



ENGLISH LITERATURE

Bridging Work

Much Ado About Nothing



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Introduction

A Bridge to A Level Literature

You have already studied *Much Ado About Nothing*. You know the plot, the characters and many of the ideas that helped you succeed at GCSE. Those skills remain important at A Level, but they are developed in new and more sophisticated ways.

At GCSE, you were often asked to explain what Shakespeare presents and how he presents it. At A Level, the conversation broadens. Ideas become more complex and debatable. Analysis of language, form and structure moves beyond methods you might have explored at GCSE and invites you to explore craftsmanship and dramatic construction. Context is no longer a collection of facts used to support an argument, but a lens through which interpretation can be generated and challenged.

You will also begin to think about texts in relation to one another. Shakespeare's comedies do not exist in isolation: they belong to wider literary traditions, genres and theatrical practices. Comparing texts allows us to explore how writers revisit similar concerns and produce different effects. You will discover that beneath the wit and humour of comedy lie serious questions about love, honour, gender, power and identity.

Perhaps the most significant change is that interpretation becomes central. You will encounter the views of critics and scholars, consider how directors and actors make interpretative choices in performance, and explore how audiences have responded to texts and productions across different periods. Rather than searching for a single "correct" reading, you will learn to evaluate multiple perspectives and develop arguments of your own.

This booklet uses *Much Ado About Nothing* as a starting point for that journey. Through contextual reading, critical debate and close textual analysis, you will see how a strong GCSE response can evolve into an A Level one.

How the Booklet Works

You will notice that this booklet does not ask you to write a complete essay immediately. Instead, each chapter focuses on a different aspect of literary study and gradually builds your confidence and understanding.

As you move through the booklet, you will work with the same essay question, the same line of argument and the same analytical paragraph. You will revisit these repeatedly, refining and extending them as each new assessment objective is introduced.

1. **Chapter 1** introduces the shift from GCSE to A Level and explores how literary study becomes increasingly interpretative.
2. **Chapter 2** introduces the assessment objectives and shows how GCSE skills evolve at A Level.
3. **Chapter 3** focuses on AO1 and AO2, helping you construct a line of argument and develop an analytical paragraph through close analysis of Shakespeare's methods.
4. **Chapter 4** introduces AO3, showing how contextual reading can deepen interpretation.
5. **Chapter 5** explores AO4 through comparison with another Shakespearean comedy, demonstrating how texts illuminate one another.

6. **Chapter 6** introduces AO5 through literary criticism, revealing that interpretation is an ongoing conversation rather than a search for certainty.

You should complete the booklet in order. Read the extracts carefully, annotate the articles, respond to the reflection questions and write in the spaces provided. Do not worry about producing perfect answers. The purpose of this booklet is to encourage curiosity, exploration and confidence.

You may find that your opinions change as you progress through the chapters. This is not a sign that your earlier ideas were wrong. Instead, it reflects the nature of literary study itself: interpretations develop as we encounter new evidence and new perspectives.

Although much of this booklet focuses on refining a line of argument and developing a single analytical paragraph, this is not the final destination. By the end of the booklet, you should use everything you have learned to produce a complete essay response to the original question.

You may wish to print this booklet out and handwrite your work, or you may wish to type your work so it is easier to consciously edit and adapt. Whichever you choose, be prepared to submit your essay in September within the first two weeks of starting the course.

Your final essay should include:

1. an introduction containing your line of argument;
2. multiple analytical paragraphs;
3. close analysis of Shakespeare's methods;
4. relevant contextual understanding;
5. comparative insight;
6. engagement with critical interpretations;
7. and a conclusion that draws together your argument.

The paragraph you have developed throughout this booklet should become one part of this larger response.

You are not expected to have all the answers before September. Instead, you are invited to approach literature with curiosity, confidence and a willingness to explore.

Welcome to A Level Literature.

Booklet Key

Key Information

Task instruction

Model/exemplar

Chapter 1

The Question

You have already studied *Much Ado About Nothing*. You know the plot, the characters and many of the ideas that helped you succeed at GCSE. You have analysed Shakespeare's methods, learnt quotations and developed interpretations supported by evidence from the text.

Those skills do not disappear at A Level.

However, A Level Literature invites you to engage with texts differently. Rather than simply identifying what Shakespeare presents, you begin to explore the ways in which literature generates debate, encourages multiple interpretations and resists straightforward answers.

To experience this shift, begin with two questions.

The GCSE Question

Read the following extract from **Act 4 Scene 1** of *Much Ado About Nothing*.

In this scene, Claudio publicly accuses Hero of being unfaithful during their wedding ceremony.

CLAUDIO:

There, Leonato, take her back again.
Give not this rotten orange to your friend.
She's but the sign and semblance of her honour.
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.

GCSE Task

Starting with this extract, explore how Shakespeare presents **honour and reputation** in *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents honour and reputation in this extract;
- how Shakespeare presents honour and reputation in the play as a whole.

The A Level Question

Consider the A Level standard question below. Read the information that follows and respond to the task.

"Shakespeare presents honour as a destructive force rather than a virtue in *Much Ado About Nothing*."

In the light of this view, explore Shakespeare's presentation of honour and reputation in *Much Ado About Nothing*.

This question does not simply ask you to identify examples of honour and reputation in the play. Instead, it offers an interpretation and invites you to engage with it.

You may agree.

You may disagree.

You may find yourself doing both.

Before deciding what you think, spend some time with the question itself.

Task:

Explore the question:

1. Read the statement several times.
2. Annotate it as you would annotate a passage from the play.
3. Circle, underline or make notes around the statement itself (above).
4. Use the prompts below to help inform your annotation.

Consider:

- Which words seem most significant?
- Which words are difficult to define?
- Which words seem open to debate?
- Which assumptions does the statement make about honour and reputation?
- Which moments from the play immediately come to mind?

Gathering Evidence

Rather than deciding immediately whether you agree or disagree, begin by collecting evidence. Imagine that you are preparing for a debate. Read the information below and complete the table that follows.

1. Evidence that supports the statement

What moments in the play suggest that Shakespeare presents honour as a destructive force rather than a virtue?

You might consider:

- Claudio's public humiliation of Hero at the wedding;
- Leonato's willingness to believe the accusation against his daughter;
- Hero's apparent death as a means of restoring her reputation;
- Beatrice's outrage at the treatment of Hero;
- Benedick's decision to challenge Claudio, placing justice above male loyalty.

Use quotations wherever possible.

2. Evidence that challenges the statement

What moments in the play suggest that honour and reputation are presented as valuable or necessary?

You might consider:

- Claudio's desire to defend his own honour after Don John's deception;
- Leonato's concern for his family's reputation;
- the Friar's plan to restore Hero's good name;
- the exposure and punishment of Don John's deception;
- the play's ending, in which honour and reputation are publicly restored through truth and reconciliation.

Again, support your ideas with evidence from the text.

3. Looking for Tension

Strong literary arguments rarely emerge from certainty.

As you gather evidence, look for moments that complicate your thinking.

For example:

- Is honour itself destructive, or is it the characters' understanding of honour that causes harm?
- Does Shakespeare criticise the social values of Messina, or the individuals who uphold them?
- Can Claudio's behaviour be explained by the expectations of his society without being excused?
- Does the ending suggest that honour is ultimately restored, or does it expose the lasting damage caused by the obsession with reputation?

Make a note of any moments that resist easy judgement. These moments of tension are often where the most interesting arguments begin.

Task:

Using the prompts and guidance above, complete the evidence table below.

Evidence to support the statement	Evidence to challenge the statement

From Ideas to Argument

You have now gathered evidence, explored different perspectives and identified points of tension.

The next step is not to choose one side and ignore the other.

Instead, begin to shape your own viewpoint.

Read the examples below.

1. A straightforward response:

Shakespeare presents honour as a destructive force because it causes unnecessary suffering.

2. A more developed response:

Shakespeare presents honour as a destructive force because the characters' obsession with reputation leads them to value public appearances over truth and trust.

3. A more nuanced response:

Although Shakespeare presents honour as a destructive force through the public humiliation of Hero and the characters' obsession with reputation, he also suggests that honour can be restored when truth prevails, complicating any straightforward condemnation of the values of Messina.

Notice that the final example acknowledges complexity.

It does not abandon judgement.

Instead, it refines it.

Task:

Drawing on the notes you have made, write a line of argument responding to the question. You do not need to completely agree or disagree.

You might begin with phrases such as:

- Although...
- While...
- To some extent...
- However...
- Ultimately...

Remember:

- Your aim is not to produce the perfect answer.
- Your aim is to begin thinking like a literary critic: gathering evidence, weighing interpretations and arriving at a viewpoint that is thoughtful, tentative and supported by the text.

Your line of argument:

Looking Ahead...

You have just begun doing something that A Level Literature students do every day.

You have moved beyond identifying examples of a theme and started to engage with an interpretation.

You have gathered evidence, recognised complexity and begun constructing an argument of your own.

In the next chapter, you will revisit your thesis and begin to develop it further, exploring how literary arguments become increasingly sophisticated through close analysis of Shakespeare's methods.

Chapter 2

The Assessment Objectives

In Chapter 1, you explored an A Level question, gathered evidence from across the play and developed a provisional argument of your own.

Without realising it, you had already begun engaging with some of the skills expected of A Level Literature students.

The Assessment Objectives (AOs) explain how literary thinking develops from GCSE to A Level. They are not simply a checklist for examiners; they describe the different ways in which we engage with texts as readers and critics.

Importantly, A Level does not replace the skills you developed at GCSE. Instead, it elevates them.

GCSE to A Level

GCSE Literature	A Level Literature
AO1: Maintain a critical style and develop an informed personal response. Use textual references, including quotations, to support and illustrate interpretations.	AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.
AO2: Analyse the language, form and structure used by a writer to create meanings and effects, using relevant subject terminology where appropriate.	AO2: Analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts.
AO3: Show understanding of the relationships between texts and the contexts in which they were written.	AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.
AO4: Use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation.	AO4: Explore connections across literary texts.
—	AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.

As you read through the table, what do you notice?

Perhaps the most striking changes are:

- GCSE skills are still present, but they become broader and more conceptual;
- AO4 changes entirely;
- A new AO5 is introduced, recognising that literary interpretation is often contested.

You have already begun engaging with AO1. Now, revisit your argument and consider how each of the AOs can deepen and develop it.

AO1: Argument

At GCSE, you developed a personal response supported by evidence from the text.

At A Level, that response becomes more conceptual and sustained.

Task:

Read the line of argument you wrote at the end of Chapter 1.

Does it:

1. move beyond retelling events?;
2. establish a clear viewpoint?;
3. acknowledge complexity?;
4. suggest that alternative interpretations may exist?

You may wish to revise it.

Revised line of argument:

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A02: Writer's Craft

At GCSE, you explored how writers use language, form and structure to create meanings and effects. Strong GCSE responses already move beyond simply identifying techniques; they explain what those methods contribute to the audience's/reader's understanding of the text.

At A Level, that analysis becomes broader and more ambitious.

You begin to consider how the distinctive features of a text's form shape meaning.

For drama, this means thinking not only as a close reader, but also as a theatre critic:

- Why has Shakespeare chosen to place this moment here?
- How would this scene work in performance?
- What do these dramatic choices encourage audiences to think and feel?
- How do the conventions of comedy shape our interpretation of *Much Ado About Nothing*?
- How do public displays of honour and reputation become moments of dramatic tension?

The question shifts from: "What effect does this method have?" and towards: "How has Shakespeare constructed meaning through the possibilities of dramatic form?"

Consider the responses below.

GCSE

Claudio's description of Hero as a "rotten orange" shows that he has completely rejected her and publicly humiliates her.

This is a valid observation. It identifies a method and explores its meaning.

A Level

By positioning Claudio's denunciation at the very moment the audience expects a wedding, Shakespeare transforms a comic convention into a moment of public humiliation. Claudio's image of Hero as a "rotten orange" reduces her to an object whose outward appearance conceals supposed corruption, exposing a society that values female reputation above truth. Staged before the entire court, Hero's disgrace becomes a theatrical spectacle, forcing the audience to witness how easily honour can be destroyed through accusation alone. In delaying the revelation of Hero's innocence until later in the play, Shakespeare prolongs this dramatic tension and encourages audiences to question the values upon which Messina's social order depends.

