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The first mention of ‘The comedie of much A dooe about nothinge’ as ‘A booke’, was in a note, dated 4 August 1600, on the fly-leaf of a volume of the Stationer’s Register, where it was formally entered on 23 August, and then appeared later that year in a quarto text (a book made up of sheets of paper folded twice to provide 4 leaves or 8 pages). The title page announced it as:

Much adoe about
Nothing
As it hath been sundrie times publikely
acted by the right honourable, the Lord
Chamberlaine his servants.
Written by William Shakespeare.

Further details on the title page informed the first readers that the play was printed in 1600 by Valentine Simmes for Andrew Wise (who also published quartos of Richard III) and William Aspley, who was later involved, though not as a very active partner, in the publishing of the First Folio of Shakespeare’s plays, due to his ownership of the rights in Much Ado and Henry IV Part 2 (2 HIV) (also printed by Simmes). The published quarto would have cost about 6d (Murphy, 2003, 30), the equivalent of an expensive seat at the Curtain, which was probably the first theatre in which Much Ado had ‘been sundrie times publikely acted’, as the title page advertises. When the Lord Chamberlain’s Men opened the Globe Theatre in summer 1599, Much Ado may have still been part of the active repertory alongside newer plays such as Julius Caesar, As You Like It and Henry V. The earliest performances of Much Ado probably date from after 7 September 1598 since it is absent from Francis Meres’s list of Shakespearean plays in his book Palladis Tamia: Wits
Treasury (1598) which was listed in the Stationers’ Register on this day. Much Ado was probably completed and brought into the repertoire late in 1598 or early in 1599.

At least one of the parts had to be reassigned in the processes of composition, rehearsal or early performance. Will Kemp, who was famous for his clowning roles, and is named in the speech prefixes for Dogberry in Act IV scene ii, left the Lord Chamberlain’s Men’s theatre company sometime before 11 February (when he started a ‘nine days’ wonder’ of dancing from London to Norwich). The quarto attributes Dogberry’s opening line to ‘Keeper’, his second to ‘Andrew’ and thereafter to ‘Kemp’, while Verges’ lines are prefixed ‘Cowley’ so we know that Richard Cowley (an actor hired by the Chamberlain’s Men), played this role. Kemp’s place as the lead comic actor was taken over by Robert Armin, who was to become a writer of plays and verse in his own right. Armin developed the role of the Shakespearean fool as a witty wordsmith in Touchstone in As You Like It, Feste in Twelfth Night and the King Lear’s Fool, which were written for him. The role of Dogberry, who is famous for his malapropisms, seems to mark the shift between Kemp and Armin’s styles of clowning. Armin’s frustrations at having been ‘writ down an ass’ (V.i.86), by having to take up a role written for Kemp (whose previous credits included Bottom), may have added an extra layer of comedy to Dogberry’s wild protestations. The line certainly seemed to have significance for Armin because in the dedication of his jest book The Italian Tailor and His Boy (1609), he appeals to the Lady Elizabeth Fitzwater recalling his role as one ‘who hath been writ downe for an Asse in his time, & pleades under forma pauperis in it still, not-withstanding his Constableship and Office’ (Armin, 1609, sig. A3).

The ‘writ downe’ form of Much Ado About Nothing in the early texts is crucial in preserving the play, but even at this stage, where editorial interventions are minimal, it shapes knowledge differently to a performance. The role of Don John is a case in point as Alan Galey has argued. In the spoken script he is simply introduced as the Prince’s brother who has been in rebellion against Don Pedro but is now reconciled to him. In the quarto and Folio texts, speech prefixes and stage directions provide the extra information that he is a bastard (and ‘dumb John’ in the quarto, sig. B4, if this is not a mistake for Don). He is not named bastard in the spoken dialogue until Act IV scene i when Hero is accused of the same illegitimate sexual activity from
which he was born. An unknowing audience can thus appreciate the moment of revelation in performance on stage or screen. Once he has been writ down a bastard in a script, however, readers cannot escape the significance of that label and its associations. Don John thus presents something of a textual crux for editors. If, following an editorial tradition tracing back to the first quarto, ‘he is a series of graphic marks on the printed page, then he is a bastard from his first entrance’. If, however, the editor prioritises performance as the origin of the play’s meaning, ‘he is an effect of transcribed stage dialogue, his own and that of other characters’ and so ‘he is not a bastard until the precise moment when his crime is suspected’ (Galey, 2004, 21).

