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Author(s): Carl Dennis

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Wit and Wisdom in *Much Ado About Nothing*

CARL DENNIS

Much Ado About Nothing works on a distinction between two modes of perception: the mode of "wit," which relies on prudential reason and a practical evaluation of sensory evidence, and the mode of belief, which rejects reason and reliance on the senses for intuitive modes of understanding. The drama of the play resides in the protagonists' moving from one way of seeing to the other; and their practical and moral success is determined by their willingness to lay down their wits and approach the world through faith, through irrational belief. The anti-idealistic wit-play of Beatrice and Benedick, which mocks the excesses of love as irrational madness, is based not on any experience of human nature but on fear of the emotions and on foolish pride. When this witty couple submit to the censure of their friends, they reject the authority of autonomous reason and use the eyes of others to discover each other and themselves. This act of irrational belief in each other's love helps bring their repressed love for each other into being, and later helps them keep faith in Hero when all appearances inform against her. Claudio, on the other hand, moves from love to hate because his initial commitment to Hero is never deep enough to make appearances irrelevant.

Recent critics of *Much Ado About Nothing* have tended to agree with Mr. Graham Storey's convincing suggestion that the play is about "man's irresistible propensity to be taken in by appearances."¹ "Deception," Mr. Storey writes, "operates at every level of *Much Ado*: it is the common denominator of the three plots, and its mechanism—eavesdroppings, mistakes of identity, disguises and maskings, exploited hearsay—are the stuff of the play."² What causes the characters to be so often deceived is one of the central critical questions that the play raises. Mr. Storey attributes all the confusion to man's innate "giddiness," following Benedick's concluding assertion that "man is a giddy thing" (V.iv.107); but the term is perhaps too imprecise to clarify the particular limitations of the protagonists.³ Perhaps a more helpful suggestion is made by Mr.

¹Graham Storey, "The Success of *Much Ado About Nothing*," in *Discussions of Shakespeare's Romantic Comedy*, ed. Herbert Weil, Jr. (Boston, 1966), p. 44.

²Storey, p. 40.

³Citations from Shakespeare in this essay are to *The Complete Works*, ed. G. B. Harrison (New York, 1968).

A. P. Rossiter, who considers almost all the characters to be "self-willed, self-centered, and self-admiring creatures, whose comedy is at bottom that of imperfect self-knowledge which leads them on to fool themselves."⁴ Surely Beatrice and Benedick are betrayed by their overreaching cleverness when they spy on their friends; Claudio is led astray when he proudly assumes that his eavesdropping gives him the knowledge and the right to vilify Hero; and Dogberry hopelessly distorts facts because of his infatuation with his own imagined excellences. But self-centeredness and self-deception are such generally pervasive flaws in Shakespearean comedy that without being further discriminated they are not very useful in defining the distinctive attributes of any particular group of characters. In this essay I want to try to sharpen the meaning of the various mistakings and discoveries of *Much Ado*, of the many changes from blindness to insight and from insight to blindness, by relating them to an opposition which the play develops between two ways of perceiving the world. One mode of perception presented here, which may be called "wit," relies on prudential reason and practical evaluation of sensory evidence; the other, the opposite of wit, rejects practical reason for intuitive modes of understanding. The drama of the play resides in the protagonists' moving from one way of seeing to the other; and their practical and moral success is determined by their willingness to lay down their wits and approach the world through faith, through irrational belief.⁵

The characters whom the reader associates most immediately

⁴ A. P. Rossiter, "Much Ado About Nothing," in Weil, p. 26. This essay appeared originally in *Angel with Horns* by A. P. Rossiter, ed. Graham Storey (London, 1961).