Both responses explore meaning.

The difference is that the A Level response also considers:

- the dramatic placement of the moment;
- the disruption of comic expectations through the interrupted wedding;
- the relationship between Hero's public humiliation and the audience's response;

- how Shakespeare uses the resources of drama to shape our understanding of honour and reputation.

Task:

Return to the extract from Act 4 Scene 1.

Choose one or two quotations from the table you devised and write a response exploring how Shakespeare constructs meaning through dramatic form.

You might consider:

- where this moment appears in the play;
- how an audience might respond to it in performance;
- what Shakespeare reveals or withholds;
- how speech, staging or dramatic conventions contribute to meaning;
- how this moment contributes to Shakespeare's presentation of honour and reputation.

Remember: you are not looking for techniques to identify.

You are exploring how Shakespeare, as a dramatist, has crafted this moment and shaped the audience's understanding of honour and reputation.

Your Response:

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AO3: Contextual Insight

At GCSE, context often supports an argument.

At A Level, context can deepen, challenge or reshape interpretation.

Consider the examples below.

GCSE

In Elizabethan society, a woman's honour and reputation were closely linked to her chastity. Hero's public humiliation would therefore have been seen as a devastating loss of honour for both herself and her family.

A Level

While an Elizabethan audience may have understood Claudio's actions within a culture that placed enormous value on female chastity and family honour, Shakespeare also invites audiences to question those assumptions. By allowing Hero to be condemned on the basis of appearance alone, and by giving Beatrice some of the play's strongest moral arguments, Shakespeare exposes how easily patriarchal ideas about honour can be manipulated. Rather than simply reinforcing contemporary attitudes, *Much Ado About Nothing* encourages audiences to consider the injustice of a society in which reputation is valued more highly than truth.

The difference is subtle but significant.

Context becomes a way of thinking rather than a fact to insert.

Task

Look back at the paragraph you have just written.

How might an understanding of Elizabethan ideas about honour, reputation, marriage and female chastity deepen your interpretation of Shakespeare's presentation of honour and reputation?

Develop your response below.

AO4: Connections Across Texts

One of the biggest surprises for many students is that AO4 changes completely.

At GCSE, AO4 rewarded accurate spelling, punctuation and grammar.

At A Level, AO4 asks you to:

- **explore connections across literary texts.**

Literature does not exist in isolation.

Shakespeare's comedies often explore similar questions:

- What makes a successful relationship?
- Can love exist without trust?
- How do deception and disguise shape identity?
- How do social expectations influence individual behaviour?
- What role do wit and language play in relationships?

Later in this booklet, you will compare *Much Ado About Nothing* with another Shakespearean comedy.

For now, simply consider:

- why might reading texts alongside one another deepen our understanding of both?
- how might two plays explore similar ideas while reaching different conclusions?
- what can comparisons reveal about Shakespeare's changing presentation of love, gender and society?

Task: write down your thoughts

A05: Critical Interpretations

A Level introduces a completely new Assessment Objective.

A05: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.

This means recognising that readers do not always agree.

You will encounter:

- academic critics;
- alternative readings;
- directors' interpretations;
- actors' performances;
- audience responses from different periods.

One critic argues that *Much Ado About Nothing* exposes the damaging effects of a society obsessed with honour, reputation and female chastity.

Another might argue that the play ultimately celebrates the restoration of social order through forgiveness, marriage and reconciliation.

Neither interpretation is automatically "correct".

Your role is to evaluate them.

Task:

Read the critical interpretation below.

"Shakespeare presents honour as a system that protects men whilst placing impossible expectations upon women."

How might someone respond to this interpretation?

Write two or three sentences that either:

- support the statement;
- challenge it;
- or qualify it by recognising both perspectives.

You might begin:

- One interpretation of *Much Ado About Nothing* is that...
- However, another reading might suggest...
- Shakespeare may encourage audiences to see...

Your Response:

Looking Ahead...

You may have noticed that the Assessment Objectives do not operate independently.

As you developed your argument, analysed Shakespeare's methods, considered the influence of context, anticipated wider connections and explored alternative interpretations, you were engaging with all of them.

The rest of this booklet will continue to revisit and refine the same question.

By returning to your original argument again and again, you will see how a strong GCSE response can evolve into something recognisably A Level: more exploratory, more nuanced and more attentive to the many conversations that literature invites.

Chapter 3

Developing Your Argument

By this point, you have already begun answering an A Level question.

In Chapter 1, you encountered an A Level-style task for the first time. You gathered evidence, explored tensions within the statement and developed a provisional line of argument.

In Chapter 2, you considered how the Assessment Objectives evolve from GCSE to A Level, recognising that the skills you have already developed are not replaced, but elevated.

The next step is to begin constructing an essay.

Importantly, A Level essays are not written by addressing one Assessment Objective at a time. Nor are they simply a series of analytical paragraphs linked together.

Instead, they are driven by a line of argument: an overall interpretation that develops, deepens and evolves across the essay. Each paragraph contributes to that wider argument.

In this chapter, you will return to the line of argument you developed earlier and begin transforming it into the foundations of an A Level essay.

Returning to Your Line of Argument

At the end of Chapter 1, you developed a provisional response to the question below.

**"Shakespeare presents honour as a destructive force rather than a virtue in *Much Ado About Nothing*."
In the light of this view, explore Shakespeare's presentation of honour and reputation in *Much Ado About Nothing*.**

Task:

Read your original line of argument again.

Having explored the Assessment Objectives in Chapter 2:

- Does it still reflect your thinking?
- Does it establish a clear judgement?
- Does it acknowledge complexity?
- Can you now see more clearly how the essay might develop?

Literary study is often a process of revisiting and refining ideas.

You will have the opportunity to revise your original response later.

A Line of Argument: The Roadmap

A line of argument does more than establish your opinion.

It provides the roadmap for your essay.

A strong line of argument should:

- respond directly to the question;
- establish an overall judgement;
- acknowledge complexity;
- anticipate the development of the essay by alluding to the ideas explored in later paragraphs.

Think of it as answering two questions at once: What do I think? and: How am I going to prove it?

Less Effective

Shakespeare presents honour as a destructive force because it causes suffering throughout the play.

This establishes a viewpoint, but gives little indication of how the essay will unfold.

More Effective

Although Shakespeare presents honour as a destructive force through the public shaming of Hero and the characters' obsession with reputation, he also suggests that honour can be restored when truth prevails. By exposing the ease with which appearances are believed over reality, Shakespeare critiques the values of Messina whilst ultimately using the comic resolution to question whether reconciliation can fully undo the damage caused by misplaced ideas of honour and reputation.

Notice that this line of argument:

- establishes an overall judgement;
- acknowledges complexity;
- hints at the main ideas the essay will explore;
- alludes to wider concerns about morality and order without relying on detailed contextual discussion.

A reader can already anticipate the likely direction of the essay.

Planning from the Line of Argument

The line of argument above might develop in the following way:

Line of Argument	Paragraph Focus
Shakespeare presents honour as a destructive force because the characters' obsession with reputation allows appearance to triumph over truth.	Paragraph 1: Hero's public humiliation and the destructive power of honour.
Shakespeare presents honour as a destructive force because the characters' obsession with reputation allows appearance to triumph over truth.	Paragraph 2: Claudio, Leonato and the influence of social expectations on individual behaviour.
Ultimately, the comic resolution restores honour publicly, but invites audiences to question whether the damage caused by false accusations can ever be completely undone.	Paragraph 3: The ending, reconciliation and Shakespeare's final judgement on honour and reputation.

At this stage, you are focusing primarily on AO1 and AO2.

You will return to these ideas later in the booklet:

- contextual insight (AO3) will deepen them;
- critical interpretations and productions (AO5) may challenge them;
- comparison with other texts (AO4) will broaden them.

For now, your task is to establish the foundations of your essay.

Line of Argument to Analytical Paragraph

At GCSE, many students use structures such as PEE, PEA or PEAL. These can provide a useful starting point.

At A Level, essays are often less formulaic. Rather than moving mechanically from point to evidence to explanation, paragraphs sustain an argument whilst moving flexibly between textual detail and interpretation, interleaving the Assessment Objectives along the way.

The structure below is not a formula to memorise.

Instead, it reflects how literary arguments often develop.

1. Establish an aspect of your argument.

How does this paragraph contribute to your wider line of argument?

2. Support it with evidence.

Which moments from the text best illuminate this interpretation?

3. Explore Shakespeare's dramatic craft.

- a. How does Shakespeare shape meaning through:
- b. language;
- c. dramatic form;
- d. structure;
- e. placement within the play;
- f. audience response;
- g. the conventions of comedy?

4. Return to the wider judgement.

How does this analysis support, refine or complicate your overall argument?

Task:

Before reading, return to the first strand of the line of argument: **Shakespeare presents honour as a destructive force because the characters' obsession with reputation allows appearance to triumph over truth.**

Now consider how this idea develops in the model below.

Although Shakespeare presents honour as a destructive force through the public shaming of Hero and the characters' obsession with reputation, he also suggests that honour can be restored when truth prevails. By exposing the ease with which appearances are believed over reality, Shakespeare critiques the values of Messina whilst ultimately using the comic resolution to question whether reconciliation can fully undo the damage caused by misplaced ideas of honour and reputation.

Shakespeare initially presents honour as a destructive force through Claudio's public denunciation of Hero during the wedding ceremony. Declaring that she is a "rotten orange", Claudio reduces Hero to an

object whose outward appearance conceals supposed corruption, encouraging those around him to judge her on accusation rather than evidence. By placing this scene at the very moment the audience expects a comic wedding, Shakespeare dramatically interrupts the conventions of comedy with public shame and emotional violence. Hero's humiliation becomes a spectacle witnessed not only by the other characters but also by the audience, exposing how reputation can be destroyed almost instantly when honour is valued above truth. Shakespeare therefore suggests that the greatest danger lies not simply in Don John's deception, but in a society prepared to believe appearances without question.

Notice how the paragraph contributes to the wider essay.

1. It develops one strand of the line of argument.

Shakespeare initially presents honour as a destructive force...

2. It selects evidence purposefully.

"...she is a 'rotten orange'..."

3. It explores Shakespeare's dramatic craft.

"...By placing this scene at the very moment the audience expects a comic wedding, Shakespeare dramatically interrupts the conventions of comedy with public shame..."

Rather than simply identifying repetition, the analysis considers:

- dramatic placement;
- audience experience;
- Shakespeare's construction of comedy.

4. It returns to the wider judgement.

"...the greatest danger lies not simply in Don John's deception, but in a society prepared to believe appearances without question."

The paragraph contributes to the essay's overall argument.

Your Turn: Part A

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- [illegible]

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Your Turn: Part B

Task:

Choose one aspect of your line of argument and develop it into a paragraph.

As you write, ask yourself:

- How does this paragraph contribute to my overall argument?
- Which quotation best supports this idea?
- How has Shakespeare shaped meaning through dramatic form?
- How does this paragraph return to the wording of the question?

Your paragraph:

Task:

Choose one aspect of your line of argument and develop it into a paragraph.

As you write, ask yourself:

- How does this paragraph contribute to my overall argument?
- Which quotation best supports this idea?
- How has Shakespeare shaped meaning through dramatic form?
- How does this paragraph return to the wording of the question?

Your paragraph:

Task:

Choose one aspect of your line of argument and develop it into a paragraph.

As you write, ask yourself:

- How does this paragraph contribute to my overall argument?
- Which quotation best supports this idea?
- How has Shakespeare shaped meaning through dramatic form?
- How does this paragraph return to the wording of the question?

Your paragraph:

- Task:**
- Choose one aspect of your line of argument and develop it into a paragraph.
- As you write, ask yourself:
- How does this paragraph contribute to my overall argument?
 - Which quotation best supports this idea?
 - How has Shakespeare shaped meaning through dramatic form?
 - How does this paragraph return to the wording of the question?
- Your paragraph:**

Task:

Choose one aspect of your line of argument and develop it into a paragraph.

As you write, ask yourself:

- How does this paragraph contribute to my overall argument?
- Which quotation best supports this idea?
- How has Shakespeare shaped meaning through dramatic form?
- How does this paragraph return to the wording of the question?

Your paragraph:

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Task:

Read your line of argument and paragraph together and reflect on what you're written.

