

# Much Ado About Nothing

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## INTRODUCTION

*Much Ado About Nothing* is not mentioned in the list of plays by Shakespeare given by Francis Meres in his *Palladis Tamia*, published in the autumn of 1598. Certain speech-prefixes of the first edition, published in 1600, suggest that as Shakespeare wrote he had in mind for the role of Dogberry the comic actor Will Kemp, who is believed to have left the Lord Chamberlain's Men during 1599. Probably Shakespeare wrote the play between summer 1598 and spring 1599.

The action is set in Sicily, where Don Pedro, Prince of Aragon, has recently defeated his half-brother, the bastard Don John, in a military engagement. Apparently reconciled, they return to the capital, Messina, as guests of the Governor, Leonato. There Count Claudio, a young nobleman serving in Don Pedro's army, falls in love with Hero, Leonato's daughter, whom Don Pedro woos on his behalf. The play's central plot, written mainly in verse, shows how Don John maliciously deceives Claudio into believing that Hero has taken a lover on the eve of her marriage, causing Claudio to repudiate her publicly, at the altar. This is a variation on an old tale that existed in many versions; it had been told in Italian verse by Ariosto, in his *Orlando Furioso* (1516, translated into English verse by Sir John Harington, 1591), in Italian prose by Matteo Bandello in his *Novelle* (1554, adapted into French by P. de Belleforest, 1569), in English prose by George Whetstone (*The Rock of Regard*, 1576), in English verse by Edmund Spenser (*The Faerie Queene*, Book 2, canto 4, 1590), and in a number of plays including Luigi Pasqualigo's *Il Fedele* (1579), adapted into English± perhaps by Anthony Munday±±as *Fedele and Fortunio* (published in 1583). Shakespeare, whose plot is an independent reworking of the traditional story, seems to owe most to Ariosto and Bandello, perhaps indirectly.

Don John's deception, with its tragicomical resolution, is offset by a parallel plot written mainly in prose, portraying another, more light-hearted deception, by which Hero's cousin, Beatrice, and Benedick±±friend of Don

Pedro and Claudio±±are tricked into acknowledging, first to themselves and then to each other, that they are in love. This part of the play seems to be of Shakespeare's invention: the juxtaposition of this clever, sophisticated, apparently unillusioned pair with the more naive Claudio and Hero recalls Shakespeare's earlier contrast of romantic and antiromantic attitudes to love and marriage in *The Taming of the Shrew*. The play's third main strand is provided by Constable Dogberry, his partner Verges, and the Watchmen, clearly English rather than Sicilian in origin. Although Benedick and Beatrice are, technically, subordinate characters, they have dominated the imagination of both readers and playgoers.