Inconsistencies in the quarto text of Much Ado suggest that it was based on Shakespeare’s authorial papers rather than a working theatre script. W.W. Greg commented: ‘If ever there was a text printed from foul papers that still needed a good deal of correction to fit them for use in the theatre it is Q’ (Greg, 1955, 279). For example, Margaret and Ursula are missing from the stage directions for Act II scene i and Conrade, Borachio and members of the Watch are not included in the entry for the examination scene Act IV scene ii. In the Watch’s first appearance at Act III scene iii, which of the lines assigned to the Watch should be spoken by Seacoal, as chief watchman, is muddled by the confusion of the speech prefix 2 Watch (the second watchman to speak) for him at the beginning of the scene and 1 Watch (as the chief watchman) later (Wells, 1980). The stage directions for Leonato’s entrances in Acts I and II include ‘Innogen his wife’ and ‘his wife’, a character who never speaks in either scene and has no more substance than the ghost of an idea in the early stages of composition. To include a mother for Hero who said nothing during the courtship, betrothal and broken wedding scenes would certainly place heavy-handed emphasis on the conventional silencing of women in early modern England, but this is not a realistic production choice for most theatre companies, including the Lord Chamberlain’s Men. Other ‘ghost’ members of Leonato’s household are ‘a kinsman’ who enters at the beginning of Act II scene i and a son of Antonio who is mentioned in the second scene as a provider of music (I.ii.1–2). Balthasar is the character who sings in Act II scene iii and is asked to provide music at Hero’s chamber (II.iii.86–87). But again the quarto text is unclear since it gives two separate entries for music: one at line 34 when Don Pedro, Claudio and Leonato enter ‘with musicke’; and the second six
lines later which reads ‘Enter Balthasar with musicke’. This problem is resolved in the Folio text.

The text of Much Ado included in the First Folio of 1623 (much more expensively priced at about £1; the equivalent of 44 loaves of bread) appears to have been printed from a copy of the 1600 quarto annotated with some changes and corrections, but no longer extant. Kemp’s ghostly presence still haunts the Folio text in the speech prefixes for Act IV scene ii, which have not been corrected. Some annotations do suggest details of performance practice. The name of ‘Jacke Wilson’ is added to the stage direction opening Act II scene iii, indicating this was the singer cast to play Balthasar and the second entry for Balthasar and music is removed. Wilson was apprenticed to John Heminge in 1611, so may have made his debut as Balthasar at performances of Much Ado at Court in 1612–13. He went on to write songs for the King’s Men and became a City Wait from 1622, a lutenist at Court in 1635 and, finally, a professor of music at Oxford in 1656. References to God are taken out from Act IV scene ii, probably as a result of censorship on religious grounds. Also missing is part of Don Pedro’s critique of Benedick’s new fashion ‘in the shape of two countries at once, as, a German from the waist downward, all slops, and a Spaniard from the hip upward, no doublet’ (III.ii.33–35). These lines were probably cut because they would have been undiplomatic at the performance given for the Court’s Christmas revels in 1612–13. Prince Frederick, the Elector Palatine, was in Court, about to celebrate his marriage to Princess Elizabeth, the daughter of James I and Anna of Denmark. The play’s comic treatment of courtship, its promotion of love succeeding war and its references to Sicilian gardens and festivities would have made a warm interlude to the wintry Court, which was in mourning for the death of Prince Henry, heir to the throne. The masked ball of Act II scene i would have mimicked the usual court practices of masking and dancing at Whitehall. Quite how appropriate the dramatisation of a broken wedding day would have been for an apprehensive bride-to-be is more questionable. Nevertheless, the play is included in both lists of plays for which John Heminge was paid by the Lord Chamberlain’s office on 20 May 1613 for ‘presenting before the Princess highnes the Lady Elizabeth and the Prince Pallatyne Elector’ so it probably had a repeat performance. It is listed once as ‘Much Adoe abowte nothinge’ and in the second list as ‘Benedicte and Betteris’ (Malone Society, 1962, 55–56). Charles I, who
would have seen these court performances, apparently wrote the names against the title of the play in his copy of the 1632 second edition of the Folio (Furness, 1899, xxii and 6).

