

Please Let This Be Much Ado about Nothing: 'Kill Claudio' and the Laughter of Release



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Abstract: This article centers on the oft-criticized and baffling laughter elicited by Beatrice's 'Kill Claudio' in Shakespeare's Much Ado about Nothing. Although many productions take pains to avoid this laughter response, the tensions built in the aborted wedding of Hero and Claudio require release. In his theory of relief, Freud posits that laughter is the means by which psychic tension is released. Laughter in the moments up to and including Beatrice's order does not carry the same emotional tension as that elicited by Dogberry's malapropisms, the early witty banter between Beatrice and Benedick, nor the farce or slapstick of other Shakespearean plays. Instead, the laughter in this moment is a byproduct of an audience's desire to expel the tension amassed at the scathing dismissal and fall of Hero, to return to the comic tone of earlier scenes, and most importantly to return to safety. Rather than avoiding this audience reaction, productions should recognize the laughter's role as a communal emotional response.

William Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing*, 1600 (Q), contains more than 22,000 words in its seventeen scenes, and, yet, its most controversial moment only rests upon two: Beatrice's 'Kill Claudio' (IV. 1. 287).¹ Beatrice's directive to Benedick

comes immediately after the ruin of Hero, in which Claudio breaks off their engagement, Hero 'falls to the ground,' and her own father tells her to 'not ope thine eyes' in hopes that she should die rather than live in shame (IV. 1. 122). Marjorie Garber calls these two words the play's 'palpable turning point';² yet, the play turns away from its comedic tone at the start of Act IV, not near its end. Its first three acts witness the rejoicing in welcoming soldiers from war, the romantic union of Hero and Claudio and their subsequent engagement, and the realization of old sparring partners — Beatrice and Benedick — that they are in love. Hence, it is a turning point when the comedy gives way to tragedy at the aborted nuptials. What, then, is 'palpable' or controversial in Beatrice's 'Kill Claudio'?

It is this line's effect on audiences in performance — often evidenced by laughter — that has inspired much debate. Many critics argue that no laughter should be prompted by Beatrice's command and that a production has failed in this moment if the audience does so. In his Introduction to the Arden edition of *Much Ado about Nothing*, A.R. Humphreys, perhaps the most zealous voice on this side of the argument, says the following about these two words in performance: 'It is a moment dangerously liable to explode the audience into laughter, perhaps because so unexpectedly sensational, so unlikely to turn out as she wishes, and so intense that Benedick's instinctive rejection chimes incongruously against it'.³ While Humphreys offers an explanation as to why an audience may laugh, one largely grounded in the laughter theory of incongruity,⁴ of particular note is Humphreys's use of the word 'dangerously.' The idea that laughter, and especially its affiliation with the loss of control, can be dangerous is one that can be found in early modern literary critics such as Sir Philip Sidney and Stephen Gosson.⁵ Humphreys is associating the laughter often elicited from Beatrice's 'Kill Claudio' with a loss of control, but it seems to me that his condemnation is not of the audience's lack of control but of the production's. The laughter here is dangerous, according to

Humphreys, because it demonstrates that the production mishandled this scene. In other words, laughter is an inappropriate response to these two words and should be avoided. And, it is clear that many agree with Humphreys's interpretation of this scene, as notable productions, ranging from the Palace Theatre's 1956 production featuring Peggy Ashcroft, to the Royal Shakespeare Company's 1976 production featuring Judi Dench, eschew the laughter that Humphrey warns against. Garber also expresses concern that laughter elicited here may undermine the sincerity of this key moment.⁶

Yet, some critics disagree. One such critic, Ralph Alan Cohen, Director of Mission and Co-Founder of the American Shakespeare Center (ASC) in Staunton, Virginia, argues not only that audiences will laugh during the second half of IV. 1, when Beatrice and Benedick are alone for the first time since discovering their love for one another, but that the largest laugh will come from Beatrice's 'Kill Claudio' (III. 4. 287).⁷ Cohen even instructs his audiences to listen for the laughter elicited by not only this scene, but Beatrice's line in particular: 'You watch. It will be there.' While Cohen admits that he used to take pains to avoid the laughter, he now allows for the laughter to occur: 'The play is much better, the themes make more sense, if the audience is allowed to laugh.'⁸

