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Folger SHAKESPEARE LIBRARY

# Much Ado About Nothing

By
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

An Updated Edition

Edited by Barbara A. Mowat
and Paul Werstine

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## From the Director of the Folger Shakespeare Library

It is hard to imagine a world without Shakespeare. Since their composition more than four hundred years ago, Shakespeare's plays and poems have traveled the globe, inviting those who see and read his works to make them their own.

Readers of the New Folger Editions are part of this ongoing process of "taking up Shakespeare," finding our own thoughts and feelings in language that strikes us as old or unusual and, for that very reason, new. We still struggle to keep up with a writer who could think a mile a minute, whose words paint pictures that shift like clouds. These expertly edited texts, presented here with accompanying explanatory notes and up-to-date critical essays, are distinctive because of what they do: they allow readers not simply to keep up, but to engage deeply with a writer whose works invite us to think, and think again.

These New Folger Editions of Shakespeare's plays are also special because of where they come from. The Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., where the Editions are produced, is the single greatest documentary source of Shakespeare's works. An unparalleled collection of early modern books, manuscripts, and artwork connected to Shakespeare, the Folger's holdings have been consulted extensively in the preparation of these texts. The Editions also reflect the expertise gained through the regular performance of Shakespeare's works in the Folger's Elizabethan Theater.

I want to express my deep thanks to editors Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine for creating these indispensable editions of Shakespeare's works, which incorporate the best of textual scholarship with a richness of commentary that is both inspired and engaging. Readers who want to know more about Shakespeare and his plays can follow the paths these distinguished scholars have tread by visiting the Folger itself, where a range of physical and digital resources (available online) exist to supplement the material in these texts. I commend to you these words, and hope that they inspire.

*Michael Witmore*
Director, Folger Shakespeare Library

# Contents

# Editors' Preface

In recent years, ways of dealing with Shakespeare's texts and with the interpretation of his plays have been undergoing significant change. This edition, while retaining many of the features that have always made the Folger Shakespeare so attractive to the general reader, at the same time reflects these current ways of thinking about Shakespeare. For example, modern readers, actors, and teachers have become interested in the differences between, on the one hand, the early forms in which Shakespeare's plays were first published and, on the other hand, the forms in which editors through the centuries have presented them. In response to this interest, we have based our edition on what we consider the best early printed version of a particular play (explaining our rationale in a section called "An Introduction to This Text") and have marked our changes in the text—unobtrusively, we hope, but in such a way that the curious reader can be aware that a change has been made and can consult the "Textual Notes" to discover what appeared in the early printed version.

Current ways of looking at the plays are reflected in our brief prefaces, in many of the commentary notes, in the annotated lists of "Further Reading," and especially in each play's "Modern Perspective," an essay written by an outstanding scholar who brings to the reader his or her fresh assessment of the play in the light of today's interests and concerns.

As in the Folger Library General Reader's Shakespeare, which this edition replaces, we include explanatory notes designed to help make Shakespeare's language clearer to a modern reader, and we place

the notes on the page facing the text that they explain. We also follow the earlier edition in including illustrations—of objects, of clothing, of mythological figures—from books and manuscripts in the Folger Library collection. We provide fresh accounts of the life of Shakespeare, of the publishing of his plays, and of the theaters in which his plays were performed, as well as an introduction to the text itself. We also include a section called "Reading Shakespeare's Language," in which we try to help readers learn to "break the code" of Elizabethan poetic language.

For each section of each volume, we are indebted to a host of generous experts and fellow scholars. The "Reading Shakespeare's Language" sections, for example, could not have been written had not Arthur King, of Brigham Young University, and Randal Robinson, author of *Unlocking Shakespeare's Language,* led the way in untangling Shakespearean language puzzles and generously shared their insights and methodologies with us. "Shakespeare's Life" profited by the careful reading given it by S. Schoenbaum, "Shakespeare's Theater" was read and strengthened by Andrew Gurr, John Astington, and William Ingram, and "The Publication of Shakespeare's Plays" is indebted to the comments of Peter W. M. Blayney. We, as editors, take sole responsibility for any errors in our editions.