Such re-titlings indicate the tendency, from the early 17th century, to prioritise the Beatrice-Benedick rather than the Hero-Claudio plot. Leonard Digges’s 1640 edition of Shakespeare’s poems alludes to both characters as a draw for audiences, suggesting that *Much Ado* enjoyed revivals in the public theatre:

... let but *Beatrice*  
And *Benedicke* be seene, loe in a trice  
The Cockpit[,] Galleries, Boxes, all are full.  

(Digges, 1640, sig. A4)

Margaret Cavendish too listed ‘Bettrice’ among Shakespeare’s female characters that made one think ‘he had been Metamorphosed from a Man to a Woman’, in order to draw them so well (Thompson and Roberts, 1997, 13). Beatrice and Benedick’s ‘merry war’ of words in the play makes them prototypes of the witty couple, a pairing that became a characteristic feature of the comedy of manners in post-Restoration drama. They thus represent one example of continuity between drama dating from before the English Civil Wars and that which followed. After the Restoration in 1660, Charles II licensed two theatre companies and *Much Ado* was assigned to the Duke’s Company managed by Sir William D’Avenant. In spite of the increasing popularity of comedies featuring witty couples, late-17th century attitudes to Shakespeare’s texts were to reform them in accordance with current tastes. D’Avenant spliced together the war of wit from the Beatrice and Benedick plot of *Much Ado* with a rewritten, more sentimental version of the main plot in *Measure for Measure*. In the new play *The Law Against Lovers* (1662), Beatrice, far from being an orphan, was recast as an heiress and ward to the Duke while Benedick was the brother of Angelo. Beatrice’s exchange with the messenger, setting up the ‘merry war’, is transposed (D’Avenant, 1673, 274–75) but the first ‘skirmish of wit’ between the couple is supplemented by Beatrice’s young sister, Viola, flirting with Benedick (276–77). Beatrice asks Benedick to help rescue her cousin, Julietta, by stealing Angelo’s seal ring and forging a warrant for Claudio and Julietta’s release, to which he agrees. In the final scene Beatrice jokes against marriage,
telling Benedick ‘Plays that end so begin to be / Out of fashion’, but Benedick reminds her that ‘a bauld Dramatick Poet / Of the next Cloister’ (an allusion to the Friar and perhaps to Shakespeare) has advised Juliet ‘to end her Tragy-Comedy / With Hymen the old way’ (326). The Duke finally commands Beatrice and Benedick to ‘joyful triumphs of a nuptial peace’, in spite of Beatrice’s comic protest that they will quarrel again (328).

The publication of Rowe’s edition of Shakespeare in 1709, with a picture of the church scene as frontispiece, brought the full text of the play back into print and it was restored to the theatre in productions at Lincoln’s Inn Fields in 1721 and in 1737 at Covent Garden. In addition to revivals in 1737, 1739 and 1746, it was also the subject of another adaptation, The Universal Passion (1737), by James Miller. The Hero-Claudio plot and elements from Molière’s La Princesse D’Elide were put together in the romance of Lucilia and Bellario. Lucilia is a much more mature, spirited heroine than Hero, claiming, like Beatrice, that she has a ‘natural Aversion to Marriage’ so that death and a husband are the same to her (Miller, 1969, 9). She is wary of Bellario’s courtship, protesting ‘Men only pretend to be our Slaves the present Hour, in order to be real Tyrants to us for the future’ (8). The cross wooing of the masked ball is transferred to the women in this play, where Bellario declares his love for Liberia (21–22) and Lucilia is obliged to plead with her and with her father to prevent the match. Liberia, in the Don Pedro role, says ‘my dear Child, I’ll not steal thy Bird’s Nest from thee’ (26). More rivalry between the two is implied when Delia compares Lucilia’s wedding gown to the grander fashion of Liberia’s dress (49), whereas in Shakespeare’s text, Margaret compares Hero’s gown to the Duchess of Milan’s.