⁵ The importance of the notion of wit in *Much Ado* has been particularly emphasized by two critics, Mr. Walter N. King and Mr. William G. McCollom. Mr. King, in his interesting article, "Much Ado About Something," *SQ*, XV (1964), limits the meaning of wit to the use of word-play, contending that the expressive practice of this kind of joking buries "natural instinct" under a layer of conventionality. Mr. McCollom, on the other hand, contending that wit is a positive force in *Much Ado*, argues that the play is "about the triumphing of true wit (or wise folly) . . . over false or pretentious wisdom," with Beatrice and Benedick being the truly wise and "Don John, Borachio, Don Pedro, Claudio, and even Leonato . . . present[ing] in very different ways the false wisdom which deceives others or itself" ("The Role of Wit in *Much Ado About Nothing*, *SQ*, XIX (1968), pp. 166, 173). The problem with this formulation is that it fails to notice that the wit-play of Benedick and Beatrice has potentially negative qualities that lead to self-deception, and that a

with wit are Beatrice and Benedick, though in their cases wit seems to be not so much rational calculation as a simple delight in verbal ingeniousness, in wittiness, which the reader admires for the sharpness of mind and the playfulness of spirits which it betokens. But this wittiness also implies a certain view of life. Taking the form of playful insults between a man and woman, it expresses indirectly a detached attitude to love, a sophisticated amusement at conventional romantic attitudes. It thus is not simply evidence of a quick mind but an indirect affirmation of rational self-control as opposed to emotional self-indulgence that carries man away from reality on the tide of feeling. For both Beatrice and Benedick, perhaps especially for Benedick, a lover like Claudio is a pathetic lunatic. From a plain-speaking, battle-loving soldier he becomes a lover whose "words are a very fantastical banquet—just so many strange dishes" and whose "soul is ravished [with] sheep's guts" (II.iii.21-22, 60-61). The witty man, on the other hand, keeping his wits about him, is able to avoid anything as irrational as love.

The desire of Benedick and Beatrice to keep their practical reasons dominant is perfectly understandable; for they are experts in the exercise of their cleverness and rank amateurs in the exercise of their emotions. But problems arise when their bias towards reason deludes them into believing that they have no emotional selves that require expression. When this happens their verbal wittiness is used not so much to expose foolishness in others but to disguise to themselves the state of their own feelings. To insult playfully a person to whom one feels attracted is a way of proving to oneself that the attraction does not exist. In Benedick's case this self-deception is also dramatized by his vexation at Claudio's immediately falling in love with Hero. To Benedick his impulsive friend is an image of his own emotional self which he is unconsciously trying to suppress; and his laments about Claudio's giving up manly soldiership for effeminate love express his unacknowledged war against his own latent desire for love. The war is doomed to failure, not

reliance on wit, in the general sense of practical reason, leads to error more often than to insight. The opposition between pride and humility is doubtless a crucial distinction in the play; but Mr. McCollom does not make clear enough how the mistakes of Claudio and Don Pedro are attributable to pride, or how Beatrice's and Benedick's belief in Hero is the result of their humility.

only because feelings cannot be ignored indefinitely, but also because a refusal to acknowledge them weakens one's ability to cope with them when they finally surface. Much of the humor of the eavesdropping scenes where Beatrice and Benedick decide to take pity on each other results from the speed in which their defenses are broken down.

Along with this distrust and denial of the emotions, a bias toward wit is associated with a hard-headed, skeptical attitude to human worth. Beatrice and Benedick mock lovers as being not only impulsive and fantastical but also prone to see value where none exists. Their battles of wit take the form of insults because they want to show themselves as being under no idealistic delusions about the worth of the opposite sex. Benedick's skepticism about women calls particular attention to itself because it involves a complete reversal of the conventional view of man as woman's pursuer. Doubtless his abuse of women is done in part for sport. He himself distinguishes his "custom" of speaking as "a professed tyrant to their sex" from "the simple true judgment" of his more serious moods (I.i.169-170). But he would hardly adopt the role of woman-hater if it did not correspond, however indirectly, to some real aspect of his own beliefs. And when he doffs his guise of the "tyrant" to speak "truly" about Hero, he still refuses to acknowledge any of her obvious merits. He is still, as Don Pedro says, "an obstinate heretic in the despite of beauty" (I.i.236-237). If he does not actually believe that all women make their husbands cuckolds and prisoners, as he asserts he does, he at least has serious doubts about the value of their society. The shrewd man of wit knows that to idealize a woman is to play the fool.