We are grateful to the authors of the "Modern Perspectives"; to Leeds Barroll and David Bevington for their generous encouragement; to the Huntington and Newberry Libraries for fellowship support; to King's University College for the grants it has provided to Paul Werstine; to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, which provided him with Research Time Stipends; to Penny Gill and Eva Mary Hooker for insightful conversations about the language of *Much Ado About Nothing*; to Skiles How-

ard and Scott Reiss for advice on Renaissance music and dance; and to the Folger Institute's Center for Shakespeare Studies for its fortuitous sponsorship of a workshop on "Shakespeare's Texts for Students and Teachers" (funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and led by Richard Knowles of the University of Wisconsin), a workshop from which we learned an enormous amount about what is wanted by college and high-school teachers of Shakespeare today.

In preparing this preface for the publication of *Much Ado About Nothing* in 1995, we wrote: "Our biggest debt is to the Folger Shakespeare Library—to Werner Gundersheimer, Director of the Library, who made possible our edition; to Jean Miller, the Library's Art Curator, who combs the Library holdings for illustrations, and to Julie Ainsworth, Head of the Photography Department, who carefully photographs them; to Peggy O'Brien, Director of Education, and her assistant, Molly Haws, who continue to give us expert advice about the needs being expressed by Shakespeare teachers and students (and to Martha Christian and other 'master teachers' who used our texts in manuscript in their classrooms); to Jessica Hymowitz, who provides expert computer support; to the staff of the Academic Programs Division, especially Mary Tonkinson, Lena Cowen Orlin, Toni Krieger, Amy Adler, Kathleen Lynch, and Carol Brobeck; and, finally, to the staff of the Library Reading Room, whose patience and support are invaluable."

As we revise the play for publication in 2018, we add to the above our gratitude to Michael Witmore, Director of the Folger Shakespeare Library, who brings to our work a gratifying enthusiasm and vision; to Eric Johnson, the Folger's Director of Digital Access, who expertly manages our editions in both their paper and their many electronic forms; to Gail Kern Paster, Direc-

tor of the Library from 2002 until July 2011, whose interest and support have been unfailing and whose scholarly expertise continues to be an invaluable resource; to Jonathan Evans and Alysha Bullock, our production editors at Simon & Schuster, whose expertise, attention to detail, and wisdom are essential to this project; to the Folger's Photography Department; to Deborah Curren-Aquino for continuing superb editorial assistance and for her exceptionally fine Further Reading annotations; to Alice Falk for her expert copyediting; to Michael Poston for unfailing computer support; to Sophie Byvik, Gabrielle Linnell, and Stacey Redick; and to Rebecca Niles (whose help is crucial). Among the editions we consulted, we found Claire McEachern's 2015 Arden edition especially useful. Finally, we once again express our thanks to Stephen Llano for twenty-five years of support as our invaluable production editor, to the late Jean Miller for the wonderful images she unearthed, and to the ever-supportive staff of the Library Reading Room.

As we began to revise *Much Ado About Nothing,* Barbara A. Mowat died on Thanksgiving Day 2017. Her knowledge, wisdom, and great care of Shakespeare's texts will be sorely missed.

Paul Werstine
2018

# Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*

*Much Ado About Nothing* is one of Shakespeare's more popular comedies, with a long history of success on the stage. Much of its appeal lies in its two stories of romantic love with their quite different journeys to comedy's happy ending. Hero and Claudio fall in love almost at first sight; their union has the blessing of the older generation (in the persons of Hero's father, Leonato, and Claudio's prince, Don Pedro). All should be well. But from the outside comes the virulent force of Don John, who acts with the kind of malice that strikes out at whatever promises to make someone else happy. For Hero and Claudio to find happiness, they must go beyond Don John's treachery, Claudio's own weak jealousy, Don Pedro's touchy sense of his own honor, and Leonato's too credulous paternal fury. It takes a second (unlikely) outside force in the guise of the bumbling, officious Dogberry to offer any hope of bringing Hero's truth to light.