Both sides of this debate offer strong evidence, especially given that effective productions have taken divergent approaches to this scene. However, the answer to whether the scene should encourage laughter (read as Cohen's 'allow', as very little needs to be done to elicit laughter here) lies in the following three considerations: the genre and tone of the play; the textual clues within the latter half of Act IV, Scene 1; and the individual and communal emotional responses of the audience. In what follows, I will first examine this moment as one that is part of a comedy both in terms of genre and tone, and, as such, productions should not actively suppress a natural laughter response. Next, textual clues within the exchange between Beatrice

and Benedick will be analyzed. It is my contention that productions that avoid the laughter here engage in a 'rewriting' of the play; the text, in contrast, allows for the laughter. Lastly, I argue that Beatrice's 'Kill Claudio' taps into an innately human response — the desire to release. In his theory of relief, Sigmund Freud posits that laughter is the means by which psychic tension is released. The laughter in this moment is a byproduct of an audience's desire to expel the tension amassed at the scathing dismissal and fall of Hero, to return to the comic tone of earlier scenes, and most importantly to return to safety. Rather than avoiding this audience reaction, productions should recognize the laughter's role as a communal emotional response. While I will take pains here to avoid the claim that audiences *should* laugh in response to Beatrice's 'Kill Claudio,' I am arguing that the laughter elicited here is a natural response to the text and, therefore, is not only not dangerous, as Humphreys argues above, but cathartic.

Before embarking on this analysis, I want to address the 'individual and communal' aspects of audience reactions mentioned above. While I argue that the phenomenon of laughter is one grounded in human psychology, the truth is that laughing is not only a human experience⁹ — in that certain generalities can be made about its causes, functions, and impulses — but that it is also an individual one. Individuals in an audience will have diverse experiences, and audiences from night to night will react differently. The impulse to laugh is in many ways subjective and personal. Thus, it is necessary to me that the moment selected for this analysis in particular is one that not only has inspired much critical debate but that also has prompted laughter in me as an audience member. Yet, theatre audiences also act collectively as one. This communal nature was noted by early modern scholars as well. In his *Plays Confuted in Five Actions* (1582), Stephen Gosson recounts a moment of audience laughter. He notes that the audience takes up 'a wonderfull laughter, and shout altogether with one voice' (C8^v).¹⁰ Gosson claims that the audience reacted

as one, with one voice, in what Matthew Steggle identifies in his *Laughing and Weeping in Early Modern Theatres* as ‘one organism’.¹¹ Admittedly, this communal reaction, especially one of an early modern audience, is difficult to authenticate.

While I am wary of treating audience laughter as a ‘transhistorical constant,’ as Steggle writes, modern audiences of early modern plays can offer much insight into how and when an audience laughs. Andrew Gurr places the first performance of *Much Ado about Nothing* in 1598 and suggests it may have been performed at The Curtain Theatre.¹² Unfortunately, no early responses to the play, e.g. in journal or letter form, have survived. The 1600 Quarto title-page declares that the play has been ‘sundrie times publikely acted,’ and, therefore, it can be assumed that it was popular. That popularity can be further solidified in the characters of Beatrice and Benedick’s appearance in a poem dating 1640 comparing Jonson with Shakespeare,¹³ but the poem offers no insight into how these characters were interpreted at the time, nor how the early modern audience may have reacted to IV. 1 in particular. For practical purposes, then, for much of our understanding early modern drama’s ability to elicit laughter, we must turn to modern productions.

Further, Steggle claims that there is much evidence in support of laughter being comedy’s primary agenda. For example, his study of Prologues from early modern plays indicates that laughter is the desired outcome for a comedy.¹⁴ Prologues of the anonymous *Mucedorus* (1598) and *Wily Beguilde* (1606), along with that of Frances Beaumont and John Fletcher’s *The Woman Hater* (1647), indicate that comedy plays — and, at times, Comedy personified — desire to ‘make you laugh’ and ‘make your eies with laughter flow.’ While there are Shakespearean plays labeled as comedies that do not appear to have laughter as a primary aim (*Measure for Measure* perhaps being the obvious example) and no Shakespearean play contains a Prologue making claims about intent as those do above, *Much Ado about Nothing* is a comedy that not only meets the genre’s conventions¹⁵ but delights its audiences

with laughter. While I will not claim that Beatrice's 'Kill Claudio' must elicit laughter since the aims of comedy are to do so, I do argue that the play establishes a pattern of laughter-making. That pattern is one that encourages an audience not only to listen for jokes and laugh in response but also to desire a return to laughter when those jokes are disrupted. This desire to return to jokes, or what will be discussed as a return to safety below, is established in the jokes that occur prior to IV. 1. To uncover how those jokes work, I turn to the theory of relief as presented in Freud's *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*,¹⁶ as his theory will also be implemented in further analyses of the laughter found at Beatrice's 'Kill Claudio' below.