But all this shrewdness of practical reason turns out to be blindness, not insight. Benedick's prudential skepticism is not based on any actual experience of human nature, on any specific knowledge of particular women, but on foolish pride. His distrust of love and marriage results in good part from an overestimation of his own worth, from his seeing himself as superior in kind to women in general. He gives himself away most obviously in his soliloquy in Leonato's orchard, in which he defines the woman who will be worthy of his love: "One woman is fair, yet I am well; another is wise, yet I am well; another virtuous, yet I am well. But till all graces be in one woman, one

woman shall not come in my grace" (II.iii.28-31). To be "well," to be prudently rational, is identified here with being impervious to love, with complete self-sufficiency. But since the rationale for this resistance is Benedick's ridiculous assurance of his own perfection, the wisdom of wit turns out to be foolishness. To identify giving "grace," giving unmerited favor, with finding "all graces," all perfections, in the object, is to willfully ignore the necessity of unearned trust, of irrational, unprovable faith, in every bond that holds people together. If strictly followed prudential wit, with its proud demand for positive proof of perfection, leads logically to a state of complete isolation, to a repudiation of the social communion that Shakespeare's comedies invariably celebrate.

Although Benedick avoids this kind of isolation by falling in love with Beatrice, we are given a grotesque example of what can happen to the man of skepticism and pride in the figure of Don John. The melancholy that Don John admits suffering from, which prevents him from liking anyone and impels him to stir up mischief, is finally not the result of particular injuries but the fruit of a morbid pride that makes him consider all society with others a diminishment of his self-sufficiency. What seems to aggravate him most when he is first presented to us is not so much his failure to defeat his brother in their recent quarrel but his being forgiven for starting it, since the forgiveness places him in the role of inferior: "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.iii.27-33). His claims to self-sufficiency, to "smile at no man's jests" and "tend to no man's business," are of course specious (I.iii.15, 17). Just as in a lighter vein Benedick seeks out the company of the woman he overtly spurns, because of his suppressed attraction to her, so in a sinister vein Don John spends his time thinking of ways to hurt the people whom he overtly pretends to ignore, feeling a suppressed admiration for them which his pride refuses to acknowledge.

The great moral difference between Benedick and Don John is rooted in the fact that Benedick is merry and Don John melancholy. Beatrice herself points out this contrast: "He were

an excellent man that were made just in the midway between him [Don John] and Benedick. The one is too like an image and says nothing, and the other too like my lady's eldest son, evermore tatling" (II.i.7-11). The overflow of good spirits that underlies at least some part of Benedick's wit-play is a safeguard against dangerous pride because it expresses a general delight in human relations, a delight that makes isolation from society impossible. The world pleases Benedick too much for him to reject it. The same kind of delight in life is associated with the sportive aspects of Beatrice's wittiness. She is, as Don Pedro comments, "a pleasant-spirited lady"; and her uncle, Leonato, drives the point home: "There's little of the melancholy element in her; she is never sad but when she sleeps, and not ever sad then" (II.i.356, 357-359). Wittiness, then, can have positive meaning as well as negative. If, on the one hand, it can be used as a tool of practical reason in the service of emotional repression, distrust, and pride, it can also express a light-hearted playfulness, a love of life, that undermines the vices of proud reason and brings man into communion with his fellows. Thus the playful side of Beatrice's and Benedick's wit-cracking prepares us for their transformation into lovers and their abandonment of bad wit.

Because Beatrice and Benedick are duped into loving each other, we may at first not be inclined to see their love as an indication of an important shift of internal perspective. After all, the trick played on them seems to appeal basically to their vanity. Each decides to love the other partly because he is flattered by the other's supposed adoration. But to move from a pride that rejects all potential lovers as unworthy to a vanity that is willing to reciprocate another's admiration is to make a crucial moral adjustment. Vanity, unlike pride, is social; it requires the good will of others in order to thrive. And the good will that Beatrice and Benedick seek is not only that of each other but the good opinion of their friends. They are duped successfully by their friends because neither wants to be thought hard-hearted and disdainful by the people they most respect. They want to fulfill the values of their community.