The story of Beatrice and Benedick is quite other. They are kept apart not by a vicious outsider but by their pride in their own brilliance and by their mutual antagonism and distrust. Both express aversion to marriage; each finds particular pleasure in attacking the other. To outsiders, they seem an ideal pair. So the outsiders decide to play Cupid.

Over the centuries the Beatrice-Benedick plot has most captivated audiences and readers. King Charles I, in his copy of Shakespeare's plays, crossed out the play's title and renamed it "Beatrice and Benedick," and a prefatory poem in a 1640 edition of Shakespeare's son-


Map of Spain, France, and Italy.


From Giovanni Botero, *Le relationi vniuersali* . . . (1618).

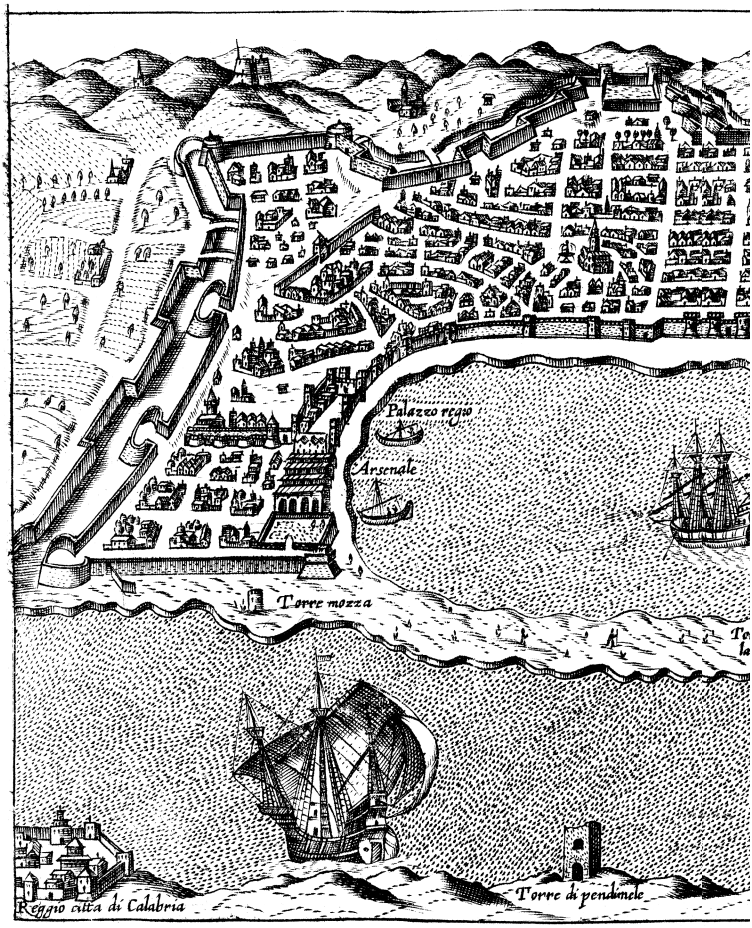
nets says, "Let but *Beatrice* / And *Benedick* be seene, lo, in a trice / The Cockpit, Galleries, Boxes all are full." And Berlioz's opera version of *Much Ado* is named *Béatrice et Bénédict*. It is generally agreed that Beatrice and Benedick are the model for the witty lovers in comic drama of later centuries; and it can be argued that they led as well to Jane Austen's Elizabeth and Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* and to Scarlett and Rhett in *Gone with the Wind*.

It is, however, the conjunction of the Beatrice and Benedick story with the story of Hero and Claudio that makes *Much Ado* so rich and rewarding a play. Beatrice and Benedick, faced with humiliating descriptions of what they had considered their most prized character traits, learn to "suffer love" and to "eat their meat without grudging"; simultaneously, Claudio and Hero are forced into an experience that acquaints them first with life's darkness (with treachery, betrayal, vicious jealousy, public shaming, and abandonment) and then with quite unexpected joy (with the recovery of the irrevocably lost, with discovery at the unlikely hands of the play's "shallow fools"). It can be argued that while the play calls itself "Much Ado About *Nothing,*" its stories are actually much ado about life at its most important.