Before doing so, however, I wish to offer a few notes on the theories of laughter. First, I agree with Neil Schaeffer's claim that perhaps one thing laughter theorists can agree on is that identifying exactly what makes us laugh is an impossible task.¹⁷ While he argues in favor of the theory of incongruity, he notes that incongruity cannot be the sole prompt for laughter; otherwise, we would laugh at all incongruities. Instead, there is something intangible — just beyond the theorist's grasp — that makes us laugh. That being said, the theory of incongruity is one that grounds many of the theories of laughter, from Schaeffer to Henri Bergson to Freud, whose theory will be used here. Perhaps the oldest theory of laughter is Aristotle's, based on superiority and informing theorists from Hobbes to Bergson again. Noted Shakespearean scholar Northrop Frye argues in favor of comedy — and, in this instance, he means laughter — as a means to enforce social norms, a theory that also informs many carnival theorists and even one that was most assuredly studied by Shakespeare: Cicero. Yet, I use Freud in this analysis because I find it to be the one that explains not only the laughter elicited by the malapropisms of Dogberry and that of the gulling scenes but also that of the seemingly inexplicable laugh prompted by Beatrice's 'Kill Claudio.'

Freud begins with the factor of 'bafflement and light dawning'.¹⁸ The joke¹⁹ deceives or baffles for just a moment, and then laughter comes in the moment of dawning, or understanding, of the unspoken. His belief that the joke lies in the unspoken is perhaps best stated by a contemporary of Freud's, Theodor Lipps: 'The joke says what it says, not always in a few, but always in too few words, that is, in words which in strict logic or in the ordinary way of thinking and speaking are not sufficient to say it. It is ultimately able to say it outright, by not saying it at all'.²⁰ Hence, the joke's inherent 'too few words' will always lead to what Freud calls a 'bafflement,' but as the listener²¹ begins to understand what is actually being said, the 'light dawning' occurs. The tension brought on by the bafflement is then released through the laughter. Freud claims there are two types of jokes: the innocuous and the tendentious. The bulk of his analysis focuses on the three technical devices of the innocuous joke: word play, pleasure of recognition, and intellectual jokes.

Each of these types of jokes and 'jokes techniques,' as Freud calls them, can be found in *Much Ado about Nothing*. However, the clearest example Freud offers of the phenomenon prompting the 'psychical release'²² of laughter is word play, like that evident in the malapropism of Dogberry. His speech is rich with the type of word play that at first baffles and then allows for a light dawning. The bafflement caused by the mistaken use of a word for a similar sounding one causes what Freud calls a psychical expenditure in that it taxes the psyche. However, it is usually easily remedied by the listener and laughter is released.

A second technical device in jokes Freud identifies is that of unification, in which the familiar unifies the speaker and the listener of the joke, which allows for the pleasure of recognition.²³ He offers examples of rhyme, repetition, and alliteration, all of which produce delight in the listener as the familiar is exploited as a source of pleasure.²⁴ A lovely example of this technique occurs in the repetition of 'requited' and its variants. Upon hearing Claudio, Leonato, and Don Pedro's

conversation detailing Beatrice's love for him, Benedick swears that her love 'must be requited' (II. 3. 199). In the next scene, Beatrice promises to 'requite' Benedick, after hearing Ursula and Hero speak of his love for her. The parallel structure of these scenes and the lovers' terms ensures audience recognition. Delight and pleasure, if not outright laughter, arises from this familiarity. This type of joke may seem to be tangentially related to this analysis; however, I will return to the pleasure found in recognition below.

Lastly, the third type of joke technique is what Freud labels as 'intellectual jokes,' ones which include 'faulty logic, displacements, absurdity, representations by the opposite, etc.'²⁵ Note that the type of word play exhibited by Dogberry discussed above could also be an example of an intellectual joke in that it rests in a representation by the opposite and in absurdity. However, the best examples of absurdity may lie in the eavesdropping — or 'noting' — scenes in which Benedick and Beatrice are tricked into realizing their mutual love by Don Pedro, Leonato, and Claudio, and Hero and Ursula, respectively.

The above review of Freud's analysis of the innocuous joke, its three joke techniques, and their relation to the relief of psychological expenditure comprises approximately three-quarters of his notable text, and, yet, the most famous and oft-cited section on the tendentious joke comprises a relatively few pages. This discrepancy is perhaps due to its subject matter. After all, it answers the question of why we enjoy 'potty humor' and 'dirty jokes.' One such tendentious joke is imbedded in the punning of 'nothing' in this play's title, as the word 'nothing' not only denoted naught and would have been an audible pun for 'noting' or eavesdropping for early modern theatre-goers but also connoted female genitalia. The bafflement caused by the three conflicting meanings would be easily rectified by an early modern audience and the tension caused by the initial confusion would have been expelled through laughter. In addressing taboo topics, the jokes allow for

a release of built up tension; the jokes become the one socially acceptable means to relieve the 'effort spent on inhibition or suppression'.²⁶ In short, jokes, according to Freud, allow for a release of tension: the bafflement released after a light dawning; the unfamiliar released after the recognition of the familiar; or the inhibition released after the socially-acceptable addressing of a taboo.