In accepting the criticism of their friends Beatrice and Benedick show not only a desire for approval and communion but a willingness to lay aside a reliance on their own wits and rely

instead on the perceptions of others. They believe on trust that their friends can see them more clearly than they can see themselves. Thus Beatrice's acceptance of the criticism she overhears is immediate:

What fire is in mine ears? Can this be true?
 Stand I condemned for pride and scorn so much?
 Contempt, farewell, and maiden pride, adieu:
 No glory lives behind the back of such.
 And Benedick, love on, I will requite thee,
 Taming my wild heart to thy loving hand.
 (III.i.107-112)

In submitting here without question to the censure of her friends, Beatrice seems to be rejecting the authority of autonomous reason. This willingness of both Beatrice and Benedick to use other eyes than their own applies of course to their views of each other as well as of themselves. When at the close of the play Leonato says that the lovers were "lent" their eyes by their friends (V.i.23-26), he means primarily that each was encouraged to love the other by overhearing reports of the love-lorn state of the other. Though in this regard they are completely mistaken, their being deceived is perhaps a step in the right direction. By rejecting objective appearances of disdain in the other by a subjective belief in the other's devotion, they indirectly repudiate the skeptical reason that supported their disdain. To be sure, they are supporting their faith here on hearsay, on circumstantial evidence. But they are willing to believe this evidence so quickly only because it agrees with their own hidden desire for love. And if they are in one sense fools, their foolishness is finally vindicated; for their very acts of irrational belief in each other's love help to bring their real love for each other into being.

That genuine love entails giving up the outer eye of reason for the inner eye of faith becomes clear later in the play when Beatrice and Benedick are tested by the crisis of Hero's vilification. Beatrice here proves her powers of commitment by believing without question in her friend's innocence. She is the only one, along with the holy Friar Francis, to give no credence whatever to the accusations of Don Pedro and Claudio. She requires no factual evidence for her conviction, relying rather

on an act of subjective trust. Benedick's powers of commitment are tested during this crisis when he places himself completely at Beatrice's disposal, agreeing even to obey her command to challenge his friend Claudio to a duel. He agrees not simply because he wants to keep Beatrice's love, but because his love for her enables him to trust in the rightness of her commands:

Benedrick: Tarry, good Beatrice, By this hand, I love thee.

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

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

Beatrice: Yea, as sure as I have a thought or a soul.

Benedrick: Enough, I am engaged, I will challenge him.
(IV.i.327-331)

In accepting without external evidence the absolute wisdom of his beloved Benedick proves that he has abandoned the external perception of wit for the inner vision of faith.

It has been argued by some critics that Beatrice and Benedick are comically emotional in their defense of Hero, that we are meant to laugh at Beatrice's command, "Kill Claudio," and at Benedick's zealous obedience. If before the pair were too witty, it is contended, now they have become too romantic. This argument is true in the literal sense that the lovers are over-hasty in their revenge against Claudio, in the sense that they are ignorant of how he was deceived. But in the larger moral context of the play this emotional impetuosity is a proof of the sincerity of their trust, and hence of their moral maturity. Only through their emotions are they led to the unprovable insight that Hero is innocent. Calm self-control and rational sifting of evidence cannot lead them to this all-important truth.

As has already been suggested, to say that Beatrice and Benedick abandon bad wit is not to say that they abandon wittiness. Humorous joking can express a playfulness founded on a love of life; and at the end of the play the pair are as playfully witty as ever. Now, however, the negative side of their wit is repudiated. Instead of concealing their feelings, their joking actually expresses them. Thus after brief and humorless assertions that they love each other "no more than reason," they submit to the

evidence of their love-letters and acknowledge their emotions by the use of witty irony:

Benedick: A miracle! Here's our own hands against our hearts. Come, I will have thee, but by this light, I take thee for pity.

Beatrice: I would not deny you, but by this good day, I yield upon great persuasion, and partly to save your life, for I was told you were in a consumption.

(V.iv.91-96)

Wittiness here takes the form not of an insult ingeniously clever, but an insult transparently a lie. Their new wit is finally directed towards themselves rather than towards others. It gently mocks the fundamental irrationality of love, though it accepts that irrationality as an essential part of life.

