

e-Illuminations: Much Ado about Nothing

Beatrice the Talkative

Much Ado about Nothing owes much of its enduring fame to the presence of one of Shakespeare’s most beloved heroines: Beatrice. Her quick wit, sly humor and enormous joy for life have delighted audiences for more than 400 years.

Beatrice enjoys a level of freedom that even her cousin, Hero, doesn’t have as the heiress of the household. She refuses to marry any man who does not please her—and since no man pleases her, her future as a spinster seems assured.

However, Beatrice’s skillful wordplay also hints at the darker realities lurking beneath the jibes and jokes. While Beatrice, Rosalind (*As You Like It*), Portia (*The Merchant of Venice*) and Viola (*Twelfth Night*) are all known for their quick thinking and dazzling banter, all are unmarried women without the protection of living parents, who must rely on their wits and intelligence to navigate potentially treacherous waters.

While Leonato’s family loves Beatrice, her sharp wit clearly makes him uneasy. “By my troth, niece, thou wilt never get thee a husband if thou be so shrewd of thy tongue,” he warns.

So how do you solve a problem like Beatrice? Elizabethan social conventions, after all, expected women to be silent and meek. Thus, in *The Taming of the Shrew*, another feisty woman with a tongue for a weapon has to be taught “obedience” before that play can reach its purported happy ending.

In *Much Ado*, however, Beatrice’s transformation from avowed singleton to woman in love cannot happen until she meets her intellectual and emotional equal. Beatrice, that merry spirit whose name means “one who blesses,” needs her Benedick, a quipster whose name means “one who is blessed.”

But how do we know that Beatrice and Benedick are meant for each other? Simply put, by their speech. These urbane lovers woo with language, their skirmish with words converting to love sonnets and, ultimately, to silence. Although Benedick may hush Beatrice with a kiss at the end of *Much Ado*—“Peace, I will stop your mouth,” he says—we know that this irrepressible lady certainly won’t stay quiet for long.

—Lydia Garcia

Reprinted from OSF’s 2009 Illuminations, a 64-page guide to the season’s plays. For more information, or to buy the full Illuminations, [click here](#). Members at the Donor level and above and teachers who bring a school group to OSF receive a free copy of Illuminations.