These few examples do not represent an exhaustive list of the moments of laughter elicited in the first half of *Much Ado about Nothing*. However, what is interesting is that each type of joke as defined by Freud is present. Freud's work, obviously, comes much later than Shakespeare's text, and, therefore, is not a theory that would have influenced his writing — like, for example, Jourbert's or Cicero's theories of laughter may have. Yet, it is a theory that answers the question, 'What makes us laugh?' in a transhistorical context and elucidates the various types of humor found in this play. As seen above, *Much Ado about Nothing* is a work that conditions an audience to expect jokes structured as bafflement leading to release. While I do not claim that audiences laugh at Beatrice's 'Kill Claudio' solely because they have been conditioned to expect laughter — otherwise, every line in the play could be argued to be a joke — they have grown accustomed to experiencing laughter as the result of bafflement.

Yet, 'Kill Claudio' cannot be classified as word play or an intellectual joke; it also is not a sexually tendentious joke. However, I do claim that the laughter found in this line is grounded in the text. In other words, the two words and the lines directly preceding them contain elements of the joke structures discussed above and defined by Freud. To uncover some of those characteristics, a return to earlier scenes is required.

Prior to the aborted wedding in Act IV, Beatrice and Benedick share two private conversations: in Act II, Scene 1 at the masquerade and in Act II, Scene 3 directly after Benedick pledges to love Beatrice.²⁷ While their witty banter is evident

from the first scene of the play, these scenes condition the audience to expect laughter during their private moments. At the masquerade, only Benedick is masked, and Beatrice does not know his identity. She describes Benedick — to a masked Benedick — as 'the Prince's jester, a very dull fool ... For he both pleases men and angers them, and then they laugh at him, and beat him' (II. 1. 118–22). Here, she ridicules his intellect and status. What prompts laughter here is not the insults themselves. Instead, it is a layered emotional response grounded in the bafflement that comes from irony — she is insulting this man to his (masked) face and does not realize it. This irony continues with Benedick's response: 'When I know the gentleman, I'll tell him what you say' (II. 1. 124–5). The bafflement is two-fold here for it is grounded in the irony of the situation and the tendentious nature of her comments. Thus, the psychic expenditure, or tension, builds from both the taboo nature of her insults and the incongruous situation.

A similar dual-bafflement occurs in Act II, Scene 3. Here, Beatrice is tasked with informing Benedick that dinner is ready. Since he has just uncovered his love for her, and believes that she loves him, he looks for double meanings in her words where there are none. When Benedick thanks her for her 'pains' upon hearing that she came against her will, she says, 'I took no more pains for those thanks than you take pains to thank me' (II. 3. 220–1). The laughter here results from the repetition of and playing with 'pains' and 'thank'; however, there is also a level of absurdity here in the way the situation — a calling of someone to dinner — has been elevated to a discussion of 'pain.' When Benedick then twists her response into hearing that she takes 'pleasure' in giving the message, she responds: 'Yea, just so much as you may take upon a knife's point and choke a daw withal' (II. 3. 224–5). The excessively violent, tendentious response comparing choking a bird at knifepoint with calling someone to dinner causes bafflement on two levels: her response does not fit the occasion as the vitriol is incongruous with the activity and her words again drift into

the taboo. From these two scenes, the audience has learned a few things about the interactions between Benedick and Beatrice. Their words will be ripe with incongruity, they will often misunderstand or twist each other's words, and they — or, rather, Beatrice in particular — will use the language of the violently taboo. The audience has also learned that in this play, those elements construct a joke prompting laughter. This knowledge will be key upon entering into the latter half of Act IV, Scene 1.

The Shakespeare's Globe 2011 production of *Much Ado about Nothing* best illustrates how laughter can occur in this scene.²⁸ The heralded production is available in DVD format, capturing not only the staging practices of the early modern theatre (as best we know of them), but also the audience reactions. Directed by Jeremy Herrin, it features Eve Best as Beatrice and Charles Edward as Benedick. After all other characters have exited from the aborted wedding, Benedick asks Beatrice, 'Lady Beatrice, have you wept all this while?' (IV. 1. 255). Loud, boisterous laughs are elicited not only in response to Benedick's question but also at her response: 'Yea, and I will weep a while longer' (IV. 1. 256). The laughter here is prompted by the incongruity of the question, for the other players have just left the stage, a time not long enough to warrant the 'all this while.' This is an incongruity that the audience has grown to expect from their exchanges. Interestingly, the two most prominent films of *Much Ado about Nothing*, Kenneth Branagh's 1993²⁹ and Joss Whedon's 2012³⁰ adaptations, both re-write this scene to remove the incongruity and avoid the laughter. In both, the scene is edited so that Benedick and Beatrice's conversation takes place in separate location from the aborted wedding — in the chapel in Branagh's and in the house in Whedon's. When Edward's Benedick indicates that he does not desire for her to cry any longer, Beatrice replies, 'You have no reason, I do it freely' (IV. 1. 258). Her response indicates that she hears 'desire' as 'command' or 'dictate,' and again, the audience of the Shakespeare's Globe laughs,

responding to her purposeful misunderstanding of his words. Best speaks these lines with resignation and slight embarrassment at showing her emotion in such an extroverted manner, but even with her reading, the explanation of the humor is weak. The bafflement created here is minimal, but it is reminiscent just enough of their earlier banter to prompt the audience to laugh.