While Beatrice and Benedick develop morally by abandoning the perception of skeptical reason for that of intuitive faith, by leaving wit for a higher wisdom, Claudio degenerates in the course of the play by rejecting subjective faith for prudential doubt. He compromises his initial emotional involvement with Hero by relying on his wits to understand her character. The fatal flaw in his love for Hero is not its impetuosity; for though it begins rather suddenly, it is based on some prior acquaintance and attraction and is directed toward a woman who is intrinsically admirable. The flaw, rather, is its lack of depth. Underneath Claudio's impetuous ardor is a latent uncertainty about the rightness of his own emotions and the value of love. This uncertainty shows itself first in the cautiousness with which Claudio tells Benedick of his feelings for Hero. Instead of boldly declaring his love at once, he begins by asking Benedick for his opinion, and when he later does acknowledge his feelings, he hedges his acknowledgement in a series of gentle qualifications. "In mine eye she is the sweetest lady that ever I looked on," he tells Benedick (I.i.189-190), guarding his praise by admitting indirectly the possible bias of his emotions. And when he later asserts, "If my passion change not shortly, God forbid it should be otherwise" (I.i.221-222), he seems to admit a lack of complete confidence in the strength and stability of his emotions.

This lack of confidence may perhaps result partly from mere

inexperience; for Claudio appears to be a young man who is more practiced as a soldier than as a courtier. He does not know the subtle workings of love, and for this reason is happy to have his friend Don Pedro woo Hero as his substitute. But when he believes Don John's lie that Don Pedro has wooed and won Hero for himself, he shows a lack of generosity as well as a lack of experience. He is too ready to distrust not only his own feelings but the intentions of others. He sees man as an easy prey to irresponsible infatuations that betray all other commitments:

'Tis certain so. The Prince woos for himself.
 Friendship is constant in all other things
 Save in the office and affairs of love;
 Therefore all hearts in love use their own tongues.
 Let every eye negotiate for itself,
 And trust no agent, for beauty is a witch
 Against whose charms faith melteth into blood.

(II.i.181-187)

This explanation of Don Pedro's supposed inconstancy in friendship, it should be noticed, not only degrades man by viewing him as a passive victim of his feelings, but also degrades women by viewing her attractions as Circean enchantments that make men act with the amorality of animals. In opposing blood to faith, love to constancy, Claudio is actually stripping love of its greatest virtue. He is blind to the fact that faith lies at the very center of love's power of perception; and this blindness prepares the way for his great blunder, his mistrust of Hero.

Some critics have tried to mitigate the guilt of Claudio's condemnation of Hero by reminding us that he is duped into his false belief not only by the slanders of Don John but by the seemingly conclusive proof of his own observation. Claudio in fact uses this argument to defend himself. "Yet sinned I not but in mistaking," he assures Leonato when he finally discovers the truth (V.i.284-285). But this defense overlooks the crucial fact that real love abandons the external perception of the eye and ear for internal subjective perception. It rejects circumstantial appeals to practical wit, to skeptical prudence, for unconditional trust. Claudio is disposed to accept flimsy appeals to his senses because he has never fully committed himself to Hero,

never rejected his suppressed doubts about the value of love. It has been argued that Don Pedro's acceptance of the false evidence is a proof of its power, that we must excuse Claudio's credulity if the good-hearted and sensible Don Pedro is duped as well. But there is obviously one all-important difference between the two men: Claudio is in love with Hero, or thinks he is, and Don Pedro is not. If love means anything here it should mean a special will to believe in the goodness of the beloved. Because Claudio's love is superficial, that special will does not exist. At the crucial moment he relies on wit, not faith.

