

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

A PLAY IN ONE ACT ADAPTED BY
John Minigan

FROM THE ORIGINAL BY
William Shakespeare



CLASSROOM STUDY GUIDE

Introduction

This one-act annotated version of Shakespeare's comedy brims with wordplay, romance, and deceit.

Playwright Bio

John was a 2019–2020 Massachusetts Cultural Council Artist Fellow in Dramatic Writing.

He has had new plays commissioned by Gloucester Stage Company, The Lyric Stage Company of Boston, and Hey Jonté Productions.

His plays have been presented in New York by Circle Rep, Urban Stages, Hey Jonté, Core Artist Ensemble, Greenhouse Ensemble, Playground Ensemble, ANDTheatre, Shelter West, and others, and around the US and UK by Barrington Stage Company, Greater Boston Stage Company, Centastage, Dean Productions, Good Company, YASPLZ, and more. He has had new plays developed and workshopped at Gloucester Stage Company, Portland Stage Company, the Utah Shakespearean Festival, Great Plains Theatre Conference, New Repertory Theatre, Actors' Repertory Theatre of Vermont, Dayton Playhouse, The Landing Theatre, Theatre Resources Unlimited, and the Orlando Shakespeare Theater, selected four times for the Samuel French Off-Off-Broadway Festival, TRU (NYC), Orange Tea Theatre (Amsterdam), The Lanford Wilson Festival, SoBe Arts, IMPACT 15 International Theatre Festival, BARE Essentials and Best of BARE Essentials (London), the Boston Theater Marathon, Short + Sweet (Dubai, Los Angeles, Sydney, Delhi, and Queensland), the Snowdance Comedy Festival, Seoul Players (South Korea), Boston Play Café, and the Theatre Nerd podcast.

He is the winner of the 2022 Judith Royer Award for Excellence in Playwriting from The Kennedy Center/Association for Theatre in Higher Education, the 2022 Louise Wigglesworth Excellence in Playwriting Award from The Lab Theater of Florida, a 2020 winner of the New American Voices Festival, a 2019 Clauder Competition Gold Prize winner, a finalist for the 2018 O'Neill National Playwrights Conference, a finalist for the 2014 Heideman Award from the Actors Theatre of Louisville, and a nominee for the Elliot Norton Award for Outstanding New Script produced in Boston in 2015, 2019, and 2023.

His short plays have won the KNOCK International Short Play Competition, the 8-Minute Madness Festival in New York City, the Rover Dramawerks Competition, the Longwood 0–60 Contest, and been selected for City Theatre Miami’s Summer Shorts and Little Fish Pick-of-the-Vine. He was also a winner of the 2014 Nantucket One-Act Play Contest, the 2015 Nor’Eastern Playwrights Contest, the 2015 Seoul Players’ Short Play Festival, and the Firehouse Center for the Arts New Works Festival in 2011, 2013, 2015, 2017, and 2020.

John’s work is published by *Theatrefolk*, *Applause* (*Best American Short Plays 2015–2016*, *Go Out and Play*), *Smith & Kraus* (*Best 10-Minute Plays of 2016*, *Best 10-Minute Plays of 2021*, *Five-Minute Plays for Performance and Study*, *Best Men’s and Best Women’s Monologues 2022*, *Best Women’s Monologues 2019*), *YouthPLAYS*, and university presses. The Asylum Giant film *Noir-Man*, based on his play *The Maltese Walter*, is currently on the film festival circuit.

Two plays John devised with high school students were overall winners of the 110+ school Massachusetts Educational Theater Guild Festival.

John lives in the Boston area with his wife, the dance scholar/teacher/dancer/choreographer Lynn E. Frederiksen. He is currently affiliate faculty at Emerson College and has taught at Shakespeare & Company, the Huntington Theatre Company, and The Hanover Theatre Conservatory.

He serves as the Dramatists Guild Ambassador for the Boston Region.