This type of laughter continues with two lines that again recall the couple's earlier barbs. Beatrice says, 'It is a man's office, but not yours' with Benedick answering, 'I do love nothing in the world so well as you. Is not that strange?' (IV. 1. 265–7). As Best emphasizes 'but not yours,' the audience is allowed to interpret the line as an implication of Benedick's failings as a man, a similar barb to the one naming him a Prince's jester in II. 1. While the line is heavy with other implications, Best's reading permits a laugh. Edward emphasizes the question, 'Is not that strange?' The emphasis allows the audience to hear the two lines as an incongruity, one that becomes a small barb aimed at Beatrice. In essence, he is asking, isn't it strange that *she* is the thing he loves most, the thing that is the most exasperating to him. Both Beatrice's and Benedick's lines can be read without comedic effect as evidenced in Branagh's and Whedon's adaptations; the interesting note here is that neither actor in the Globe production does much to make them humorous. Instead, the actors need only allow for the possibility of humor for the audience to laugh. This lack suggests that the laughter, if allowed, naturally comes from these words. I argue that the audience not only hears these lines as reminiscent of earlier exchanges between the two characters — being able to identify the patterns of play in their jokes — but that they also take pleasure in recognizing the familiar. The first half of Act IV, Scene 1, which will be discussed in detail below, is jarring and unfamiliar. The audience's recognition of this familiar banter and joke structure allows them to laugh much more heartily than if these lines were in isolation. Thus, while the

bafflement caused by each line individually is minimal, its existence grants the audience permission to laugh.³¹

It is the recognition of their verbal sparring pattern that causes the greatest laugh from Best's 'Kill Claudio' (IV. 1. 287), and it is the momentum of laughter created thus far that ensures the audience gesture of laughter, rather than a gasp, once she reads this critical line. She does not allow for a pause; instead, it continues the quick banter in which they have always engaged, and are engaging in presently. She speaks quickly, in an urgent tone, and the audience responds with laughter. The violence within these two words is shocking, but in this context it becomes the same type of shock and bafflement as prompted by her earlier violent rhetoric. The audience has come to expect the taboo from Beatrice — in decorum and appropriateness, but especially in words of violence. Thus, the audience laughs at this tendentious line, hearing it as a joke.

What becomes especially important in this reading is Benedick's response: 'Ha! Not for the wide world' (IV. 1. 288). As Jeremy Lopez notes in his *Theatrical Convention and Audience Response*, the writing out of 'ha' in early modern plays is a rarity.³² For an era often associated with mirth, laughing on stage — and explicitly written in text — was not common. Lopez uncovers two contradictory intentions of the written 'ha': this staged laughter either underscores the 'inappropriateness of laughter,' such as that evidenced by Titus Andronicus upon receiving the heads of his sons, or invites 'complicity' from the audience in laughter.³³ Thus, while Benedick's 'Ha!' could support Humphreys's claim that laughter here is dangerous and inappropriate, it may also support Cohen's belief that the laughter should be encouraged and Benedick's reaction merely mirrors the audience's own response. To solve this disparity, Lopez's final note regarding the writing out of 'ha' is most beneficial: the writing out of laughter indicates when the laughter should begin and when it should stop.³⁴ The short burst of laughter embodied in Benedick's 'Ha!'

indicates that laughter from the audience is expected. He finds her violent request to be similar to Beatrice's earlier violent jokes just as the audience does. However, the release is short lived. The realization that she is not joking comes quickly, for both Benedick and the audience.

Interestingly, all three productions discussed in this analysis avoid this textual clue. The Shakespeare's Globe production's Edward and Whedon's Alexis Denisof both omit the sound entirely, while Branagh rewrites the sound to one of realization, the 'ah.' While the omission of the 'Ha!' does not prevent the laughter of the audience, as evidenced by the great roar of laughter at Beatrice's 'Kill Claudio' in the Globe production, it does seem to take rewriting to avoid the laughter all together. Both Branagh's and Whedon's film adaptations take multiple steps to avoid the laughter here: the change in setting to avoid the laughter stemming from IV. 1. 255; the removal of Benedick's 'Ha!' at IV. 1. 288; and the insertion of a kiss just before Benedick asks of Beatrice, 'Come, bid me do anything for thee' (IV. 1. 286), a move that makes the scene more intimate and romantic — two tones not conducive to laughter. It is my contention that the scene must be rewritten in these ways to avoid the laughter elicited from Beatrice's 'Kill Claudio.' The textual clues within the play encourage laughter in this moment and discourage the suppression of this natural audience response.