Ask yourself:

- Does my paragraph genuinely develop the argument I established?
- Could a reader anticipate the direction of my essay from my line of argument?
- Have I moved beyond identifying methods to exploring Shakespeare's dramatic craft?
- Have I maintained a focus on the question throughout?

Make any revisions you feel are necessary.

Looking Ahead...

You now have the beginnings of an A Level essay:

- a refined line of argument;
- a developed analytical paragraph;
- a clear relationship between the two.

In the next chapter, you will revisit this same paragraph through contextual readings. Rather than adding historical information for its own sake, you will explore how contextual insight can deepen, challenge and reshape the argument you have already begun to construct.

Your essay has started.

Now it is time to elevate it.

Chapter 4

Integrating Contextual Insight

At GCSE, context often helps to explain a text.

You may have learned about Elizabethan attitudes towards honour, reputation and female chastity, or the expectations surrounding marriage and patriarchal authority. You may also have explored the social importance of appearance, inheritance and legitimacy. These details can help us understand why Shakespeare makes particular choices.

At A Level, however, context becomes something more dynamic.

Context is not simply information to be added into an essay. Instead, contextual reading should deepen, challenge and complicate interpretation.

The question is no longer: What do I know about the period? Instead, ask: How does this reading change the way I understand the text?

In this chapter, you will revisit the paragraph you wrote in Chapter 3 and explore how literary, historical and theatrical contexts reshape interpretation.

Returning to the Model

Task:

Remind yourself of the model (below) from Chapter 3 which developed the line of argument and first main analytical paragraph.

Although Shakespeare presents honour as a destructive force through the public shaming of Hero and the characters' obsession with reputation, he also suggests that honour can be restored when truth prevails. By exposing the ease with which appearances are believed over reality, Shakespeare critiques the values of Messina whilst ultimately using the comic resolution to question whether reconciliation can fully undo the damage caused by misplaced ideas of honour and reputation.

Shakespeare initially presents honour as a destructive force through Claudio's public denunciation of Hero during the wedding ceremony. Declaring that she is a "rotten orange", Claudio reduces Hero to an object whose outward appearance conceals supposed corruption, encouraging those around him to judge her on accusation rather than evidence. By placing this scene at the very moment the audience expects a comic wedding, Shakespeare dramatically interrupts the conventions of comedy with public shame and emotional violence. Hero's humiliation becomes a spectacle witnessed not only by the other characters but also by the audience, exposing how reputation can be destroyed almost instantly when honour is valued above truth. Shakespeare therefore suggests that the greatest danger lies not simply in Don John's deception, but in a society prepared to believe appearances without question.

Task:

Now reread the paragraph you wrote in Chapter 3.

Before reading any further, ask yourself:

- What assumptions am I making?
- What do I currently believe Shakespeare is doing?
- Which aspects of my interpretation feel secure?
- Which ideas might become more nuanced?

Keep this paragraph in front of you throughout the chapter.

Reading 1: Kingship, Regicide and Disorder

Historical context enhances interpretation; at A Level, historical knowledge matters because it changes the questions we ask of the text.

Task:

Read and annotate the extract below.

Highlight:

- ideas that deepen your interpretation;
- ideas that challenge it;
- ideas that could reshape your paragraph.

Extracts: from 'The Play in Context' (see appendices for full article – page 78)

The English monarchy had experienced a good deal of political turmoil in the years preceding the reign of Queen Elizabeth, and even during the early years of her power: there were challenges to the throne and schemes to overthrow her as queen, as well as war and constitutional issues surrounding religion. By the late 1500s Elizabeth had largely proven herself to be a capable ruler and brought a degree of stability to the country, disproving the doubts of those who felt a woman could not rule. Elizabeth famously resisted marriage in favour of retaining her own autonomy; the fact she was known for this may have helped pave the way for audiences to feel positively about an outspoken and unusual female character like Beatrice, who did not seem to need or want a husband.

Following the Middle Ages, the *Renaissance* (French for 'rebirth') had begun in Europe in the 14th century and brought renewed emphasis on learning, art and culture. It influenced the works of English playwrights like Shakespeare who often used stories from Greece and Italy to inform their works, but it also informed society's philosophical ideas. While there was still a rigid class hierarchy in English society (citizens could be arrested for wearing clothing that suggested they were of a higher social class than they actually were, for example), Renaissance ideals meant greater emphasis on the individual and on the importance of their freedom to think and act for themselves.

Beatrice and Benedick represent some of these ideals in how they do not conform to society's ideas of traditional courtship and marriage for the sake of family alliances and social status. Their rejections of marriage may be overturned by the end of the play, but there is little doubt that they are marrying for the sake of their feelings for each other, not because they have to. Benedick's loyalty to Beatrice and her reliance on him to challenge Claudio show both characters have gained some personal growth and imply their love is realistic, pragmatic and based on respect, promising to give both the space to be their individual selves within a marriage...

... power and women were considered little more than their father's or husband's property. Traditional gender roles demanded *chastity* and modesty from women, while men were allowed more freedom. Benedick boasts of his popularity with women, for example, when no woman would have been permitted to engage in casual relationships with men, or even to openly imply that men found her attractive, without bringing dishonour on herself and her family.

Marriage was important not only to preserve the 'honour' of a woman (who would have been expected to keep her virginity until marriage) but also to forge a connection between two families of equal wealth and status – a 'good' marriage meant family fortunes and titles were preserved and consolidated. It could even provide business opportunities or a rise in social status and these were considered the important factors in a marriage – not love between individuals.

Hero and Beatrice are contrasting characters – Hero is *passive* and obedient, as an ideal Elizabethan woman was supposed to be. Beatrice, on the other hand, is strong-willed and outspoken. Her wit can both charm and offend people, and she uses it to deflect the idea that she should be a wife to anyone. She is of noble birth and doesn't seem to need to marry for the sake of her financial wellbeing, so her intention to never rely on a man seems like a valid future for her.

However, her rage at the treatment of her cousin and her desperation for revenge on Claudio for destroying Hero's reputation show the imbalance of power between men and women. She laments that she is not a man and cannot fight Claudio herself for ruining Hero's honour, and this illustrates how powerless women could be, even in the face of a false accusation.

Task:

Think about the reading:

- How might an Elizabethan audience have responded differently to Hero and Beatrice?
- How do Renaissance ideas about individuality influence your interpretation of Beatrice and Benedick?
- How does an understanding of patriarchy alter your view of Claudio's treatment of Hero?
- Does Shakespeare reinforce the values of Elizabethan society, or encourage audiences to question them?

Model Revisited

Task:

Read the model.

Notice how it has evolved (see sections in bold) – the contextual insight has been integrated at several points.

Although Shakespeare presents honour as a destructive force through the public shaming of Hero and the characters' obsession with reputation, he also suggests that honour can be restored when truth prevails. By exposing the ease with which appearances are believed over reality, Shakespeare critiques the values of Messina whilst ultimately using the comic resolution to question whether reconciliation can fully undo the damage caused by misplaced ideas of honour and reputation.

Shakespeare initially presents honour as a destructive force through Claudio's public denunciation of Hero during the wedding ceremony. Declaring that she is a "rotten orange", Claudio reduces Hero to an object whose outward appearance conceals supposed corruption, encouraging those around him to judge her on accusation rather than evidence. **For an Elizabethan audience, however, Hero's humiliation would have represented more than a private misunderstanding. Women were expected to preserve both their chastity and their family's honour, while marriage was viewed as a means of securing status, wealth and social stability rather than simply personal happiness.** Positioned at the very moment the audience expects a comic wedding, Claudio's rejection of Hero therefore becomes not only a dramatic interruption of the play's comic conventions **but also a public demonstration of the devastating consequences of a society that values reputation above truth.** Shakespeare ultimately presents honour as something that can be manipulated and destroyed with alarming ease, encouraging audiences to question the values that allow appearance to outweigh justice.

Your Turn

Task:

Revisit your own paragraph from Chapter 3.

Integrate some contextual insight informed by this historical lens.

Aim to weave the context into your paragraph, and not simply put it at the end.

Your Response:

Reading 2: Renaissance Comedy and Performance

Context also involves understanding how theatre functioned within society and how audiences responded to performance.

Task:

Read the extract below carefully - annotate it as you read.

Highlight:

- ideas that deepen your interpretation;
- ideas that challenge it;
- ideas that could reshape your paragraph.

Extracts: from 'Much Ado About A Lot' (see appendices for full article – page 80)

If *Much Ado* gives us male bonding, it also gives us female solidarity. Hero's anguish at being wrongly accused of infidelity, and Beatrice's passionate plea to maintain her innocence, reveals to us the closeness of the two young women. What brings them yet closer, though, is their own isolation. Who is able to fight their corner? Who can they turn to as an ally? Leonato – Hero's own father – believes Don John's story rather than the daughter he's known for her entire life. Shakespeare doesn't even give Hero and Beatrice mothers to defend them from the accusations thrown at them; presumably, both women died at some unspecified point in the past. Or perhaps the lack of mother-figures onstage happened for practical reasons: it's possible that when the play was written in the late 1590s, when only men were allowed to perform onstage, that there were not enough actors in Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, who could convincingly play older women. Even if this was the case, though, Shakespeare uses this to his advantage by allowing us to see how vulnerable women like Hero and Beatrice could be in Elizabethan society. The fact that only men were able to be actors might also give us a reason why Beatrice is so outspoken in the first place: originally, she too would have been played by a man.

Task:

Think about the reading:

- How does this change your understanding of Shakespeare's theatre?
- How might Hero's public humiliation have affected an audience watching the play in performance?
- How might an Elizabethan audience have responded differently from a modern audience?
- How does performance shape our understanding of honour and reputation?

Model Reconsidered

Task:

Read the model again.

Notice how it has evolved (see section in bold) – in this case, it is integrated at the beginning.

Although Shakespeare presents honour as a destructive force through the public shaming of Hero and the characters' obsession with reputation, he also suggests that honour can be restored when truth prevails. By exposing the ease with which appearances are believed over reality, Shakespeare critiques the values of Messina whilst ultimately using the comic resolution to question whether reconciliation can fully undo the damage caused by misplaced ideas of honour and reputation.

Writing for a theatrical culture in which audiences expected comedy to end in celebration and marriage, Shakespeare deliberately transforms the wedding ceremony into a moment of public humiliation, forcing spectators to confront the destructive consequences of honour and reputation before restoring comic order. Shakespeare initially presents honour as a destructive force through Claudio's public denunciation of Hero during the wedding ceremony. Declaring that she is a "rotten orange", Claudio reduces Hero to an object whose outward appearance conceals supposed corruption, encouraging those around him to judge her on accusation rather than evidence. For an Elizabethan audience, however, Hero's humiliation would have represented more than a private misunderstanding. Women were expected to preserve both their chastity and their family's honour, while marriage was viewed as a means of securing status, wealth and social stability rather than simply personal happiness. Positioned at the very moment the audience expects a comic wedding, Claudio's rejection of Hero therefore becomes not only a dramatic interruption of the play's comic conventions but also a public demonstration of the devastating consequences of a society that values reputation above truth. Shakespeare ultimately presents honour as something that can be manipulated and destroyed with alarming ease, encouraging audiences to question the values that allow appearance to outweigh justice.

Your Turn

Task:

Reconsider your revised paragraph.

How might an understanding of Renaissance theatre and performance broaden your interpretation beyond Hero and Claudio as individual characters?

Aim to deepen your interpretation rather than simply adding information.

Revised paragraph:

Reflection: Watching it Evolve

Task:

Compare the three versions of the model.

Version	Development
Original Model	Line of argument & close analysis which developed an interpretation
Model Revisited	Historical context deepened the interpretation through Elizabethan ideas about honour, reputation and patriarchy.
Model Reconsidered	Theatrical context broadened the discussion by considering Renaissance performance and how audiences experienced Hero's public humiliation on stage.

What has changed?

At A Level, AO3 is not about accumulating facts. It is about recognising that texts exist within wider historical, literary and theatrical conversations.

The strongest essays do not simply mention context. They allow contextual understanding to reshape interpretation.

Looking Ahead...

You have now revisited and refined your paragraph through contextual reading.

In the next chapter, you will encounter another important aspect of A Level Literature:

What happens when critics, directors and audiences disagree about what a text means?

You will discover that literary interpretation is not fixed.

It is debated.