Synopsis

Beatrice and Benedick start off as enemies. They challenge each other’s wit and swear to never get married. Claudio falls in love with Hero, Leonato’s daughter, and wants to marry her. Don Pedro decides that he wants to get Beatrice and Benedick to fall in love with one another as well. At the same time, Don Pedro’s brother Don Juan wants to foil Claudio and Hero’s wedding. Mischief occurs and plans go into place that involve deceit, love, and trickery. Who ends up having a wedding in the end? Will Don Juan get away with his scheme or will he be caught? Paths cross as characters begin to swindle each other but all leads to a happy ending in this Shakespearean comedy.

Characters

DON PEDRO [M]: A Prince from Aragon. Benedick and Claudio's commanding officer.

DON JOHN [M]: Don Pedro's bastard brother.

BENEDICK [M]: A soldier. In a relationship with Beatrice.

CLAUDIO [M]: A soldier. In a relationship with Hero.

FRIAR FRANCIS [M]

BEATRICE [W]: Leonato/Leonata's niece. In a relationship with Benedick.

HERO [W]: Leonato/Leonata's daughter. In a relationship with Claudio.

MARGARET [W]: Gentlewoman to Hero.

URSULA [W]: Gentlewoman to Hero.

LEONATO/LEONATA: Governor of Messina. Hero's father/mother and Beatrice's uncle/aunt.

BORACHIO/BORACHIA: Follower of Don Juan.

CONRADE/CONSTANZA: Follower of Don Juan.

DOGBERRY: A constable.

VERGES: A police recruit.

MESSENGER

SEXTON

Themes

Betrayal, Friendship, Love, Relationships, Misunderstanding

Pre-Read Questions

- ★ What prior knowledge do you have of *Much Ado About Nothing*?
- ★ How have you seen the enemies to lovers trope reflected in modern media? Name examples.
- ★ What do you expect to happen in a comedy?
- ★ What is an adaptation? Name an example of an adaptation you know.
- ★ What is iambic pentameter?

Pre-Read Activities

Research Project: Author

- ★ Divide students into groups and give them a limited amount of time to research the author of *Much Ado About Nothing*, William Shakespeare.
 - » Who was William Shakespeare?
 - » What is his background?
 - » How many plays did he write? Did he write anything else aside from plays?
 - » What inspired his plays?
 - » Was he a “successful” writer?
 - » Was there any criticism of his writings?
- ★ Decide how students will share their knowledge. Will they create a scene based on what they’ve learned? An oral presentation with a visual component? A quiz?

Adaptation Exercise

- ★ Divide students into groups. Give each group a short nursery rhyme as their source material. The point is for students to work quickly.

- ★ Discuss the definition of adaptation, and adaptations of fairy tales that students may know.
 - » Adaptation definition: to make something suitable for a new purpose, to modify, to alter
- ★ The goal of the exercise is for students to adapt the nursery rhyme into a scene. They don't have to use the words of the rhyme, but the scene must be connected to it. Remind students that they are making something suitable for a new purpose. That means the scene must have characters and a conflict, and take place in a specific location.
 - » What characters can be derived from the nursery rhyme?
 - » What location can the scene take place in, as indicated by the nursery rhyme?
 - » What conflict can be derived from the fairy tale?
- ★ The scene should be less than one minute. Give groups time to discuss, create, rehearse, and present.
- ★ Afterward, discuss the process. What were the challenges? How did they modify and alter for a new purpose?

Word Association

- ★ This is a group warm-up activity that allows students to get Shakespeare's words in their body before analyzing the text. How does the word feel? What does the student's instinct/gut say about a particular word? How does the word transform the text being said?
- ★ Have students walk around the space and tell them you are going to call out words. All of the words you call out can be found in Shakespeare's texts.
- ★ When you call out a word, students must jump into a position/pose that they feel represents that word. Tell the students not to overthink it and to go with the first thing that pops into their mind. There is no right or wrong. Tell students to allow themselves to be transformed through the text.

★ Below is a list of potential words you can use that have several meanings in Shakespeare's texts. Feel free to add words as you see fit. You can also repeat words to see how students' interpretations of the word changes the second time they hear it.

» Rose

» Fair

» Nature

» Dignity

» Devil

» Monster

» Love

» Proper

» Cupid

» Prince

» Darkness

Shakespearean Language

★ Provide students with a list of words or phrases that appear in *Much Ado About Nothing* that are in Shakespearean English.