However, the most compelling support of this laughter is one that identifies it as a release of the psychic tension built on a grand scale in Act IV rather than one stemming from a moment of incongruity or bafflement. It is this overriding, communal tension that is released upon her command. Most work in relief theory has mirrored Freud's findings but applied them to new situations. One theorist grounded in Freud's work, however, has expanded upon the original hypotheses and his claims are especially pertinent here. Norman Holland, a Freudian analyst of literature, adds a key hypothesis in explaining the relief impulse: 'Perhaps laughter

is a social signal to other members of the group that they can relax with safety'.³⁵ This kind of laughter signifies a return to safety and often occurs as a groundswell, with the laughter being contagious or with the laughers acting as one, much as Gosson observed above. What is key is that this laughter occurs after a communally experienced moment of danger; safety has been threatened and laughter signifies the end of that threat. And, it is the theory of relief that best explains the laughter that comes so easily for most audiences after witnessing Hero's devastation, a theory that perhaps can best be summed up with Figaro's famous line from Pierre Beaumarchais's *The Barber of Seville*: 'I laugh, so that I may not cry.' Here, in application to the reactions of an entire audience, however, the line should probably be re-stated as 'we laugh, so that we may not cry.' An audience that communally has experienced a trauma — the devastation of Hero — needs to expel that psychic tension and will do so with laughter if allowed.

IV. 1 and the emotions prompted by it are only understood in the context of the play in its entirety. Up until the start of Act IV, *Much Ado about Nothing* follows the conventions of not only a comedy, but a funny one at that. The witty banter between Benedick and Beatrice and the malapropisms of Dogberry the Constable allow for much laughter, while the plot involving two couples falling in love and joined in union at the play's closing all adhere to the audience's expectations. While the trick played by Don John and the malevolence behind it could cause alarm in an audience, they largely do not, for the audience expects some type of complication to arise. This expectation is grounded in the audience's understanding that it is enjoying a comedy; there is a feeling that, as Cohen states, 'everything will be alright.'³⁶

The opening lines of IV. 1 allow for the audience to hold onto that feeling. The audience may feel some uneasiness when the Friar asks of Claudio, 'You come hither, my lord, to marry this lady?' and Claudio responds with a 'no' (IV. 1 .4–6).

However, that uneasiness abates when Leonato corrects the Friar: 'To be married to her. Friar, you come to marry *her*' [emphasis added] (IV. 1. 7). This line allows for the audience to believe Claudio's 'no' was merely an over-attentiveness to clarity, and the relief offered in Leonato's line allows for a boisterous laugh, heard notably in the Shakespeare's Globe 2011 production. However, once Claudio begins his verbal assault on Hero, accusing her of knowing 'the heat of a luxurious bed' and of engaging in 'savage sensuality' (IV. 1. 39, 59), it is clear that this scene is darker than the expected complication to love found in most comedies. This section is allowed only one other true opportunity for laughter, evidenced again in the Shakespeare's Globe 2011 production. After many ugly words have already been spoken, Benedick says, 'This looks not like a nuptial' (IV. 1. 66). If the player chooses to use a tone of exasperation rather than solemnity, a large laugh can be elicited here, but it is the last one for nearly two hundred lines. While the Globe production does capitalize upon these two moments available for laughter, it is worth noting that the remainder of the scene is gut-wrenching. It is perhaps due to the unadorned set, or the intimacy of a staged performance, that the tragedy of this section is felt more here than in Branagh's or Whedon's adaptations. The audience (visible due to universal lighting) is incredibly quiet.

The tension from this scene stems from multiple forces: the violence of Claudio's words, the rejection of an innocent by both her fiancé and her father, the impotence from not being able to right this wrong. From the audience's perspective, there is also a bafflement at witnessing such a distressing scene within a play that had implicitly promised that 'everything would be alright'; what it wants more than anything is to return to the familiar, to return to the comic. If the production allows for it, the audience will embrace the comedy and release laughter in relief beginning at Benedick's 'Lady Beatrice, have you wept all this while?' They will collectively signal that a return to safety, as Holland argues, is here. That collective laughter of

release will be heard most loudly at Beatrice's 'Kill Claudio' for it is here that the audience needs to signal most that this play is still a comedy.

