEDICK Tarry, good Beatrice. By this hand, I love
thee.

BEATRICE Use it for my love some other way than
swearing by it.

BENEDICK Think you in your soul the Count Claudio
hath wronged Hero?

BEATRICE Yea, as sure as I have a thought or a soul.

BENEDICK Enough, I am engaged. I will challenge
him. I will kiss your hand, and so I leave you.
Go comfort your cousin. I must say she is dead, and so
farewell.

ACT 5

Scene 2

Side For: Benedick, Beatrice

BENEDICK

Sweet Beatrice, wouldst thou come when I called thee?

BEATRICE Yea, signior, and depart when you bid me.

BENEDICK O, stay but till then!

BEATRICE “Then” is spoken. Fare you well now. And yet, ere I go, let me go with that I came, which is, with knowing what hath passed between you and Claudio.

BENEDICK Only foul words, and thereupon I will kiss thee.

BEATRICE Foul words is but foul wind, and foul wind is but foul breath, and foul breath is noisome. Therefore I will depart unkissed.

BENEDICK Thou hast frightened the word out of his right sense, so forcible is thy wit. But I must tell thee plainly, Claudio undergoes my challenge, and either I must shortly hear from him, or I will subscribe him a coward. And I pray thee now tell me, for which of my bad parts didst thou first fall in love with me?

BEATRICE For them all together, which maintained so politic a state of evil that they will not admit any good part to intermingle with them. But for which of my good parts did you first suffer love for me?

BENEDICK Suffer love! A good epithet. I do suffer love indeed, for I love thee against my will.

BEATRICE In spite of your heart, I think. Alas, poor heart, if you spite it for my sake, I will spite it for yours, for I will never love that which my friend hates.

BENEDICK Thou and I are too wise to woo peaceably. And now tell me, how doth your cousin?

BEATRICE Very ill.

BENEDICK And how do you?

BEATRICE Very ill, too.

BENEDICK Serve God, love me, and mend. for here comes one in haste.