» 'Tis

» Morrow

» Wherefore

» Protest

» Thou

- » Note
- » Thy
- ★ Tell students to infer what these words and phrases might mean. They can use prior knowledge to come up with their inferences.
- ★ Once students make their inferences provide them with examples of lines that use these words. Take turns picking students to read the lines aloud with the class.
- ★ After reading the lines, have students reflect on their original inferences and discuss what they now think the words mean.
- ★ Ask students if they can think of any other Shakespearean words not mentioned previously. Discuss Shakespeare's language choices and why they are important to understand.
- ★ You can also ask students how they would choose to turn this language into modern English. How would they explain what Shakespeare is trying to say?

Setting Research

- ★ *Much Ado About Nothing* takes place in Messina, Sicily, which is a real place in Italy. Divide students into groups and give them a limited amount of time to research Messina.
 - » What is the population of Messina?
 - » What is the ecosystem of Messina like?
 - » What is an average day of living in Messina like?
 - » What is Messina known for?
 - » Are there any popular destinations in Messina? Tourist attractions?
 - » Where did the city get its name?
 - » Why do you think Shakespeare chose Messina as the place for *Much Ado About Nothing* to occur in?

- ★ Decide how students will share their knowledge. Will they create a scene based on what they've learned? An oral presentation with a visual component? A quiz?

Shakespearean Character Types

- ★ Tell students to begin walking around the room as themselves. They can interact with one another, make eye contact, etc. They should walk neutrally.
- ★ Tell students that as they walk you will call out different Shakespearean character types (e.g., the Fool) and students will begin to walk around the way they think that character type would. Examples of character types/tropes are below:
 - » The Fool
 - » Starcrossed Lovers
 - » The Nobles
 - » The Fantastical (e.g., Witches, Spirits)
 - » The servants
 - » The soldiers
- ★ Tell students to start by walking around and when you say so they can begin to interact with one another.
- ★ After students have explored different characters, tell them to pick their favorite and begin to walk around the room as such.
- ★ Ask students to observe how their character interacts with other types of characters. What is their character's status? How does their character feel about the other types in the room? How does their character greet others?
- ★ Once the activity is complete, discuss:
 - » Which character type was your favorite? Why?
 - » Was it easy or difficult to step into different character types? Which was the easiest? Which was the most challenging? Why?

- » What discoveries did you make as you explored different character types?

Exploring Iambic Pentameter

- ★ With students discuss the meaning of iambic pentameter. No Sweat Shakespeare defines it as “a line of writing that consists of ten syllables in a specific pattern of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, or a short syllable followed by a long syllable.”
- ★ Put students into groups of four and give them a list of lines with iambic pentameter and without. Tell them they are going to work together to identify which of the lines have iambic pentameter. Examples of lines are provided below:
 - » “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day” - Sonnet 18
 - » “To be, or not to be, that is the question” - Hamlet
 - » “If music be the food of love, play on” - Twelfth Night
 - » “But, soft! What light through yonder window breaks?” - Romeo and Juliet
- ★ Remind students that they can tap out the beat/rhythm or clap it out if they are unsure of a line.
- ★ Once students complete this activity, tell them to research their own iambic pentameter line. This can be one that isn’t listed, one that isn’t Shakespeare, or one they create on their own.
- ★ Once everyone has their own line of iambic pentameter tell each group they are going to present it. Encourage students to have fun with their line. They can do a dramatic reading, make it into a song/rap, dance it out, etc.
- ★ After everyone has presented discuss:
 - » Was it difficult to grasp iambic pentameter? Why or why not?
 - » Are you surprised that iambic pentameter can be used outside of Shakespeare and poetry (e.g., in modern day songs)?

- » What challenges did you face when identifying iambic pentameter? How did you overcome them?
- » Why is iambic pentameter important when it comes to Shakespeare? Why do you need to understand it?