Chapter 5

Exploring Texts and Traditions

At GCSE, you studied *Much Ado About Nothing* as a text in its own right.

At A Level, you begin to recognise that literary texts do not exist in isolation. Writers revisit similar concerns, ask recurring questions and experiment with familiar forms. Reading texts alongside one another allows us to deepen our understanding of both.

AO4 asks you to:

- **Explore connections across literary texts.**

However, comparison is not simply about identifying similarities and differences.

Instead, comparison allows texts to illuminate one another. It encourages us to ask broader questions:

- What concerns repeatedly interest Shakespeare as a comic dramatist?
- How do different comic heroines challenge the expectations placed upon them?
- How do deception, disguise and misunderstanding shape comic endings?
- Does comedy simply restore social order, or does Shakespeare use it to question the society he presents?

In this chapter, you will encounter another of Shakespeare's great comedies: *Twelfth Night*.

As you do so, keep the following question in mind:

- How do Shakespeare's comedies use love and deception to expose the values of the societies they portray?

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, deception threatens Hero's honour before ultimately restoring harmony.

In *Twelfth Night*, disguise creates confusion, humour and unexpected relationships.

Both explore the tension between appearance and reality.

Both question the expectations placed upon men and women.

Both encourage audiences to consider whether comic endings truly resolve the problems that precede them.

Before You Begin

Task:

Based on your study of *Much Ado About Nothing*, what do you think Shakespeare is interested in exploring through comedy?

You might consider: love; honour; reputation; deception; friendship; gender; marriage; identity; wit; appearance and reality; forgiveness.

Record your ideas:

Introducing *Twelfth Night*

Written around 1601, *Twelfth Night* is one of Shakespeare's most celebrated comedies.

The play follows Viola, a young woman who is separated from her twin brother Sebastian after a shipwreck. Believing him to be dead, Viola disguises herself as a young man named Cesario and enters the service of Duke Orsino.

The disguise creates a series of misunderstandings. Orsino sends Cesario to woo the Countess Olivia on his behalf, but Olivia falls in love with Cesario instead, while Viola secretly falls in love with Orsino.

Like *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Twelfth Night* explores love, deception and mistaken identity. However, the two comedies use deception in different ways.

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, deception threatens Hero's reputation and nearly destroys a marriage. In *Twelfth Night*, disguise creates confusion but ultimately leads to reconciliation.

As you read, ask yourself: **When does deception become harmful, and when does it become a force for happiness?**

Shakespeare offers no easy answers.

Act One

Twelfth Night opens with uncertainty and loss. After surviving a shipwreck, Viola is washed ashore in the unfamiliar land of Illyria. Believing that her twin brother Sebastian has drowned, she is left alone without family or protection. Learning that Duke Orsino rules the country and that the Countess Olivia has withdrawn from society following the death of her brother, Viola decides to disguise herself as a young man named Cesario so that she can safely enter Orsino's service.

Meanwhile, the audience is introduced to an Illyria dominated by love, desire and performance. Orsino presents himself as a hopeless romantic, declaring, "If music be the food of love, play on," as he indulges his own melancholy over Olivia's refusal to marry him. Olivia, however, has vowed to mourn her brother for seven years and refuses to receive any suitors. Shakespeare therefore establishes two characters who appear trapped by exaggerated versions of love and grief before Viola has even entered their lives.

Once disguised as Cesario, Viola quickly gains Orsino's confidence. Impressed by Cesario's intelligence and sensitivity, Orsino sends the young page to plead his case to Olivia. Instead of falling in love with Orsino, however, Olivia is captivated by Cesario, unaware that the eloquent messenger is actually a woman. At the same time, Viola herself develops genuine feelings for Orsino but cannot reveal her identity without exposing her deception. Shakespeare therefore creates a network of conflicting desires in which every character misunderstands the true object of another's affection.

Alongside the romantic plot, Shakespeare introduces the comic world of Olivia's household. Sir Toby Belch delights in drinking, disorder and mockery, encouraging the foolish Sir Andrew Aguecheek to continue his hopeless pursuit of Olivia. Maria, Olivia's witty gentlewoman, quickly proves herself more intelligent than the men around her, while the self-important steward Malvolio condemns their behaviour and attempts to impose order upon the household. These contrasting characters establish the comic subplot that will eventually intersect with Viola's story, highlighting the play's fascination with disguise, performance and mistaken identity in both love and society.

Yet Shakespeare immediately complicates what might otherwise appear to be a straightforward romantic comedy. Viola's disguise protects her from danger, but it also creates a series of misunderstandings that become increasingly difficult to resolve. The audience enjoys the dramatic irony of knowing Cesario's true identity, while watching the other characters make decisions based upon appearances rather than reality. From the very beginning of the play, deception is shown to possess both comic and potentially painful consequences.

Act One therefore establishes the central tension of the comedy.

Viola knows who she really is.

The question is how long that truth can remain concealed before appearances begin to cause genuine harm.

AO4 Reflection

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, deception threatens Hero's honour and reputation.

In *Twelfth Night*, deception creates confusion through disguise and mistaken identity.

Task

How does Shakespeare establish different relationships between deception and truth from the very beginning of each comedy?

Record your ideas:

Act Two

Act Two explores the increasingly complicated consequences of Viola's disguise. Although she adopted the identity of Cesario to protect herself, the deception now begins to affect everyone around her. Shakespeare develops the comic misunderstandings established in Act One whilst also revealing the emotional costs of mistaken identity. What initially seemed a practical solution becomes increasingly difficult to sustain.

Viola continues to serve Duke Orsino, carrying messages of love to Olivia on his behalf. Each visit only deepens Olivia's affection for Cesario, leaving Viola trapped in an impossible position. She cannot reveal her true identity without abandoning the disguise that has kept her safe, yet she knows Olivia's hopes can never be fulfilled. Reflecting on her predicament, Viola recognises the painful irony of the situation, admitting, "Disguise, I see, thou art a wickedness." Unlike many of the other characters, Viola understands the truth behind the misunderstandings, making her both the architect and the victim of the play's deception.

Meanwhile, Shakespeare develops the comic subplot within Olivia's household. Sir Toby Belch, Maria and Sir Andrew Aguecheek decide to take revenge on the self-important Malvolio, whose attempts to impose order have made him unpopular. Maria devises a plan to trick him into believing Olivia is secretly in love with him by forging a letter in Olivia's handwriting. Convinced the letter is genuine, Malvolio eagerly follows its bizarre instructions, believing he is winning Olivia's affection whilst unknowingly making himself ridiculous. As with Viola's disguise, Shakespeare presents deception as a force capable of creating both comedy and humiliation.

Act Two therefore expands the play's central concern with appearance and reality. Characters increasingly make decisions based upon what they believe to be true rather than what is actually true. Unlike the audience, they possess only fragments of the full picture, allowing Shakespeare to exploit dramatic irony whilst raising more serious questions about trust, identity and perception.

Shakespeare begins to ask whether deception merely creates comic confusion—or whether appearances can become powerful enough to shape reality itself.

AO4 Reflection

In *Twelfth Night*, deception initially creates comic misunderstanding before eventually leading towards reconciliation.

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, deception rapidly destroys trust, reputation and relationships before the truth is finally restored.

Task:

When does deception become harmless entertainment, and when does it become genuinely dangerous?

How might *Much Ado About Nothing* answer this question? How might *Twelfth Night*?

Record your ideas:

Act Three

Act Three marks the dramatic and comic climax of Twelfth Night. The misunderstandings that have gradually developed through Viola's disguise become increasingly tangled, while the subplot surrounding Malvolio reaches its height. Shakespeare explores both the joy and the cruelty that deception can produce, asking audiences to consider whether appearances can ever be trusted.

Viola continues to act as Orsino's messenger, but the emotional triangle becomes ever more complicated. Olivia openly declares her love for Cesario, despite Viola's attempts to discourage her. Unable to reveal the truth, Viola can only hint at her real feelings, lamenting, "I am the man." Shakespeare uses dramatic irony to place the audience in a privileged position: they understand every misunderstanding while watching the characters become increasingly trapped by false appearances.

Meanwhile, Sir Toby, Maria and Fabian eagerly watch their trick against Malvolio unfold. Having discovered Maria's forged letter, Malvolio convinces himself that Olivia loves him and appears before her wearing ridiculous yellow stockings and smiling constantly, believing these behaviours will win her affection. Instead, Olivia is bewildered by his strange behaviour and concludes that he has lost his mind. The audience is invited to laugh at Malvolio's humiliation, yet Shakespeare also raises uncomfortable questions about the fine line between comic entertainment and genuine cruelty.

The confusion deepens further when Sir Andrew, encouraged by Sir Toby, challenges Cesario to a duel in the hope of impressing Olivia. Neither Sir Andrew nor Viola wishes to fight, yet both believe they have no choice. Before the duel can begin, Antonio unexpectedly arrives and mistakes Cesario for Sebastian, whom he believes to be Viola's twin brother. When Viola fails to recognise him, Antonio is devastated, while Viola realises for the first time that Sebastian may still be alive. Hope begins to replace grief, but the mistaken identities become even more complicated.

Act Three therefore demonstrates how deception grows beyond the control of those who created it. Viola's disguise, Maria's forged letter and the mistaken identities surrounding Sebastian all generate consequences that none of the characters fully anticipate. What began as playful deception now threatens friendships, reputations and personal happiness.

Shakespeare suggests that appearances may entertain audiences, but they also possess the power to reshape people's lives in unexpected ways.

AO4 Reflection

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, deception reaches its climax when Hero's reputation is publicly destroyed.

In *Twelfth Night*, deception reaches its climax when mistaken identities create confusion, humiliation and emotional conflict.

Task:

How do Shakespeare's two comedies present the consequences of deception differently?

Why do you think one play makes audiences laugh while the other asks them to question the damage deception can cause?

Record your ideas:

Act Four

The consequences of deception begin to unfold rapidly in Act Four. The misunderstandings created by Viola's disguise and the mistaken identities surrounding Sebastian reach their height, drawing more characters into confusion whilst bringing the play closer to resolution. Shakespeare demonstrates that appearances have become so convincing that they begin to shape reality itself.

The act opens with Sebastian's arrival in Illyria. Having survived the shipwreck, he has been searching for Viola, unaware that she is alive and disguised as Cesario. His presence immediately intensifies the confusion. Sir Andrew, believing Sebastian to be Cesario, attacks him in revenge for their earlier confrontation. Unlike Viola, however, Sebastian defends himself confidently, leaving Sir Andrew and Sir Toby astonished by what appears to be Cesario's sudden transformation. Shakespeare exploits the audience's superior knowledge to create dramatic irony, as characters repeatedly mistake one twin for the other.

Meanwhile, Olivia encounters Sebastian and mistakes him for Cesario. Delighted by what she believes to be his sudden change of heart, she proposes marriage. Although bewildered by Olivia's affection, Sebastian accepts, recognising the remarkable opportunity before him. His decision reflects one of the play's central concerns: appearances can become so persuasive that they reshape people's lives before the truth has been revealed. The audience knows that Olivia has unknowingly married the wrong person, yet Shakespeare also suggests that genuine happiness may emerge from accidental deception.

Elsewhere, the comic subplot takes a darker turn. Malvolio, convinced of Olivia's love by Maria's forged letter, has been imprisoned as a madman after behaving so strangely that those around him believe he has lost his reason. Sir Toby, Maria and Feste prolong the deception, with Feste disguising himself as the curate Sir Topas to torment the bewildered steward further. Although the scenes are comic, Shakespeare invites audiences to question whether the trick has gone too far. Malvolio's suffering complicates the play's humour, suggesting that deception can humiliate as easily as it can entertain.

Act Four therefore brings the play to the brink of revelation. Characters continue to trust appearances over reality, while the audience waits for the truth to emerge. Shakespeare demonstrates that deception can produce unexpected happiness, but also genuine suffering, leaving the final act to determine whether truth can restore the harmony that appearances have disrupted.

AO4 Reflection

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, deception reaches its most destructive point when Hero's reputation is publicly ruined before the truth is eventually revealed.

In *Twelfth Night*, deception reaches its greatest complexity as mistaken identities produce both joy and suffering before recognition becomes possible.

Task:

How do Shakespeare's two comedies present the relationship between deception and resolution?

Does revealing the truth repair all the damage deception has caused?