Abetting Claudio's lack of trust in Hero is the kind of pride that we have seen supporting Benedick's initial commitment to wit. One of the reasons behind Claudio's decision to expose Hero in public is a desire to punish her for daring to dishonor him. He seems to be moved as much by the need of personal revenge as by the claims of moral justice. His dignity is offended that someone would be brazen enough to try to trick so noble a man as himself. By deciding to "bear her in hand until they come to take hands" (the phrase is Beatrice's, IV.ii.305-306), by feigning ignorance until the last moment, he intends to prove that he can overmatch her craft with his own. The hurt to his pride accounts for the viciousness of his attack, for his willingness to hurt cruelly the feelings of Hero's father and uncle in order to make her suffer, for the preponderance of anger over pity as he says to Leonato, "take her back again,/ Give not this rotten orange to your friend" (IV.i.32-33). To the extent that Claudio's sense of justice is tainted by proud vengefulness he becomes like Don John, the man who is angry at the world and who is the prime agent in causing Claudio's distrust of Hero.

After his condemnation of Hero, Claudio holds a position in relation to Benedick that exactly reverses their original relations. While Benedick has rejected the perceptions of the skeptic for those of the lover, Claudio has moved from love to skepticism. Where the old Benedick who trusts no woman is left behind for the new Benedick who trusts one woman completely, the old love-seeking Claudio is abandoned for a new Claudio who decides "to lock up all the gates of love" and "turn all beauty into thoughts of harm" (IV.i.106,108). Because Benedick has abandoned wit for the will to believe, he can see the goodness of Hero that is hidden from her apparent lover, Claudio, who has abandoned the will to believe for wit. The

extent to which they have developed in opposite direction is shown most emphatically in the scene in which Benedick challenges Claudio to a duel. Benedick here is now in deadly earnest, attacking his former friend with honest indignation; Claudio is now the flippant man of wit, hiding under his wittiness whatever qualms he may feel about Hero's death. He expects Benedick to provide some witty entertainment, unaware that the old Benedick no longer exists:

Claudio: We have been up and down to seek thee, for we are high-proof melancholy and would fain have it beaten away. Wilt thou use thy wit?

Benedick: It is in my scabbard. Shall I draw it?

Don Pedro: Dost thou wear thy wit by thy side?

Claudio: Never any did so, though very many have been beside their wit. I will bid thee draw as we do the minstrels, draw to pleasure us.

(V.i.122-129)

Though Claudio and Don Pedro amuse themselves by joking about Benedick's loss of wit and his falling in love, Benedick is now wit-proof, as he says in his parting speech to Claudio: "Fare you well, boy. You know my mind. I will leave you now to your gossiplike humor. You break jests as braggarts do their blades, which, God be thanked, hurt not" (V.i.187-190). The laugh that Claudio and Don Pedro have at Benedick's new seriousness, at the love-stricken man who "goes in his doublet and hose and leaves off his wit" (V.i.202-203), is cut short when they learn from Borachio just how much their own wits have been deceived. "I have deceived," affirms Borachio, "even your very eyes" (V.i.238).

In order for Claudio to deserve Hero's love at the end of the play, he must repudiate the prudential reason and reliance on sensory evidence that comprises bad wit. At first it may be a little difficult to see him accomplishing this; for when he tells Leonato that he sinned "But in mistaking," he seems to overlook, as we have mentioned, the lack of trust which made this mistaking possible. Yet when he mourns Hero at her tomb he not only shows real grief at what his mistaking has done, but makes no effort to mitigate his guilt. The epitaph he writes for her affirms that she was "Done to death by slanderous tongues"

and identifies her murderers with her mourners:

Pardon, goddess of the night,
 Those that slew thy virgin knight,
 For the which, with songs of woe,
 Round about her tomb they go.

(V.iii.12-15)

Moreover, in yielding himself up completely to the will of Leonato, in agreeing even to marry any woman that Leonato chooses, Claudio seems to be renouncing his reliance on self-sufficient intelligence. Just as Benedick finally relies on Beatrice's perception, so Claudio is finally willing to let someone else see for him and "dispose/ For henceforth of poor Claudio" (V.i.305). And his not being allowed even to see the face of his wife before the marriage suggests symbolically the need to abandon external perception of the outer eye. The apparent miracle of Hero's resurrection comes about only by repudiating the kind of skeptical wit that caused her apparent death.⁶