The rivalry between characters offers ample opportunity for Byron, the Don John of this version, to plot. He adapts Edmund’s sentiment to deride his brother, saying ‘I was born in the pure State of Nature, he in the stale Marriage Bed’ (15–16). The darker element of the wedding is already hinted at when the bride Lucilia states ‘I’m now prepar’d to be a made a Sacrifice’ (51). In the wedding scene, Bellario enters in ‘Fun’ral Garb’ which, as Gratiano points out ‘suits but ill the Splendor of our Court’ and ‘its Pomp to grace your Nuptials’. Bellario darkly points out: ‘My Lord, the Nuptial and the Fun’ral Rites / Are sometimes not so different in their Nature’ (53). This is all we see of a funeral in The Universal Passion, which has no mourning scene for
Bellario to repent. Instead he is given an amalgamation of Romeo’s mourning for Juliet and the praise of Cordelia’s blessed, pearl-like tears as she wrings her hands (65). Bellario refuses the second match as impossible, asking for ‘any other Chastisement’; his shock giving expression to spectators’ uneasiness surrounding this part of Shakespeare’s plot:

But what! To wed another! hold, my Heart,
Now dear Lucilia’s lost – to wed another!
Impossible; my Soul starts back with Horror,
And Nature shudders at the very Sound.

(64)

Lucilia, who shares some of Beatrice’s pride and self-declared aversion to marriage, gives voice to her unwarranted sense of injury in the church scene:

Have I for this, ungrateful as thou art,
When love of Freedom struggled in my Breast,
And Nature prompted me to live a Virgin,
Broke all those Vows to be thus basely treated;
To have my Fame, unspotted ‘till this Moment,
Be sully’d, injur’d, ruin’d thus by thee.
I need no Dagger’s Point, – burst, burst, my Heart.

(55)

Like Hero, she collapses and disappears from the stage until her name is cleared. When Bellario is persuaded to take a second bride on trust ‘with all her Imperfections’ (69), and Lucilia is restored, she objects (‘Hold, hold, my Lord’), not willing to accept him. She gives voice to the questions raised about what possible good reason she should have to trust him again:

You may again bring Wretchedness upon me;
And after I have once escap’d the Wreck,
Why should I prove the boisterous Main again?

(70)

No answer is given to these valid points. Lucilia does not speak again; her hand is joined to Bellario’s without any verbal consent on her part.
The more vigorous characterisation of Lucilia makes the figure of Liberia less of a contrast to the romantic heroine than in Shakespeare’s play. Liberia adopts many of Beatrice’s lines and some of Benedick’s qualities, declaring ‘my Heart’s a sound as a Bell’ (9). It is hinted, however, that she is feeling left out of the wedding preparations, protesting too much that because ‘I abhor the Thoughts of committing Matrimony so much, that I can’t endure the Preparation even for another’. Liberia goes on to sing Balthasar’s song with an amended first line: ‘Sigh no more, Virgins, sigh no more, / Men were deceivers ever;’ (39). She and Protheus fall victim to the plots of their friends in overhearing scenes which follow Shakespeare’s quite closely but use the couple’s reactions to marriage to balance the demands and appeal of romantic comedy against the supposedly more fashionable, worldly rejection of it. Liberia maintains an anti-romantic tenor right to the end of the play. Just before dancing with Protheus, she sings against ‘Such Bondage’ as marriage will bring (73–74). Protheus ends the play proper by declaring that they should be an example to the world that honourable wedlock ‘May, spite of Rallery, once more come in Fashion’ and ‘LOVE still reign the UNIVERSAL PASSION’ (76). In case this view should prove too sentimental for spectators, Mrs Clive, who played Liberia, counters it with a distinctly anti-romantic epilogue saying the author is ‘Non compos mentis’ for ending the play in this way (77). As an adaptation, The Universal Passion thus provides quite a trenchant critique of Shakespeare’s original, giving Lucilia much more of a voice than Hero, and raising questions about the romantic plot that have preoccupied critical writing.
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