Is it 'surprised laughter,' as Alison Findlay suggests in her guide to the text and performance?³⁷ Is it 'sensational,' or 'dangerous,' as Humphreys suggests? Or, does it stem from a desire for the play to return to the comic, as Cohen suggests? To be clear, there is something surprising and sensational about the cold, direct request, but the scene does prepare the audience that a moment like this is coming, even if it is a moment that Beatrice has not quite admitted to herself. Beatrice demonstrates her unease in making the request before she issues the order, evidenced by her asking of forgiveness and using the word 'protest' to proclaim her love of Benedick (IV. 1. 279–82). Thus, while the bluntness of the line can cause shock, an attentive audience should already realize that something is coming. Additionally, the request cannot be as ridiculous as Humphreys portrays it, for Benedick agrees to do her bidding by the end of the scene. Further, while Cohen's hypothesis that the audience wants to return to the comedy it enjoyed earlier explains the laughter in the previous lines, it does not quite explain the boisterousness that accompanies this one.

Instead, the moment cannot be explained by just one cause. The audience is 'surprised,' it does hear the request as 'sensational,' and it does want the play to return to its comedic roots. The laughter is a means to expel tension, even if the tensions are derived from many forces. What makes this line remarkable is that it capitalizes on all three tensions at once, allowing for the great response of laughter that is often elicited. After experiencing the communal trauma of the aborted wedding scene, the audience is signaling to each other that they can relax in safety; I would argue further that the laughter signals to the production the desire to remain in safety. While consciously an audience understands that its gestures will not alter the course of a production, psychically the laughter signals its collective wish for Beatrice's request to be a joke — a desire to return to the safety of the comic. It is

worth noting, however, that even in the Shakespeare's Globe production silence befell the audience once again upon her next line: 'You kill me to deny it. Farewell' (IV. 1. 289). This line confirms that the audience's desire will be postponed for at least the time being. The loss of sincerity, as Garber fears above, does not occur; the scene does not devolve. It remains a rich and layered scene infused with a multitude emotions. The audience has been not only permitted, but prompted to experience an intrinsically human communal reaction, and the scene is all the more effective for it. The tension released here allows for Benedick's resolve to kill Claudio to be all the more impactful. It is not just one more moment of tension; this moment signaling character development is now singular.

Before closing, it is worth acknowledging how strong the impulse to release in a scene such as this one is. As the Shakespeare's Globe production brings this scene to a close, two moments are worth noting. The first occurs during Beatrice's speech ending with the following: 'O God that I were a man! I would eat his heart/ in the market place' (IV. 1. 303-4). Best does not even complete these lines before a loud roar of applause emerges from the audience. I believe this reaction to have the same impetus as the laughter witnessed above, but the audience is no longer being offered lines of possible incongruity or surprise. In other words, it is not being permitted to laugh; hence, the tension still contained within the audience is released not in laughter but in applause. The second occurs at the start of IV. 2 with the entrance of Dogberry. Before Paul Hunter's Dogberry utters even one line, the audience laughs. The recognition of the familiar is strong in this moment; the audience aligns the Dogberry character with laughter and will laugh upon his mere entrance in order to further expel pent up tension. This is an example of an audience in desperate need of returning to the familiarity of the comic, and they again release that tension of repression at the first moment the production allows, begging for this all to be much ado about nothing.

Notes

¹ William Shakespeare, *Much Ado about Nothing*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt and others, 2nd ed (New York: Norton, 2008), pp. 1416–70.

² Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare after All* (New York: Anchor, 2005), p. 373.

³ A.R. Humphreys, 'Introduction', in *Much Ado about Nothing: The Arden Shakespeare*, ed. by A.R. Humphreys (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 48.

⁴ For discussions of the theory of incongruity see the following: Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. by Cloudesely Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan, 1914; repr. Rockville, MD: Arc Manor, 2008); Paul Lewis, *Comic Effects: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Humor in Literature* (Albany: State University of New York, 1989); and Neil Schaeffer, *The Art of Laughter* (New York: Columbia University, 1981). Sigmund Freud's theory of release, used in this analysis, is also grounded in incongruity.

⁵ It is important to note here that neither Sidney's nor Gosson's expressions of fear regarding laughter's loss of control imply an anti-laughter stance. While others of the period, such as Philip Stubbes, often express fear of laughter in condemnations of mirth as a whole, Sidney and Gosson underscore anxieties about particular types of laughter, such as Gosson's discussion of the 'meaner sorte' of laughter and Sidney's laughter that 'commeth...not of delight.' See the following: Stephen Gosson, *Plays Confuted in Five Actions* (1582), in *Shakespeare's Theater: A Sourcebook*, ed. by Tanya Pollard (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 84–114; Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apologie for Poetrie* (1583), in *English Literary Criticism: The Renaissance*, ed. by O.B. Hardison, Jr. (New York: Meredith, 1963), pp. 99–146; and Philip Stubbes, *An Anatomie of Abuses* (1583), ed. by F.V. Furnival (London: Trubner, 1877–1882).