The crowning blow to the claims of wit in *Much Ado* is given in farcical terms by the antics of Dogberry and Verges. For these blundering clowns, who are completely witless, manage to stumble into the truth that is denied Claudio and Don Pedro. As Borachio tells the deceived noblemen, "What your wisdoms could not discover, these shallow fools have brought to light" (V.i.238-240). In the task of discovering clever criminals, crafty wit must yield to well-intentioned stupidity. Instead of cautioning prudent vigilance, Dogberry and Verges tell the watches to avoid getting into trouble; but the culprit gives himself away. They completely misconduct the trial, but they seem to know somehow that Borachio is a villain; and when they finally bring Conrad and Borachio before Leonato, Dogberry is able to give the crime its right name, although he is too ignorant to count to

⁶I must admit that I agree with the many critics who are disturbed by Claudio's joviality during his wedding. His punning jokes at Benedick, his rather crude question, "Which is the lady I must seize upon?" (V.i.53), and his playful request to look under the bride's veil before the ceremony suggest that his remorse over Hero's death is somewhat superficial. A more somber bearing here would make us more willing to believe that he deserves Hero, that he has reached the moral plane of Beatrice and Benedick.

six: "Marry, sir, they 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" (V.i.220-224). What seems to lie behind the success of their witlessness is their good will. They are simple-minded, but their hearts are in the right place. Their respect for Leonato's good name, for example, is ridiculously expressed, but is finally commendable:

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?

Dogberry: Yea, an 'twere a thousand pound more than 'tis, for I hear as good exclamation on your Worship as of any man in the city, and though I be but a poor man, I am glad to hear it.

Verges: And so am I.

(V.i.20-31)

In the world of the play such good feelings seem to be enough to enable one to stagger into truth.

While Dogberry and Verges, when taken together, represent the triumph of witlessness, Dogberry taken by himself can be seen to expose wit in even a more direct way. For with all his stupidity Dogberry believes that he is a clever man; and by his fatuous pride in his wit he parodies unconsciously the pride of Benedick and Claudio. Thus his malapropisms, which result partly from his desire to display his vocabulary, are related in motive to the word-play of his betters, which expresses, at least in its debased form, a kind of intellectual vanity.⁷ And Dogberry's patronizing lament that old Verges's "wits are not so blunt" as they should be, that "when the age is in, the wit is out," recalls Benedick's initial patronizing of love-lorn Claudio, and looks forward to Claudio's laughing lament over Benedick's foolishness as a lover. The relation of Dogberry to Claudio is

⁷Mr. Rossiter makes a similar point, contending that "wit and nitwit share a common obsessive delight in the wonder of words" (p. 28).

especially close. Dogberry's examination of Borachio and Conrade follows immediately after Claudio's public examination of Hero; and the absurd mishandling of the villains' hearing (though Dogberry has promised to "spare no wit" in the matter (III.v.66)) is a commentary on the injustice of Hero's hearing. Even Dogberry's horror that he should have "been writ down an ass" (IV.ii.90) may perhaps echo Claudio's angry indignation at the affront to his dignity which might be caused by Hero's supposed deception. The men of wit in the play, then, are not only less successful than the fools in seeing truth, but are mocked by one fool's aping of their witty pretensions.

The inadequacy of wit as a mode of perception is perhaps suggested by the very title of *Much Ado About Nothing*. It has been often pointed out that "noting" and "nothing" were pronounced alike in Elizabethan England, and one recent critic, Miss Dorothy Hockey, has suggested in a very useful article that *Much Ado* is really a "dramatization of mis-noting," pointing out the many specific references to hearing and seeing in the play that underscore the mistakes of observation.⁸ We can enlarge the meaning of this point if we keep in mind the relation of noting to wit; for wit in *Much Ado*, as we have seen, entails a skeptical prudence that relies on sensory facts rather than on intuitive belief. The pun in the title, which suggests that to depend on noting is to depend on nothing, thus vindicates indirectly the intuitive mode of perception to which wit is opposed.

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
BUFFALO

⁸Dorothy C. Hockey, "notes notes, Forsooth . . . ," *SQ*, VIII (1957), p. 354.