Close Reading Analysis Questions

Close reading is an analysis tool. Students read a text multiple times for in-depth comprehension, striving to understand not only **what** is being said but **how** it's being said and **why**. Close reading takes a student from story and character to drawing conclusions on author intention. Close reading prompts students to flex their thinking skills by:

- ★ Teaching students to engage with a text.
- ★ Teaching students to be selective. We can't highlight everything in the text, only the most important elements.
- ★ Teaching students to make educated decisions. All conclusions and opinions must be backed up with a text example.

Have students analyze *Much Ado About Nothing*, individually or in groups, using the following text-dependent questions:

Read One: What is happening?

1. What is Leonato's feeling about the letter?
2. Who is Signior Mountanto?
3. Describe Benedick and Beatrice's relationship.
4. What is the cause of bitterness between Don Juan and Don Pedro?
5. What is Don Pedro's plan to get Benedick to fall in love with Beatrice?
6. What does the name Borachio mean?
7. How does Beatrice feel about having a husband?

8. Who says “I am not of many words”? Is this proven true or false?
9. What is Benedick and Beatrice’s past? How does she describe it?
10. How does Beatrice feel about Hero’s engagement?
11. How is Borachio planning to intervene in Hero’s love life?
12. What shifts in Benedick? How does he treat Beatrice after Don Pedro’s plan is in effect?
13. How do Hero and Ursula trick Beatrice?
14. What is the great coil Dogberry referring to on pg.14?
15. What is Dogberry trying to tell Leonato?
16. Why does Claudio object at the wedding?
17. Why does Hero faint?
18. What does Beatrice ask Benedick to do?
19. What are the charges against Borachio and Conrade?
20. Why does Beatrice refuse to kiss Benedick?
21. Who gets married at the end of the play? Based on this, who, in the end, has the power in the romantic relationships? The men or the women?

Read Two: How is it happening?

1. How would you describe the language the playwright is writing in? Why do you think he made this decision rather than modernizing the text?
2. How does the playwright use personification throughout the text? Cite an example from the text to support your answer.
3. How does the playwright use Don Pedro as a foreshadowing tool?
4. What does it mean when the playwright changes from prose to verse? Cite an example from the text to support your answer.

5. What does it mean when the playwright changes from you to thou/thee? Cite an example from the text to support your answer.
6. What is a double entendre? How does the playwright use this technique throughout the text? Cite an example from the text to support your answer.
7. What is the playwright saying when he writes “What fire in mine ears”? What literary technique is he using? Is there really fire in Beatrice’s ears?
8. How does the tone and mood shift when Claudio makes his accusation?
9. How do the stakes rise throughout the play? At what point would you say the stakes are the highest? Why?
10. Do you believe there is a villain in this play? Why or why not?
11. Identify a line where the playwright uses iambic pentameter. Why do you think this line is written like that?

Read Three: Why is it happening?

1. What does the playwright want you to take away from the text?
2. What is the playwright trying to say about love? Cite examples from the text to support your answer.
3. What is the playwright trying to say about gender roles? Cite examples from the text to support your answer.
4. Discuss your process of interpreting Shakespeare’s words. How did this help you understand what was happening in the play?
5. What do you think happens next to Beatrice and Benedick?
6. Which line in the play resonated with you the most? Why? What did the author want you to take away from this line?

Post-Read Questions

- ★ What is one question that you still have about the play?

- ★ What did you learn from reading the play? What lesson(s) are you taking away?
- ★ What surprised you about the adaptation?
- ★ What is one thing you would change about the adaptation?
- ★ Which character was your favorite? Why?
- ★ Do you believe any of the characters were in the right? Why or why not?

Post-Read Activities

Modern Translation

- ★ Put students into groups of four and assign each group a short scene from the play.
- ★ Tell students they are going to work together to adapt the scene and modernize it. They can modernize the language, setting, costumes, etc.
- ★ Give students a set amount of time to modernize the scene and then give them time to rehearse their scene.
- ★ Once everyone is done, have each group present. Then, discuss:
 - » What was it like to modernize the text?
 - » What was challenging about creating a modern adaptation? How did you make choices on what to modernize?
 - » What obstacles did you face and how did you overcome them?
 - » What stood out to you about the scenes you saw?