⁶ Garber, p. 373.

⁷ Ralph Alan Cohen, 'Dr. Ralph Presents: *Much Ado about Nothing*', in *American Shakespeare Center Podcast Central* <<http://americanshakespearecenter.blogspot.com/2012/03/dr-ralph-presents-much-ado-about.html>> [accessed 28 March 2012].

⁸ Ralph Alan Cohen, personal interview, 19 June 2012.

⁹ Aristotle claims that 'no animal but man ever laughs' in his *On the Parts of Animals* (III.10). More than 2,000 years later, Bergson echoes the same sentiment that laughter 'is strictly human' (p. 10). Many laughter theorists do, however, note that primates imitate laughter. See Aristotle, *On the Parts of Animals*, trans. by William Ogle (Oxford, Oxford University, 1912).

¹⁰ Gosson, pp. 84–114.

¹¹ Matthew Steggle, *Laughing and Weeping in Early Modern Theatres* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), p. 64.

¹² Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage 1574–1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 168.

¹³ Humphreys, p. 33.

¹⁴ Steggle, pp. 59–63.

¹⁵ As this is not a paper that discusses genre directly, I will not devote space here to discussing how *Much Ado about Nothing* meets the conventions of the genre of comedy as defined in the early modern era. For full discussions of genre, see the following: Northrop Frye, 'The Argument of Comedy'

(1948), in *Theories of Comedy*, ed. by Paul Lauter (Garden City: Anchor, 1964), pp. 450–60; Leo Salinger, *Shakespeare and the Traditions of Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1976); and *Acting Funny: Comic Theory and Practice in Shakespeare's Plays*, ed. by Frances Teague (Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh University, 1994).

¹⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. by Joyce Crick (New York: Penguin, 2002).

¹⁷ Schaeffer, p. 1.

¹⁸ Freud, p. 4.

¹⁹ The term 'joke' is used broadly here. While much of the scholarly work uncovering the impulse of laughter and unpacking how exactly that impulse is prompted use traditional joke structure as examples (i.e. a verbal anecdote or exchange that has a set-up and punch line), the term 'joke' is often used as a synonym for moments with the intended purpose of eliciting laughter.

²⁰ Quoted in Freud, p. 5. This phenomenon also perhaps explains why the explanation of a joke diffuses the humor. As many critics of humor studies have noted, nothing 'kills' a joke faster than attempting to unpack exactly why it is 'funny.'

²¹ It should be noted that most of Freud's examples are verbal jokes.

²² Freud, p. 138.

²³ Freud, pp. 116–17.

²⁴ Freud, p. 117.

²⁵ Freud, p. 119.

²⁶ Freud, p. 115.

²⁷ It is true that the conversation at the masquerade is not strictly in private; however, the structure of the scene indicates that Beatrice and Benedick can only hear each other. The second scene is remarkable as only Benedick recognizes the love he has for Beatrice; the staged eavesdropping scene which forces her to realize the love she has for Benedick comes directly afterwards. Hence, in both examples, Benedick knows something that Beatrice does not: their mutual identities in the first and their mutual love in the second.

²⁸ *Much Ado about Nothing*, Shakespeare's Globe, London, 2011, dir. by Jeremy Herrin' (Kultur, 2013).

²⁹ *Much Ado about Nothing*, dir. by Kenneth Branagh (MGM, 1993).

³⁰ *Much Ado about Nothing*, dir. by Joss Whedon (Lionsgate, 2012).

³¹ One might question if an audience is conditioned to laugh in the way that I argue here. Dennis Kennedy's discussion of the *chatouilleurs*, members of the audience planted to laugh at specific moments and, hence, inspire others in the audience to laugh as well, speaks to this issue. The *chatouilleurs* work under the assumption that audience reactions can be triggered. I argue that audiences can be triggered to laugh through a conditioning process as well. If laughter is often elicited through word play, for example, audiences will be conditioned to listen more closely for those types of jokes. Dennis Kennedy, *The Spectator and the Spectacle: Audiences in Modernity and Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2009), pp. 17–18.

³² Jeremy Lopez, *Theatrical Convention and Audience Response in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 174.

³³ Lopez, pp. 174–75.

³⁴ Lopez, p. 175.

³⁵ Norman Holland, *Laughing: A Psychology of Humor* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 43.

³⁶ Cohen, 'Dr. Ralph Presents: *Much Ado about Nothing*.'

³⁷ Alison Findlay, *The Shakespeare Handbooks: Much Ado about Nothing* (London: Palgrave, 2011), p. 57.