Record your ideas:

Act Five

By the final act of the play, the web of disguises and misunderstandings can no longer be sustained. Shakespeare carefully unravels the confusion he has created, revealing hidden identities, exposing deception and restoring order. Yet, although the comedy ends in celebration, it also leaves audiences questioning whether every wound can be healed simply by uncovering the truth.

The act begins as Orsino visits Olivia once more, accompanied by Cesario. Still believing Cesario has betrayed him by accepting Olivia's love, Orsino reacts with anger and disappointment, while Olivia insists that she and Cesario have already been married. Viola is bewildered, unable to explain events without revealing her disguise. Shakespeare heightens the confusion by bringing together characters who all possess different versions of the truth, allowing the audience to anticipate the revelation that will resolve the play.

The turning point arrives with Sebastian's appearance. For the first time, the twins stand together, and the long sequence of mistaken identities is finally explained. Brother and sister are joyfully reunited, Olivia discovers that she has unknowingly married Sebastian rather than Cesario, and Orsino at last recognises Viola's true identity. Freed from her disguise, Viola is finally able to declare her love openly, while Orsino responds by asking her to become his wife. The deception that has driven the plot therefore gives way to recognition, reconciliation and the restoration of social harmony.

Not every conflict, however, is resolved so comfortably. Malvolio is released from confinement and discovers that he has been the victim of Maria's forged letter and the cruel trick played by Sir Toby, Sir Toby's companions and Feste. Unlike the other characters, he refuses reconciliation, leaving the stage with the bitter promise, "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you." Shakespeare therefore complicates the conventional comic ending by reminding audiences that laughter can come at another person's expense. The restoration of harmony is genuine, but it is not complete.

The play concludes with multiple marriages and the reunion of Viola and Sebastian, apparently restoring the order that had been disrupted by disguise and deception. Yet Shakespeare leaves one final note of reflection through Feste's closing song, which reminds the audience that life continues beyond the boundaries of the play and that joy and hardship inevitably coexist. The song gently tempers the celebrations, suggesting that comedy does not erase life's difficulties but offers a way of enduring them.

Act Five therefore offers resolution rather than perfect closure. Truth is finally revealed, relationships are restored and social order is re-established, but Shakespeare refuses to pretend that deception leaves no lasting consequences. Instead, he suggests that forgiveness, self-knowledge and reconciliation require generosity from those willing to move beyond misunderstanding, whilst acknowledging that not everyone is prepared to do so.

AO4 Reflection

Both *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Twelfth Night* end with the restoration of truth and the promise of marriage.

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, however, Hero's reputation can never be entirely untouched by her public humiliation, while in *Twelfth Night* Malvolio leaves embittered, refusing to forgive those who deceived him.

Task:

Do Shakespeare's comedies truly restore harmony, or do they simply persuade audiences to accept an imperfect ending?

How do the endings of *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Twelfth Night* encourage different responses to forgiveness and reconciliation?

Record your ideas:

Comic Protagonists Compared

By this point, you have encountered two very different Shakespearean comedies.

At first glance, *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Twelfth Night* appear to have little in common.

One comedy centres upon honour, reputation and public accusation, while the other revolves around disguise, mistaken identity and concealed desire. One uses deception to expose the fragility of social reputation; the other uses it to create comic confusion and unexpected self-discovery.

However, comparison allows us to move beyond obvious differences.

AO4 asks us to consider how texts illuminate one another. Rather than asking simply, "What is the same?" or "What is different?" we might instead ask: "What new understanding of *Much Ado About Nothing* emerges when we place it alongside *Twelfth Night*?"

The table below is designed to help you think comparatively. Notice how each comparison returns us to the central concerns of Shakespearean comedy: love, deception, identity, forgiveness and social order.

Question	<i>Much Ado About Nothing</i>	<i>Twelfth Night</i>
What initiates the comedy?	Don Pedro's matchmaking and Don John's deception set the action in motion.	Viola's shipwreck and disguise as Cesario create the central misunderstandings.
What role does deception play?	Deception exposes the fragility of honour and reputation, leading to public humiliation before reconciliation.	Deception creates comic confusion through disguise and mistaken identity before truth is revealed.
How do the protagonists suffer?	Hero suffers public disgrace, while Beatrice experiences anger at the injustice surrounding her cousin.	Viola experiences isolation and emotional conflict as her disguise prevents her from revealing her true identity.
When does recognition occur?	Truth is restored when Borachio's deception is exposed and Hero's innocence is recognised.	Recognition occurs when Sebastian appears and Viola's true identity is finally revealed.
What effect does self-knowledge have?	Characters must recognise the consequences of judging appearances too quickly before reconciliation becomes possible.	Characters discover that appearances are unreliable and that genuine understanding depends upon recognising the truth beneath disguise.
How should audiences judge them?	Claudio invites both criticism for his treatment of Hero and sympathy for his remorse, while Beatrice's challenge to convention earns admiration.	Viola's honesty beneath her disguise invites sympathy, while Malvolio provokes both laughter and pity.
What remains unresolved?	Whether Hero's public humiliation can ever be fully undone and whether honour can truly be restored.	Whether Malvolio's humiliation undermines the comic ending and whether forgiveness has genuine limits.

Reflection

Comparison does not require us to decide which play is "better" or "funnier".

Instead, it encourages us to think more carefully about the questions Shakespeare repeatedly explores through comedy.

Task

Having encountered both plays, consider the following:

- Does deception always lead to harm?
- Can appearances ever be trusted?
- Is forgiveness necessary for comedy to achieve its resolution?
- Are Shakespeare's comic endings entirely happy, or do they leave important questions unresolved?
- How do *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Twelfth Night* encourage audiences to think differently about love, honour and identity?

Record your ideas:

Returning to the Model

Throughout this booklet, you have revisited the same model paragraph, allowing it to evolve as your understanding has deepened.

At the end of Chapter 4, you reconsidered your interpretation through contextual reading (AO3).

Now, comparison invites you to broaden that interpretation once more.

Task:

Read the model below from where it was modified with AO3 insight.

Although Shakespeare presents honour as a destructive force through the public shaming of Hero and the characters' obsession with reputation, he also suggests that honour can be restored when truth prevails. By exposing the ease with which appearances are believed over reality, Shakespeare critiques the values of Messina whilst ultimately using the comic resolution to question whether reconciliation can fully undo the damage caused by misplaced ideas of honour and reputation.

Writing for a theatrical culture in which all female roles were performed by boys, Shakespeare invites audiences to witness Hero's humiliation as a public spectacle whilst simultaneously giving Beatrice an unusually outspoken voice that challenges the expectations placed upon women. Shakespeare initially presents honour as a destructive force through Claudio's public denunciation of Hero during the wedding ceremony. Declaring that she is a "rotten orange", Claudio reduces Hero to an object whose outward appearance conceals supposed corruption, encouraging those around him to judge her on accusation rather than evidence. For an Elizabethan audience, however, Hero's humiliation would have represented more than a private misunderstanding. Women were expected to preserve both their chastity and their family's honour, while marriage was viewed as a means of securing status, wealth and social stability rather than simply personal happiness. Positioned at the very moment the audience expects a comic wedding, Claudio's rejection of Hero therefore becomes not only a dramatic interruption of the play's comic conventions but also a public demonstration of the devastating consequences of a society that values reputation above truth. Shakespeare ultimately presents honour as something that can be manipulated and destroyed with alarming ease, encouraging audiences to question the values that allow appearance to outweigh justice.

Task:

Now read the reconsidered model, with AO4 insight incorporated.

Although Shakespeare presents honour as a destructive force through the public shaming of Hero and the characters' obsession with reputation, he also suggests that honour can be restored when truth prevails. By exposing the ease with which appearances are believed over reality, Shakespeare critiques

the values of Messina whilst ultimately using the comic resolution to question whether reconciliation can fully undo the damage caused by misplaced ideas of honour and reputation.

Writing for a theatrical culture in which all female roles were performed by boys, Shakespeare invites audiences to witness Hero's humiliation as a public spectacle whilst simultaneously giving Beatrice an unusually outspoken voice that challenges the expectations placed upon women. Shakespeare initially presents honour as a destructive force through Claudio's public denunciation of Hero during the wedding ceremony. Declaring that she is a "rotten orange", Claudio reduces Hero to an object whose outward appearance conceals supposed corruption, encouraging those around him to judge her on accusation rather than evidence. For an Elizabethan audience, however, Hero's humiliation would have represented more than a private misunderstanding. Women were expected to preserve both their chastity and their family's honour, while marriage was viewed as a means of securing status, wealth and social stability rather than simply personal happiness. Positioned at the very moment the audience expects a comic wedding, Claudio's rejection of Hero therefore becomes not only a dramatic interruption of the play's comic conventions but also a public demonstration of the devastating consequences of a society that values reputation above truth. Shakespeare ultimately presents honour as something that can be manipulated and destroyed with alarming ease, encouraging audiences to question the values that allow appearance to outweigh justice. **By contrast, in *Twelfth Night* deception ultimately enables self-discovery and reconciliation, suggesting that Shakespeare's comedies do not condemn deception itself but instead question the motives behind it and the willingness of individuals to trust appearances over truth. *Much Ado About Nothing*, however, demonstrates that when deception exploits a society obsessed with honour and reputation, its consequences become far more destructive.**

Notice what has changed.

The comparison has not distracted from your interpretation of *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Instead, it has sharpened it.

AO4 does not ask: What is similar? It asks: How does another text help me understand this one more deeply?

Your Turn

Task:

Using one carefully integrated comparative sentence, broaden your interpretation through *Twelfth Night*.

Remember:

- Keep *Much Ado About Nothing* as the focus.
- Use *Twelfth Night* to illuminate your argument.
- Avoid bolt-on comparison.
- Ask yourself what *Twelfth Night* reveals about *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Revise your paragraph:

Looking ahead...

Before moving on, take a moment to recognise how your thinking has evolved:

- Chapter 3 helped you construct an argument and analyse Shakespeare's methods;
- Chapter 4 deepened that argument through literary and historical context;
- Chapter 5 broadened that argument through comparison.

You have not replaced earlier interpretations.

You have refined them.

In the final chapter of this booklet, you will discover that interpretation itself is contested. Critics disagree.

Directors make choices. Audiences respond differently across time.

Literary study is not about arriving at a single, definitive answer.

It is an ongoing conversation.

Chapter 6

Joining the Critical Conversation

Throughout this booklet, you have gradually developed your interpretation of Shakespeare's presentation of honour and reputation in *Much Ado About Nothing*.

1. You began by constructing an argument.
2. You analysed Shakespeare's dramatic methods.
3. You deepened your ideas through context.
4. You broadened them through comparison.
5. At each stage, the same paragraph evolved.

However, A Level English Literature asks something more.

It asks you to recognise that intelligent readers do not always agree.

Two critics may examine the same scene, the same quotation and the same character and arrive at different conclusions.

This is AO5.

AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.

Importantly, AO5 is not about finding the "correct" critic.

Nor is it about collecting quotations from critics and attaching them mechanically to the end of an essay.

Instead, criticism should help you:

1. refine your ideas;
2. challenge your assumptions;
3. qualify your interpretations;
4. recognise the complexity of literary debate.

Literature becomes a conversation.

And now, you are invited to join it.

Before You Begin

Task:

Without looking back at your paragraph, complete the statements below.

Claudio's treatment of Hero is understandable because...

Claudio's treatment of Hero is more blameworthy because...

If you found yourself agreeing with both statements, you have already begun thinking critically.

Reading 1: Gail Kern Paster

Critical interpretations can encourage us to revisit familiar characters from an entirely new perspective.

Task:

Read the extract carefully and annotate it as you read.

Highlight:

- ideas that support your interpretation;
- ideas that challenge your interpretation;
- ideas that could deepen your understanding of *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Extracts: from 'A Modern Perspective' (see appendices for full article – page 81)

Much Ado is not unusual in its reiterated wordplay on horns, since jokes about the wearing of cuckolds' horns are commonplace throughout the literature of this period. But, in the drama of the period, there is a marked disparity between the frequency of the jokes and the infrequency of wifely infidelity. Many more wives are falsely accused than are, in fact, guilty. This discrepancy between fears of betrayal and actual guilt suggests that we should focus less on the infidelity itself than on the real source of patriarchal anxiety, which was patriarchy's inevitable dependence on (and inability to verify) the chastity of wives and mothers. For only such chastity secured a social structure based on legitimate inheritance of lands, wealth, property, rank, and name.