After you have read the play, we invite you to turn to the back of this book and read "*Much Ado About Nothing:* A Modern Perspective," by Gail Kern Paster, Director *Emerita* of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

# Reading Shakespeare's Language: *Much Ado About Nothing*

For many people today, reading Shakespeare's language can be a problem—but it is a problem that can be solved. Those who have studied Latin (or even French or German or Spanish) and those who are used to reading poetry will have little difficulty understanding the language of Shakespeare's poetic drama. Others, though, need to develop the skills of untangling unusual sentence structures and of recognizing and understanding poetic compressions, omissions, and wordplay. And even those skilled in reading unusual sentence structures may have occasional trouble with Shakespeare's words. More than four hundred years of "static"—caused by changes in language and life—intervene between his speaking and our hearing. Most of his immense vocabulary is still in use, but a few of his words are no longer used, and many of his words now have meanings quite different from those they had in the sixteenth century. In the theater, most of these difficulties are solved for us by actors who study the language and articulate it for us so that the essential meaning is heard—or, when combined with stage action, is at least *felt*. When reading on one's own, one must do what each actor does: go over the lines (often with a dictionary close at hand) until the puzzles are solved and the lines yield up their poetry and the characters speak in words and phrases that are, suddenly, rewarding and wonderfully memorable.

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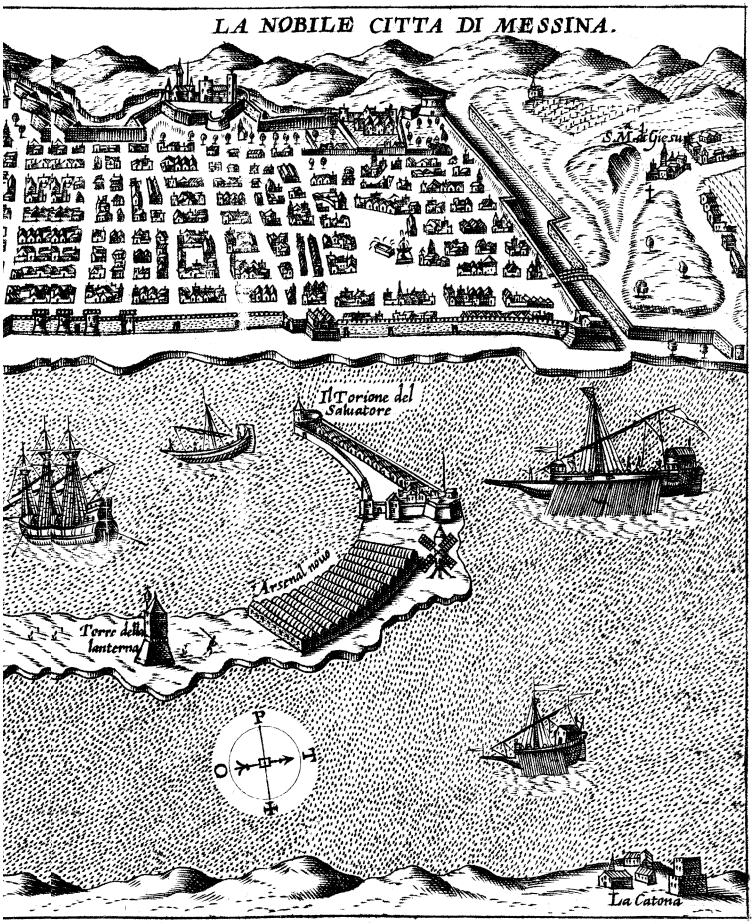


From Pietro Bertelli, *Theatrum vrbium Italicarum* . . . (1599).