Exploring Themes

- ★ As a class compile a list of themes touched upon in *Much Ado About Nothing*. These can be themes already listed or themes the students come up with themselves.

- ★ Once the themes are compiled, put students into groups of 3–4. In these groups tell them they are going to write down lines from the play that reflect each of the themes listed. For each theme students should write down 2–3 lines.
- ★ After students complete their list go around the class and have students read the lines they wrote for one of the themes. Encourage them to have fun with this. For example, they can do a dramatic reading of the line or create a tableau to show the line to the class.
- ★ After everyone has presented, discuss:
 - » What themes did you find were easier than others to write lines for?
 - » Why is it important to know the themes of a play?
 - » What challenges did you face as you searched for lines? How did you overcome them?
 - » Why is text analysis important when it comes to Shakespeare?

Adaptation Research

- ★ Now that students have read one adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing* they will research another adaptation. Divide students into groups and assign each one an adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing* to research. Examples are below:
 - » *Much Ado High School*
 - » *The Only Thing Worse Than Me is You* by Lily Anderson
 - » *Messina High* (2015)
 - » *Much Ado About Nothing* (2012)
 - » *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993)
 - » *Speak Easy, Speak Love* by McKelle George
- ★ Have students answer the following questions:
 - » Compare and contrast your adaptation to the one we just read as a class.

- » What makes this adaptation stand out? How is it different?
- » Who created the adaptation? What inspired them?
- » When did this adaptation come out? What is the history behind this adaptation?
- ★ Decide how students will share their knowledge. Will they create a scene based on what they've learned? An oral presentation with a visual component? A quiz?

Character Costume Design

- ★ Choose a character and design their costume.
- ★ Based on their personality, what would they wear? What pieces of clothing define them? What colours and textures would they choose?
- ★ Draw a colour costume rendering.

Staged Scenes

- ★ Divide students into small groups and assign each group a scene from the play, or a short moment within a scene.
- ★ Give students time to rehearse.
- ★ Each group will present their moment.
- ★ Discuss the scenes afterward.
 - » How did seeing the scenes acted out differ from reading them?
 - » Why is it important to act a scene as well as read it?
 - » Did any of the presentations offer a different interpretation of the characters than yours?

Shakespearean Tableau Series

- ★ Divide students into groups and tell each group to pick three lines from the play. The first line should be from the beginning, the second should be from the middle, and the third should be from the end.
- ★ Tell students they are going to create a tableau for each line they picked. Together the tableaux should summarize the play. Once students create a tableau for each line, tell them to create transitions between each tableau that tell the story of Romeo and Juliet.
- ★ Once students have created their tableaux, have them present their series.
- ★ After every group presents, discuss:
 - » What stood out from the tableaux you saw?
 - » How did you choose which lines to pick?
 - » What challenges did you face as you created the tableaux and how did you overcome them?
 - » How can you tell a story without using words?

Character Exploration

- ★ Have students pick the name of one of the characters in the play from out of a hat. Once every student has a character, tell them they are going to research the character.
 - » What does the character's name mean? Why did Shakespeare choose that name?
 - » How does the character react to others?
 - » Do they enjoy living in Messina? Why or why not?
 - » What is their home life like?
 - » What are their views on love?

- ★ Tell students they may have to create their own answers to some of these questions, but that their answers should be based on inferences from the text.
- ★ After each student has created a background for their character, tell them they are going to introduce themselves to the class as this character.
- ★ After everyone presents their character, discuss:
 - » What was it like stepping into this character’s shoes?
 - » Was it difficult or easy to create a background for your character? Why?
 - » What discoveries did you make through the character exploration process?
 - » How did you surprise yourself throughout this process?
 - » What stood out to you when other characters introduced themselves?

Playwright Process

Playwright John Minigan talks about his process of writing/adapting Much Ado About Nothing. Have students read and then discuss/reflect on how their perception of the writing process compares to the playwright’s.

What was the inspiration for writing/adapting this play?