*In Much Ado, I want to suggest, this patriarchal anxiety gives cuckoldry jokes a particular, local function. They work to resolve a social contradiction in Elizabethan society, a moment of double bind in the cultural history of marriage in which an authoritarian official tradition collided with an emergent ideal. Sixteenth-century English society had not yet dispensed with forms of overt, virulent misogyny inherited from medieval Catholicism which made marriage, especially for men, a less perfect way of life than celibacy. But it could not readily accommodate these inherited forms of misogyny to a post-Reformation celebration of marriage, particularly in its modern form of companionate, consensual unions in which the emotional satisfaction of both partners assumes new importance. Elizabethan society could not dispense with misogyny because the most general, even ancient function of antifeminist discourse is to justify patriarchy's unequal distribution of power and property, its subordination of women. But virulent suspicion of wifely chastity—the kind of suspicion that destroys lives and marriages in *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale*, for example—must have seemed incompatible with an emergent theory of marriage focused upon the initial consent of both partners and upon their long-term fulfillment of a set of mutual obligations which were in part material, in part emotional.⁵ Even Don Pedro, in seeking to promote the marriage of Hero and Claudio, assumes that winning the consent of Hero comes before anything else: "I will break with her and with her father" (1.1.304), while Beatrice slyly urges her cousin not to say "Father, as it please you" but rather "Father, as it please me" (2.1.53, 55–56). If women's feelings matter, then so, it would seem, do feelings about women: medieval misogyny and post-Reformation marriage theory could not comfortably coexist. From the tension between them, the double plots of Shakespeare's comedy come into being.*

Paster argues that the repeated jokes about cuckoldry in *Much Ado About Nothing* are far more than comic entertainment. They expose a society in which female chastity underpins male honour, inheritance and social order. According to Paster, Claudio's readiness to believe Hero's apparent infidelity reflects not simply his individual jealousy but a wider patriarchal culture that encourages suspicion of women. Shakespeare therefore presents Hero's public humiliation as the product of social attitudes rather than merely Don John's deception.

Students might also question whether Shakespeare ultimately challenges these patriarchal assumptions or whether the comic ending restores the very social structures that made Hero's humiliation possible.

Reflection

Task:

Paster argues that *Much Ado About Nothing* exposes the patriarchal values that encourage suspicion of women and make Hero's public humiliation possible.

To what extent do you agree?

You may wish to consider:

- Does Claudio's treatment of Hero reflect his own character, or the society in which he lives?
- Does Shakespeare encourage audiences to sympathise more with Hero than with Claudio?
- Does the play challenge patriarchal ideas about honour and reputation, or ultimately restore them?

Record your ideas:

Returning to the Model

Task:

Read the model paragraph below.

This is the version developed at the end of Chapter 5 having integrated a comparison with *Twelfth Night*.

Although Shakespeare presents honour as a destructive force through the public shaming of Hero and the characters' obsession with reputation, he also suggests that honour can be restored when truth prevails. By exposing the ease with which appearances are believed over reality, Shakespeare critiques the values of Messina whilst ultimately using the comic resolution to question whether reconciliation can fully undo the damage caused by misplaced ideas of honour and reputation.

Writing for a theatrical culture in which all female roles were performed by boys, Shakespeare invites audiences to witness Hero's humiliation as a public spectacle whilst simultaneously giving Beatrice an unusually outspoken voice that challenges the expectations placed upon women. Shakespeare initially presents honour as a destructive force through Claudio's public denunciation of Hero during the wedding ceremony. Declaring that she is a "rotten orange", Claudio reduces Hero to an object whose outward appearance conceals supposed corruption, encouraging those around him to judge her on accusation rather than evidence. For an Elizabethan audience, however, Hero's humiliation would have represented more than a private misunderstanding. Women were expected to preserve both their chastity and their family's honour, while marriage was viewed as a means of securing status, wealth and social stability rather than simply personal happiness. Positioned at the very moment the audience expects a comic wedding, Claudio's rejection of Hero therefore becomes not only a dramatic interruption of the play's comic conventions but also a public demonstration of the devastating consequences of a society that values reputation above truth. Shakespeare ultimately presents honour as something that can be manipulated and destroyed with alarming ease, encouraging audiences to question the values that allow appearance to outweigh justice. By contrast, in *Twelfth Night* deception ultimately enables self-discovery and reconciliation, suggesting that Shakespeare's comedies do not condemn deception itself but instead question the motives behind it and the willingness of individuals to trust appearances over truth. *Much Ado About Nothing*, however, demonstrates that when deception exploits a society obsessed with honour and reputation, its consequences become far more destructive.

Task:

Now read the model paragraph below which has been adapted.

Notice how criticism can be woven into an argument rather than attached awkwardly to the end.

What has been incorporated links to the prior point about theatrical culture and public spectacle, and is linked to the point that follows about honour and reputation, which was the original starting point/idea of this paragraph before it developed.

The sentences have been adapted to ensure it is seamlessly integrated.

It becomes part of the wider discussion.

The additions below have been bolded.

Although Shakespeare presents honour as a destructive force through the public shaming of Hero and the characters' obsession with reputation, he also suggests that honour can be restored when truth prevails. By exposing the ease with which appearances are believed over reality, Shakespeare critiques the values of Messina whilst ultimately using the comic resolution to question whether reconciliation can fully undo the damage caused by misplaced ideas of honour and reputation.

Writing for a theatrical culture in which all female roles were performed by boys, Shakespeare invites audiences to witness Hero's humiliation as a public spectacle whilst simultaneously giving Beatrice an unusually outspoken voice that challenges the expectations placed upon women. **Paster argues that the play's repeated jokes about cuckoldry reveal a wider patriarchal anxiety about women's chastity, inheritance and male reputation, suggesting that Hero's public humiliation is not simply the result of Don John's deception but of a society already prepared to suspect women.** Shakespeare initially presents honour as a destructive force through Claudio's public denunciation of Hero during the wedding ceremony. Declaring that she is a "rotten orange", Claudio reduces Hero to an object whose outward appearance conceals supposed corruption, encouraging those around him to judge her on accusation rather than evidence. For an Elizabethan audience, however, Hero's humiliation would have represented more than a private misunderstanding. Women were expected to preserve both their chastity and their family's honour, while marriage was viewed as a means of securing status, wealth and social stability rather than simply personal happiness. Positioned at the very moment the audience expects a comic wedding, Claudio's rejection of Hero therefore becomes not only a dramatic interruption of the play's comic conventions but also a public demonstration of the devastating consequences of a society that values reputation above truth. Shakespeare ultimately presents honour as something that can be manipulated and destroyed with alarming ease, encouraging audiences to question the values that allow appearance to outweigh justice. By contrast, in *Twelfth Night* deception ultimately enables self-discovery and reconciliation, suggesting that Shakespeare's comedies do not condemn deception itself but instead question the motives behind it and the willingness of individuals to trust appearances over truth. *Much Ado About Nothing*, however, demonstrates that when deception exploits a society obsessed with honour and reputation, its consequences become far more destructive.

Your Turn

Task:

Return to your own paragraph.

Integrate the critical insight into your analysis.

Remember:

- keep your own argument central;
- use the critic to sharpen your interpretation;
- avoid adding criticism mechanically at the end;
- think carefully about where the critical voice naturally belongs.

Your Revised Paragraph:

Task:

Return to your own paragraph.

Integrate the critical insight into your analysis.

Remember:

- keep your own argument central;
- use the critic to sharpen your interpretation;
- avoid adding criticism mechanically at the end;
- think carefully about where the critical voice naturally belongs.

Your Revised Paragraph:

Task:

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Remember:

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- avoid adding criticism mechanically at the end;
- think carefully about where the critical voice naturally belongs.

Your Revised Paragraph:

Task:

Return to your own paragraph.

Integrate the critical insight into your analysis.

Remember:

- keep your own argument central;
- use the critic to sharpen your interpretation;
- avoid adding criticism mechanically at the end;
- think carefully about where the critical voice naturally belongs.

Your Revised Paragraph:

- Task:
- Return to your own paragraph.
- Integrate the critical insight into your analysis.
- Remember:
- keep your own argument central;
 - use the critic to sharpen your interpretation;
 - avoid adding criticism mechanically at the end;
 - think carefully about where the critical voice naturally belongs.
- Your Revised Paragraph:**

Task:

Return to your own paragraph.

Integrate the critical insight into your analysis.

Remember:

- keep your own argument central;
- use the critic to sharpen your interpretation;
- avoid adding criticism mechanically at the end;
- think carefully about where the critical voice naturally belongs.

Your Revised Paragraph:

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Looking Back

At the beginning of this booklet, you were invited to think differently about literary study.

Since then, you have learned how to:

- construct arguments (AO1);
- analyse Shakespeare's methods (AO2);
- deepen interpretations through context (AO3);
- broaden ideas through comparison (AO4);
- engage with literary criticism (AO5).

You have also discovered something important.

Great literature rarely produces certainty.

Instead, it invites debate.

It encourages disagreement.

It rewards curiosity.

As you move into A Level English Literature, remember:

- You do not need the "right" answer.
- You need an argument that is thoughtful, supported and open to complexity.

That is what literary study demands.

And that is the conversation you are now ready to join.

What's Next?

You are now to complete your essay – as aforementioned in the introduction, you can hand write or type this.

Important: Whilst this booklet required you to integrate contextual insight (AO3), comparative insight (AO4), and critical insight (AO5) in one main paragraph, you are not expected to include these in all your main paragraphs. You have to be selective and purposeful, avoiding repetition and embedding any of the above just for the sake of it.

Your deadline will be given to you in September, however expect it to be within the first two weeks of the term.

This essay will be marked and feedback will be provided.

Your baseline assessment will be linked to this work where you'll be given a similar essay-style question to respond to – the contextual and critical reading from this bridging unit will be directly relevant for this assessment.

Appendices

Much Ado About Nothing: The Play in Context

Elizabethan society



Phoenix portrait of Queen Elizabeth I by Nicholas Hilliard

The English monarchy had experienced a good deal of political turmoil in the years preceding the reign of Queen Elizabeth, and even during the early years of her power: there were challenges to the throne and schemes to overthrow her as queen, as well as war and constitutional issues surrounding religion. By the late 1500s Elizabeth had largely proven herself to be a capable ruler and brought a degree of stability to the country, disproving the doubts of those who felt a woman could not rule. Elizabeth famously resisted marriage in favour of retaining her own autonomy; the fact she was known for this may have helped pave the way for audiences to feel positively about an outspoken and unusual female character like Beatrice, who did not seem to need or want a husband.

Following the Middle Ages, the *Renaissance* (French for 'rebirth') had begun in Europe in the 14th century and brought renewed emphasis on learning, art and culture. It influenced the works of English playwrights like Shakespeare who often used stories from Greece and Italy to inform their works, but it also informed society's philosophical ideas. While there was still a rigid class hierarchy in English society (citizens could be arrested for wearing clothing that suggested they were of a higher social class than they actually were, for example), Renaissance ideals meant greater emphasis on the individual and on the importance of their freedom to think and act for themselves.

Beatrice and Benedick represent some of these ideals in how they do not conform to society's ideas of traditional courtship and marriage for the sake of family alliances and social status. Their rejections of marriage may be overturned by the end of the play, but there is little doubt that they are marrying for the sake of their feelings for each other, not because they have to. Benedick's loyalty to Beatrice and her reliance on him to challenge Claudio show both characters have gained some personal growth and imply their love is realistic, pragmatic and based on respect, promising to give both the space to be their individual selves within a marriage.

Illegitimacy

There was a common belief in *Elizabethan* England that those born out of wedlock, as Don John is, were naturally inclined to be evil. A son born to unwed parents faced immediate barriers to being accepted in society and was often prevented from inheriting wealth, titles or property from their father.

Many Renaissance plays use a villain of *illegitimate* birth as the main *antagonist* – Shakespeare himself uses it in *King Lear* with the character of Edmund, who resents being treated as a lesser being because of his illegitimacy; he manipulates others to improve his own social standing and get revenge on his brother and father.

Don John in *Much Ado About Nothing* is similarly bitter about his situation and this motivates him to attempt to ruin the potential happiness of Claudio and Hero; he notes his particular dislike of Claudio, who is young and in favour after his conduct in the war, and this suggests he is jealous of him.

