



Much Ado About Nothing "The Merry War of Wits"

From the moment they appear on stage, Beatrice and Benedick engage in verbal wordplay — both with one another and with others — that shows off their quick minds and quick tongues. Wordplay in *Much Ado About Nothing* takes many forms. Characters use sarcasm and repetition, insult one another, make jokes, play off each other's words with puns and intentional double meanings, and create lively metaphors and similes.

In the chart is a section from *Much Ado About Nothing* that has been annotated to explain Beatrice's witty speech. Read the scene and study the annotations to understand how Shakespeare employs wordplay.

Then create two charts in your notebook to annotate two more scenes: Beatrice and Benedick's meeting (No Fear: 1.1.93–114) and Claudio and Benedick discussing Hero (No Fear: 1.1.126–159). Annotate each scene to explain Shakespeare's wordplay. Note that some terms will be unfamiliar, but an understanding of every single line of text is not necessary to enjoy the overall humor.

Original Text (No Fear: 1.1.25–75)	Annotation
Beatrice I pray you, is Signor Mountanto returned from the wars or no?	Insult/sarcasm: Beatrice calls Benedick by a fencing term, <i>montanto</i> , to insult him with a foolish name. There is also implied sarcasm since she claims not to care about Benedick but is still asking about him.
Messenger I know none of that name, lady. There was none such in the army of any sort.	
Leonato What is he that you ask for, niece?	
Hero My cousin means Signor Benedick of Padua.	
Messenger O, he's returned; and as pleasant as ever he was.	

<p>Beatrice</p> <p>He set up his bills here in Messina and challenged Cupid at the flight, and my uncle's Fool, reading the challenge, subscribed for Cupid, and challenged him at the bird-bolt. I pray you, how many hath he killed and eaten in these wars? But how many hath he killed? For indeed I promised to eat all of his killing.</p> <p>Leonato</p> <p>Faith, niece, you tax Signor Benedick too much, but he'll be meet with you, I doubt it not.</p> <p>Messenger</p> <p>He hath done good service, lady, in these wars.</p> <p>Beatrice</p> <p>You had musty victual, and he hath help to eat it. He is a very valiant trencherman. He hath an excellent stomach.</p> <p>Messenger</p> <p>And a good soldier too, lady.</p> <p>Beatrice</p> <p>And a good soldier to a lady, but what is he to a lord?</p> <p>Messenger</p> <p>A lord to a lord, a man to a man, stuffed with all honorable virtues.</p> <p>Beatrice</p> <p>It is so indeed. He is no less than a stuffed man. But for the stuffing—well, we are all mortal.</p>	<p>Repetition: While Beatrice's story is obscure, she intentionally repeats the word to render Benedick ridiculous.</p> <p>Sarcasm/pun: Beatrice is being sarcastic when she calls Benedick valiant, or brave. She also calls him a trencherman, which is a hearty eater and a person who sponges off others.</p> <p>Double meaning: The Messenger means a good soldier <i>also</i>, but Beatrice pretends he means Benedick is a good soldier <i>compared to</i> a lady.</p> <p>Pun: The Messenger uses <i>stuffed</i> to mean "filled", but Beatrice changes the meaning into a stuffed man, or a dummy.</p>
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Leonato

You must not, sir, mistake my niece. There is a kind of merry war betwixt Signor Benedick and her. They never meet but there's a skirmish of wit between them.

Beatrice

Alas, he gets nothing by that. In our last conflict four of his five wits went halting off, and now is the whole man governed with one, so that if he have wit enough to keep himself warm, let him bear it for a difference between himself and his horse, for it is all the wealth that he hath left to be known a reasonable creature. Who is his companion now? He hath every month a new sworn brother.

Messenger

Is't possible?

Beatrice

Very easily possible. He wears his faith but as the fashion of his hat; it ever changes with the next block.

Messenger

I see, lady, the gentleman is not in your books.

Beatrice

No. An he were, I would burn my study. But, I pray you, who is his companion? Is there no young squarer now that will make a voyage with him to the devil?

Messenger

He is most in the company of the right noble Claudio.

Beatrice

O Lord, he will hang upon him like a disease! He is sooner caught than the pestilence, and the taker runs presently mad. God help the noble Claudio! If he have caught the Benedick, it will cost him a thousand pound ere he be cured.

Insult: Beatrice says that Benedick lacks his wits since she beat him in their last verbal sparring and now he is no smarter than his horse.

Double meaning: The Messenger uses *in your books* to mean "in your opinion" but Beatrice takes him literally to refer to the books in a library that she would destroy as a way of ridding herself of Benedick.

Simile: Beatrice likens Benedick to a disease that will infect Claudio and drive him insane.

<p>Messenger</p> <p>I will hold friends with you, lady.</p> <p>Beatrice</p> <p>Do, good friend.</p> <p>Leonato</p> <p>You will never run mad, niece.</p> <p>Beatrice</p> <p>No, not till a hot January.</p> <p>Messenger</p> <p>Don Pedro is approached.</p>	<p>Joke: Leonato means that Beatrice will never fall victim to Benedick's charms, and Beatrice agrees by making a joke out of a highly unlikely event.</p>
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RL.11-12.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

RL.11-12.6 Analyze a case in which grasping a point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

SL.11-12.3 Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis, and tone used.

W.11-12.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.