I was running a high school theater program, and I had directed several full-length Shakespeare plays with my students. With an interscholastic one-act play festival coming up, I thought my students would learn a lot from combining the intensity of acting Shakespeare with the intensity of the festival — but we needed a one-act version to fit the festival’s rules.

At the same time, I also thought that I could get to all the positives that working with teen actors on Shakespeare can provide (understanding and using heightened text; doing intense vocal work; committing as actors to high stakes, life-or-death moments, etc.) with a shorter play, so that we could spend more time on those positives and the intensity of those experiences rather than always worrying, “We have forty more pages to get to!”

What challenges did you encounter during the writing process?

It's hard to cut a play as brilliant as *Much Ado*. There are lines and moments that you have to let go of when you adapt a full-length to a one-act, and it can be heartbreaking to lose lines you love.

But I did two summers of training with the great education staff at Shakespeare & Company, a theater in Western Massachusetts. Their Director of Education, Kevin Coleman, gave us great advice: Don't think of it as cutting a great play; start with no play at all and build your adaptation from zero using the moments that matter the most. Shifting my mindset that way was a huge help.

Another challenge was to try to maintain as much iambic pentameter as possible, which sometimes meant taking the beginning of one line, cutting the rest, cutting the beginning of the next line and leaving the end so the text would fit together like a jigsaw puzzle — while preserving meaning, sense, and rhythm!

What was it like to see the play performed?

My students showed real bravery in taking on the challenge of *Much Ado* and investing in the emotional journeys of the characters. Knowing they would be performing difficult material not just for our home audience but also for students from other schools (and adjudicators) made them committed to the play and to one another in ways that were transformative for them. And, as we advanced through preliminary to the semifinal and then championship round of the festival, they worked harder and harder, dug deeper emotionally, and became ever more committed to one another as an ensemble. This was thirty years ago, and I'm still in touch with many in that cast and crew.

As a playwright, what is your favourite moment/character in the play and why?

Tough question! I love the so-called "chapel scene" after Claudio, Don John, and Don Pedro leave the wedding. Benedick and Beatrice's wit, emotional vulnerability, and rage combine in that scene in ways that are just astonishing. I've always felt it's one of the best and most finely-tuned scenes in Shakespeare — such a powerful roller-coaster ride for two brilliant but emotionally confused characters.

That said, the moment Hero lifts her veil in the "second wedding" is astonishing. Claudio, who has been so wrong about so much and been so disrespectful of Hero as

a woman, has experienced incredible guilt over his actions. In that moment, he has to give up all his power and say, “I am your husband, if you like of me.” For the first time in the play, the choice is hers, not his — and her acceptance of him in that moment is what makes for the play’s happy ending and allows them both to grow into better people. That moment can bring me to tears.

Which is harder for you, first drafts or rewrites?

I find first drafts so much harder! A friend calls the first draft the “spaghetti draft,” and I love that. You’re just flinging spaghetti at the walls to see what will stick.

Once that’s done, I find it easier to really get to work shaping the play. And if I can get into a reading or workshop or production with actors and a director and maybe a dramaturg, I make progress much faster. I love revision “in the room” during rehearsals to try things out and find the best choices.

What’s your writing process like?

I generally write for at least two hours every day, even if it’s two hours staring at a real or digital blank page. There’s a saying, I think by Louis L’Amour, “The water can’t run till you turn on the faucet.” Then I often spend more time doing other things like revising, researching or making notes related to a play I’m planning in the future, etc.

When I do get to the end of a first draft, I generally benefit from putting it aside for a bit and working on something else to clear my mind so I can come back fresh later. Paula Vogel has an expression, “Drop and give me twenty!” When you finish a draft, drop it, and write twenty pages of something else.

What engages you about playwriting?

I wrote poetry for a long time before I started writing plays, and I still love to dive into language. Obviously in adapting/cutting Shakespeare, it’s a joy to live with such amazing language swirling around the brain and heart and gut.

What I’ve loved about writing for the theater is the collaborative process. As I mentioned before, being “in the room” with other artists and collaborating to find the best possible version of a script is like alchemy. So, moving from the lonely, language-based work of a poet to the engaging sense of community with other artists has been a joy that, as much as a need to tell stories, has kept me going.