Patriarchy and gender roles

Renaissance England was a *patriarchal* society in which men held the positions of power and women were considered little more than their father's or husband's property. Traditional gender roles demanded *chastity* and modesty from women, while men were allowed more freedom. Benedick boasts of his popularity with women, for example, when no woman would have been permitted to engage in casual relationships with men, or even to openly imply that men found her attractive, without bringing dishonour on herself and her family.

Marriage was important not only to preserve the 'honour' of a woman (who would have been expected to keep her virginity until marriage) but also to forge a connection between two families of equal wealth and status – a 'good' marriage meant family fortunes and titles were preserved and consolidated. It could even provide business opportunities or a rise in social status and these were considered the important factors in a marriage – not love between individuals.

Hero and Beatrice are contrasting characters – Hero is *passive* and obedient, as an ideal Elizabethan woman was supposed to be. Beatrice, on the other hand, is strong-willed and outspoken. Her wit can both charm and offend people, and she uses it to deflect the idea that she should be a wife to anyone. She is of noble birth and doesn't seem to need to marry for the sake of her financial wellbeing, so her intention to never rely on a man seems like a valid future for her.

However, her rage at the treatment of her cousin and her desperation for revenge on Claudio for destroying Hero's reputation show the imbalance of power between men and women. She laments that she is not a man and cannot fight Claudio herself for ruining Hero's honour, and this illustrates how powerless women could be, even in the face of a false accusation.

Much Ado About A Lot – Dr Mirande Fay Thomas

'O God, that I were a man!' cries Beatrice after her cousin, Hero, has been left at the altar on her wedding day. When Beatrice says this, what she means is that she wishes that, as a woman, she were entitled to the qualities that men are not only allowed to have, but are celebrated for. Qualities such as the ability to take personal revenge on men like Claudio, openly defy father-figures like Leonato, or even simply to fall in love with a person of her choosing and for her affection not to be seen as weakness, nor her sexual desires be used as evidence of her inconstant character.

Much Ado About Nothing is a bit of a misleading title. Shakespeare's play grapples with a variety of things: gender, friendship, banter, shaming, trickery, hypocrisy, and even the nature of evil, just to name a few. But while the play doesn't deal with 'nothing', there is 'much ado' about quite a lot.

From the very first scene, we can see how the play is concerned with male friendship and the practice of bonding through 'banter'. As soon as this happens, we also see how this is done not just to cement friendships between men, but to exclude women from such conversations. When Leonato introduces Don Pedro to his daughter Hero, he immediately makes a joke about whether or not his daughter is actually his. This doesn't appear to be said in a self-deprecating way. Instead, Leonato's aim is to accuse his dead wife of being a whore in order to get a laugh from the laddish soldiers he wants to make friends with.

For men like Benedick, Claudio, Don Pedro, and Leonato, humour like this acts as both a weapon and a shield. By making sexist jokes, the women are demeaned, but the jokes are also made because of the own men's insecurity: the very fact that women can hurt them emotionally is a chink in their armour that they don't want to be exposed. But the play's main female character, Beatrice, is the heroine precisely because she sees the everyday sexism around her and decides to shout back. Beatrice uses the insults that the men make and turns them back on them. When Benedick tells her 'God keep your ladyship still in that mind, so some gentleman or other shall scape a predestinate scratched face', she replies 'Scratching could not make it worse, an 'twere such a face as yours were'. Using his own words against him, Beatrice inverts his original insult to her own advantage. This kind of witty exchange is known as euphuism, and it's a good way of getting one up on your rival. Of course, this ends up being the reason why Beatrice and Benedick seem so well-suited for each other: Beatrice gives as good as she gets when it comes to the sort of male banter Benedick engages in.

If Much Ado gives us male bonding, it also gives us female solidarity. Hero's anguish at being wrongly accused of infidelity, and Beatrice's passionate plea to maintain her innocence, reveals to us the closeness of the two young women. What brings them yet closer, though, is their own isolation. Who is able to fight their corner? Who can they turn to as an ally? Leonato – Hero's own father – believes Don John's story

rather than the daughter he's known for her entire life. Shakespeare doesn't even give Hero and Beatrice mothers to defend them from the accusations thrown at them; presumably, both women died at some unspecified point in the past. Or perhaps the lack of mother-figures onstage happened for practical reasons: it's possible that when the play was written in the late 1590s, when only men were allowed to perform onstage, that there were not enough actors in Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, who could convincingly play older women. Even if this was the case, though, Shakespeare uses this to his advantage by allowing us to see how vulnerable women like Hero and Beatrice could be in Elizabethan society. The fact that only men were able to be actors might also give us a reason why Beatrice is so outspoken in the first place: originally, she too would have been played by a man.

When we watch the play today, we may feel uncomfortable about what we see, particularly as much of the action is only too recognisable as we go about our own lives. The shaming of Hero, and in particular, the male hypocrisy about sexual partners (if a man is sleeping around, he's a stud; if a woman sleeps around, she's a slut) is still a double-standard that we are exposed to, as is the idea that a man is more likely to be loud, talkative, and funny (and that if a woman is also those things, then she isn't being very ladylike). At the heart of *Much Ado* is a deep anxiety that appears most obviously in the character of Don John, the illegitimate brother of Don Pedro. As a bastard, Don John is a literal symbol of infidelity and women having sex outside of marriage. He's the proof that some women do indeed sleep with men who aren't their husbands, and his very existence confirms the worst fears of characters like Claudio and Leonato. The social anxiety around his illegitimate birth seems to make him what he is: 'a plain-dealing villain'. In Elizabethan society, the fact that he's a bastard automatically makes him evil. With this in mind, we can see why Claudio is so concerned that his fiancé has cheated on him with someone else. Saying that: while it's terrible that Don John is frowned upon simply because of his illegitimate birth, it's also terrible that no one believes Hero and Beatrice simply because they're women.

Much Ado About Nothing is still a romantic comedy, and it gives us an ending where everything seems to work out for the best. The trickery is uncovered, the truth is revealed, and two couples end up getting happily married. Despite this, you may still find yourself asking further questions when you leave the theatre. If you were Hero, would you have forgiven Claudio? Do you think the marriages will last? Don John will be punished – and his actions deserve it – but doesn't his capture further stigmatise people born outside marriage and, once again, blame women for having pre-marital sex while letting the men off the hook? As Shakespeare's play ends, our own stories about how society treats gender are just beginning.

A Modern Perspective: *Much Ado About Nothing* – Gail Kern Paster

Cuckoldry jokes are in the air in Messina. Its governor, Leonato, snatches one out of it when he jokes feebly about having to ask his wife repeatedly for reassurance as to his daughter's legitimacy:

PRINCE I think this is your daughter.

LEONATO Her mother hath *many times* told me so.¹

(1.1.102–3)

Benedick draws our attention to this trace of an old suspicion: "Were you in doubt, sir, that you asked her?" (1.1.104). But Benedick, we soon learn, is also suspicious of women as the agents of men's humiliation and defeat. He expresses an almost pathological fear of betrayal in marriage: to be married is to wear the conventional horns of a cuckold, to have one's own military bugle snatched away, to have it sounded in one's own face:

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 [i.e., a bugle-call blown] 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.
(1.1.234–40)

Benedick's extraordinary self-portrait of his relations with women yields readily to a psychoanalytic reading. Moving without pause from his conception to his upbringing to his cuckolding, he conflates his relations to mother and to wife, collapses past and future, memories and fears.² What seems to unify all these stages of a man's life, for Benedick, is humiliating dependence on women, beginning with the infant's dependence on maternal women for life and nurture. But that early dependence, instead of being outgrown, is seen here as forerunner to the later sexual humiliations of the adult male. Furthermore, Benedick's dismissive mention of his mother as the "woman [who] conceived me" betrays her real importance to the structure of repressed memory. In psychoanalytic narratives of male repression, the mother's lack of the phallus is a disturbing image for the child—an image of his own fear of castration and of his overmastering by another male. But for Benedick, the returning soldier, this fear of women seems less generic than personal: the cuckold's horns that he envisions as his own future headdress are specifically those of a defeated soldier who has lost his bugle to another soldier. It is not surprising, then, that Benedick's anticipation of a farewell to arms here parallels Othello's lament for the loss of heroic identity through an imagined sexual betrayal by Desdemona:

Farewell the tranquil mind! Farewell content!
Farewell the plumèd troops and the big wars
That makes ambition virtue! O, farewell!
Farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump,
The spirit-stirring drum, th' ear-piercing fife,
The royal banner, and all quality,
Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!
(*Othello* 3.3.400–6)

For soldiers like Benedick and Othello, marriage threatens loss of a valued form of masculine singleness, a loss of control.

More interesting, perhaps, in a comic action like *Much Ado's* which is organized around the imagining of sexual betrayal, is that the fear of being associated with the cuckold's horns is not peculiar to men nor is resistance to marriage a symptom of only masculine identity. Though her uncles worry that Beatrice's sharp tongue makes her "too curst" (2.1.20) to get a husband, she jokes that she will thereby avoid making her husband wear horns: "I shall lessen God's sending that way, for it is said 'God sends a curst cow short horns,' but to a cow too curst, he sends none" (2.1.21–24). Even the devil, no mere mortal, wears the signs of betrayal; Beatrice imagines having him meet her looking "like an old cuckold with horns on his head" (2.1.44–45). The horn motif continues to sound in the play even after it ostensibly has been silenced by the exposure of Don John's sexual slander against Hero. Thus Benedick, though converted to love in the person of Beatrice, nonetheless misogynistically urges the play's remaining eligible bachelor, Don Pedro, to join in the march to the altar in the spirit of accepting a universal, age-old humiliation: "Get thee a wife, get thee a wife. There is no staff more reverend than one tipped with horn" (5.4.126–28). If betrayal is the universal fate of the married, it is no wonder that Beatrice regards marriage as a form of repentance:

. . . wooing, wedding, and repenting is as a Scotch jig, a measure, and a cinquepace. The first suit is hot and hasty like a Scotch jig, and full as fantastical; the

wedding, mannerly modest as a measure, full of
state and ancientry; and then comes repentance,
and with his bad legs falls into the cinquepace faster
and faster till he sink into his grave.
(2.1.72–78)³

As all these quotations suggest, anxiety about sexual betrayal in marriage seems endemic in Messina, sparing neither the old nor the young, neither male nor female. What is clear in the men's cuckoldry jokes is their willful silence, for the sake of male friendship and preservation of the status quo, about the male betrayer and a contrasting emphasis on his female partner. It is not the desires of other men that Benedick mistrusts but those of womenkind. It is only when they are among themselves that the Men's Club of Messina—to borrow Harry Berger's wonderful appellation—allows Balthasar's song to register an alternative truth: "Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more, / Men were deceivers ever, / One foot in sea and one on shore, / To one thing constant never" (2.3.64–67).⁴

Much Ado is not unusual in its reiterated wordplay on horns, since jokes about the wearing of cuckolds' horns are commonplace throughout the literature of this period. But, in the drama of the period, there is a marked disparity between the frequency of the jokes and the infrequency of wifely infidelity. Many more wives are falsely accused than are, in fact, guilty. This discrepancy between fears of betrayal and actual guilt suggests that we should focus less on the infidelity itself than on the real source of patriarchal anxiety, which was patriarchy's inevitable dependence on (and inability to verify) the chastity of wives and mothers. For only such chastity secured a social structure based on legitimate inheritance of lands, wealth, property, rank, and name.

In *Much Ado*, I want to suggest, this patriarchal anxiety gives cuckoldry jokes a particular, local function. They work to resolve a social contradiction in Elizabethan society, a moment of double bind in the cultural history of marriage in which an authoritarian official tradition collided with an emergent ideal. Sixteenth-century English society had not yet dispensed with forms of overt, virulent misogyny inherited from medieval Catholicism which made marriage, especially for men, a less perfect way of life than celibacy. But it could not readily accommodate these inherited forms of misogyny to a post-Reformation celebration of marriage, particularly in its modern form of companionate, consensual unions in which the emotional satisfaction of both partners assumes new importance. Elizabethan society could not dispense with misogyny because the most general, even ancient function of antifeminist discourse is to justify patriarchy's unequal distribution of power and property, its subordination of women. But virulent suspicion of wifely chastity—the kind of suspicion that destroys lives and marriages in *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale*, for example—must have seemed incompatible with an emergent theory of marriage focused upon the initial consent of both partners and upon their long-term fulfillment of a set of mutual obligations which were in part material, in part emotional.⁵ Even Don Pedro, in seeking to promote the marriage of Hero and Claudio, assumes that winning the consent of Hero comes before anything else: "I will break *with her* and with her father" (1.1.304), while Beatrice slyly urges her cousin not to say "Father, as it please you" but rather "Father, as it please me" (2.1.53, 55–56). If women's feelings matter, then so, it would seem, do feelings about women: medieval misogyny and post-Reformation marriage theory could not comfortably coexist. From the tension between them, the double plots of Shakespeare's comedy come into being.

Perhaps such a reading of *Much Ado* seems obvious. Any reader of the play can see how much of its action is devoted to overcoming, through Don Pedro's theatrical manipulations, the resistance to love expressed by both Beatrice and Benedick. But to follow this reading to its logical conclusion will require the replacement of a character-based interpretation of the play with one which dissolves boundaries between the text as an autonomous work of art and the culture in which it is produced. Such a reading will attend to the widely dispersed misogyny in Elizabethan culture which speaks in and through Benedick, and to the effects of that misogyny as they register in Beatrice's resistance. Thus, where I depart from traditional critics is in refusing to accept Beatrice and Benedick's resistance to marriage as finally psychological in

significance, even if it is expressed in psychological form in their language and behavior. I do not wish to explain resistance to marriage as idiosyncratic aspects of the personalities of Beatrice and Benedick, even though such resistance is what most sets them apart from their friends and kinfolk. Nor do I wish to interpret their eventual declarations of mutual affection as the manifestation of a hidden attraction that was there all along. I take their love as the creation of Don Pedro, who would “fain have it a match,” he says, to enliven the time between Claudio’s betrothal and nuptials by accomplishing a difficult thing. And presumably he also wishes to make sure that no person in his lordly jurisdiction escapes from the paradoxical cultural requirement to pair off *freely*.

But the uncomfortable truth is that, in a misogynistic culture, resistance to marriage is rational, not idiosyncratic, because misogyny—defined as the systematic denigration of women—gives men and women well-founded reasons to suspect one another. Beatrice and Benedick are given the function in this play of wittily enacting for our benefit the conventional postures of mutual antagonism so that their eventual union will seem both to ratify the irrational force of desire (no matter how it is brought into being) and to dissolve the larger social tensions exemplified by their mutual mistrust. Because, even though marriage might appear incompatible with individual peace of mind, it remains the basic form of social organization, the central distribution point in Elizabethan society for the social and sexual goods of adult maturity. This paradox about marriage may serve to explain why Don Pedro, rather than take a laissez-faire position with regard to the wooing and resistance to wooing in his midst, intervenes personally as head of the social order in the double matchmakings of Hero to Claudio, Beatrice to Benedick. Indeed, he has a notable, almost quantifying pragmatism with regard to affection, assuaging Claudio’s fear that his “liking might too sudden seem” with a breezy “What need the bridge much broader than the flood? / The fairest grant is the necessity. / Look what will serve is fit” (1.1.311–13).

It is important for my argument to emphasize that the history of misogyny is also the history of romantic love, that cultivation of antifeminist feeling has, since the early twelfth century in Europe, coexisted with, indeed depended upon, a counterbalancing idealization of woman. As Howard Bloch has argued, “Misogyny and courtly love are coconspiring abstractions of the feminine whose function was from the start, and continues to be, the diversion of women from history by the annihilation of the identity of individual women . . . and thus the transformation of woman into an ideal.”⁶ That is to say, the idealism of romantic love and the denigration of antifeminist rhetoric are alike in functioning to erase differences between women in order to make women anonymous and invisible to historical action. Such an erasure of differences in women is precisely what occurs in Benedick’s lines quoted above, where the distinct roles of mother and wife are subsumed into the one undifferentiated category, Woman. In the logic of misogyny, if one woman is treacherous, all women are condemned: “Because I will not do them the wrong to mistrust any, I will do myself the right to trust none.” The point is not only, as Harry Berger has argued, that “the difference between men and women in this respect . . . is that women are responsible for their sins but men are not.”⁷ Even more crucial is to recognize the instability between a misogyny which posits all Women-as-the-Same and an idealization which posits Women-as-Different.⁸ In the conversations between Claudio and Benedick—as in the similar conversations between Romeo and Mercutio—this instability in the categorization of women is easy to detect: “Can the world buy such a jewel” as Hero, idealist Claudio asks rhetorically. “Yea,” comes the misogynist’s bawdy reply, “and a case [vagina] to put it into” (1.1.177–78).



The marriage yoke. (1.1.197)

From Henry Peacham, *Minerua Britanna* ... (1612)

Indeed, this instability in the way women are categorized would seem to motivate the different rhetorics by which Benedick and Beatrice are each persuaded to love. While Benedick must be led to believe in Beatrice as Different from all other women, Beatrice must be brought to accept herself as just the Same. Hence Benedick is made to overhear a conversation among the men which describes Beatrice as a compendium of virtues—"an excellent sweet lady," "out of all suspicion . . . virtuous," "exceeding wise" (2.3.166–68)—except for her dotage on Benedick. Beatrice, by contrast, learns from Hero and Ursula less about Benedick's virtues than about her own faults, the chief of which is the nonconformity of resistance: "to be so odd and from all fashions / As Beatrice is cannot be commendable" (3.1.76–77). Both resisters are asked to understand the other's alleged passion as unwilling and uncontrollable—the real thing, in other words. Beatrice and Benedick experience their separate reactions to this surprising news as free and fortuitous. Benedick, on cue, vows to "be horribly in love with her" (2.3.237). Beatrice, stung by what she has overheard, thereupon commits herself to a course of action she names self-taming, "taming my wild heart to thy loving hand" (3.1.118). But we have heard Don Pedro gloat, "The sport will be when they hold one an opinion of another's dotage, and no such matter" (2.3.218–20), and we thus have reason to think otherwise about the relative freedom of their actions. We witness the conspirators glorying in the emotional transformations which, in the guise of "love gods" (2.1.377), they claim to have achieved; and we note in their language a deterministic vocabulary of contagion and entrapment. Claudio whispers to the Prince that Benedick has "ta'en th' infection" (2.3.129); Hero and Ursula congratulate themselves on having "limed," or trapped, Beatrice (3.1.109). Thus in the contrast between Beatrice and Benedick's subjective experience of free choice in love and the undeniable presence of social manipulation in bringing them to imagine that freedom, we can recognize the powerful, because invisible, workings of ideological conditioning to make people act, so they think, naturally: "the world," as Benedick grandiosely declares, "must be peopled" (2.3.244–45).



A pleached bower. (1.2.9)

From T[homas] F[ella], *A book of diverse devices* ... (1585–98, 1622).

But since early modern English patriarchy required both marriage and misogyny, the social inscription that works so hard to create romantic love works equally hard to destabilize it. Thematic links between the two institutions of marriage and misogyny are emphasized because, in the double plot of *Much Ado About Nothing*, the actions to make and to break nuptials employ the same kinds of theatrical means. Shakespeare assigns the function of destroyer with evident symmetry to Don Pedro's brother, Don John the Bastard, whose sense of self-expression in trying to abort the nuptials of Claudio and Hero matches Don Pedro's in bringing them about. If the moral differences between the two brothers seem too insistently coded, that may be—as Jean Howard has argued—because the play is ambivalent about the social and moral function of theatrical practice.⁹ By making the Iago-like Don John a bastard who is so determined to avenge his defeat at the hands of Claudio that he does not scruple to scapegoat Hero in the process, Shakespeare defines one kind of theatrical manipulation as evil, that is, as motivated by the urge to destroy. But is the moral character of Don Pedro's delight in theatrical practices thereby enhanced? The answer to that question cannot be unproblematical, given that Don Pedro's surrogate wooing of Hero leads to a series of early misapprehensions—that the Prince woos for himself; that Hero or her father might have preferred to accept the Prince's suit; that love of women breeds mistrust between male friends because, as Claudio says, “beauty is a witch / Against whose charms faith melteth into blood [i.e., sensual appetite]” (2.1.177–78). Nor does Don Pedro's devotion to theatrical practice give him any advantage in

seeing through his brother's deception: when the Prince and Claudio witness the scene at Hero's chamber window in which Margaret allows herself to be courted as Hero in Hero's clothes, they see and hear only what Don John has prepared them to: "Go but with me tonight, you shall see her chamber window entered, even the night before her wedding day" (3.2.105–7). The potential moral hollowness and material harm of theatrical practices are later emblemized, in this play, when Claudio stands before what we know to be an empty tomb to read an epitaph for Hero.

The play takes pains to construct Claudio as inexperienced and to emphasize the superficiality of a love which arises, he says, at a moment of postcombat mental vacancy:

. . . now I am returned and that war thoughts
Have left their places vacant, in their rooms
Come thronging soft and delicate desires,
All prompting me how fair young Hero is,
Saying I liked her ere I went to wars.
(1.1.296–300)

The prolongation of courtship—which seems the goal of Shakespeare's other conventional lovers such as Orlando in *As You Like It*, or even Romeo—holds no attraction for the two-dimensional Claudio, nor does Hero use the courtship period as Rosalind does in *As You Like It* to investigate the quality of her lover's desire and imagination. The too-compliant Hero accepts the marriage proposal of a man in a mask and then learns to transfer her consent from the wearer of that mask, Don Pedro, to his young favorite. Claudio does not even plan to spend much time getting acquainted with Hero after their marriage and has to be told that his astonishing plan to accompany Don Pedro home to Aragon would be a great "soil in the new gloss of your marriage" (3.2.5–6). (Indeed, the lovers' activity of courtship as mutual interrogation is taken over in this play by Beatrice and Benedick. Even though this delight in mutual interrogation is one reason why we are conditioned to expect their eventual union, it is also the case that Beatrice and Benedick use the resulting information to bolster resistance to marriage and to improve their jests at each other's expense.) Shakespeare uses Claudio's passivity and inexperience as a wooer to rationalize the young count's readiness to believe Don John's slander of Hero and to prepare us eventually to forgive the misogynistic brutality with which he shames her before the assembled wedding guests:

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.
(4.1.35–40)

Claudio's willed commitment to reading Hero's blush as "guiltiness, not modesty" (42) suggests that the real problem linking the two plots of the play is the collapse of the tension between women-as-different and women-as-the-same into one incoherent category of woman-as-different-from-herself. The audience then and the audience now are in a position to understand that widespread cultural suspicion of women, surrogate wooing, and Don John's theatrical illusionism have combined to interrupt the wedding of Hero and Claudio. The audience is also in a position to appreciate the irony of Benedick and Beatrice relinquishing their resistance to marriage and exchanging protestations of love at the very moment when the grounds for mutual suspicion between the sexes seem to have widened. A subtler irony may reside in the complexities of Benedick's situation as the lapsed misogynist learns of one danger in love he had not foreseen, one other rational reason to remain resistant. That is, even as he gives up misogyny and trusts Beatrice's word for Hero's innocence, he finds a new way in which love may be hazardous to one's health:

when he rashly asks Beatrice to “bid me do anything for thee,” she promptly replies, “Kill Claudio” (4.1.302–3). “Ha! Not for the wide world,” comes his automatic reply.

The recuperative necessities of comic closure that will not allow Hero to die or remain dishonored by an unforgiven Claudio also prevent Benedick from having to follow up on the challenge he flings at Claudio and Don Pedro, from having to act irrevocably upon his decision to sacrifice old loyalties to male companions to new loyalties to his future companion in marriage. But the final entrance of the bridal party, with not just the reborn Hero but all the women wearing masks, suggests that the old cultural categories that produce suspicion and slander remain largely untouched by the theatrical manipulations of the Friar and the rapprochement of Beatrice and Benedick. Even the words of Claudio’s question, “Which is the lady I *must seize* upon?” (5.4.54) in their traditional suggestions of coercion and violence suggest the social manipulations that are required to separate men and women from the companionship of their own sex and precipitate them into the terrifying private world of heterosexual union for life. Perhaps this is why Benedick insists on ending the play not with a wedding but with the stately, regulated movements of a communal dance in which the couples move not singly, but together, and no man is yet wearing horns.