## Shakespeare's Words

As you begin to read the opening scenes of a play by Shakespeare, you may notice occasional unfamiliar words. Some are unfamiliar simply because we no longer use them. In the opening scenes of *Much Ado About Nothing,* for example, you will find the words *squarer* (i.e., fighter, quarreler), *methinks* (it seems to me), *recheat* (the notes of a hunting horn), *baldrick* (a belt for holding bugles, swords, etc.), and *arras* (a hanging screen of rich tapestry fabric). Words of this kind are explained in notes to the text and will become familiar the more of Shakespeare's plays you read.

In *Much Ado About Nothing,* as in all of Shakespeare's writing, the more problematic are the words that are still in use but that now have different meanings. In the opening scenes of *Much Ado,* for example, the word *tax* has the meaning of "take to task, criticize," *stomach* is used where we would say "appetite, hunger, or courage," *halting* where we would say "limping," *sad* where we would say "serious," and *winded* where we would say "sounded, blown." Such words will be explained in the notes to the text, but they, too, will become familiar as you continue to read Shakespeare's language.

Some words are strange not because of the "static" introduced by changes in language over the past centuries but because these are words that Shakespeare is using to build a dramatic world that has its own geography and history and background mythology. *Much Ado About Nothing,* for example, through references to Messina, Venice, and Padua, to "thick-pleached alleys" and "orchards," creates a location on a wealthy estate in Italy. Through military language—*action* (i.e., military engagement), *sort* (i.e., rank, kind), and *sworn brother* (i.e., brother-in-arms)—it places itself in time, just at

the end of a war. Through complicated references to Cupid and his arrows and to Hercules (a mythological figure prominent both for his massive strength and for his helplessness when trapped by love), it also builds a world in which warfare and romantic love are intricately intertwined. These "local" words and references (each of which will be explained in notes to this text) help to build the world that Beatrice, Benedick, Hero, and Claudio inhabit, and will soon become a familiar part of your reading of the play.

## Shakespearean Wordplay

In *Much Ado About Nothing,* Shakespeare plays with language so often and so variously that the entire play can be read and heard as brilliant repartee: witty punning, elaboration of commonplaces, highly figured verbal structures. In the play's opening scene, the Messenger delivers his report of the just-ended war in elaborate verbal figures. He reports that Claudio "hath borne himself beyond the promise of his age, doing in the figure of a lamb the feats of a lion," thus contrasting Claudio's lamblike youth and apparent helplessness with his lionlike ferocity in battle. He then uses figured language to report Claudio's uncle's reception of the news of Claudio's valor: "there appears much joy in him, even so much that joy could not show itself modest enough without a badge of bitterness." (*Badge* here means "sign," and *bitterness* means "anguish of heart, suffering.") These words are such a complicated way of saying "He was so happy he wept" that Leonato is forced to ask for clarification: "Did he break out into tears?" The Messenger's response, "In great measure," leads in turn to Leonato's punning response: "A kind overflow of kindness," where *kind* means both "natu-

ral" and "warmhearted" and *kindness* means both "kinship" and "affection."

Every major character in *Much Ado About Nothing* has his or her own way of playing with, elaborating, or misusing language. Two of the more intriguing are Beatrice and Benedick, whose linguistic tendencies define them for the other characters. Beatrice, in the prejudice of the time, is seen as "shrewish" or "curst" because of her "sharp tongue." Her first line in the play is to ask whether "Signior Mountanto" (i.e., Benedick) has returned from the war, jabbing at Benedick by naming him with the fencing term *montant* (an upward thrust). More typical of her wordplay is her response to the Messenger's "I see, lady, the gentleman is not in your books." The Messenger is, of course, using the phrase "in your books" figuratively, to mean "in your favor"; she takes the phrase literally and replies "No. An [i.e., if] he were, I would burn my study [i.e., library]." A few lines earlier we find her again taking a figurative phrase and interpreting it literally: when the Messenger describes Benedick as a man "stuffed with all honorable virtues," she responds "It is so indeed. He is no less than a stuffed man, but for the stuffing—well, we are all mortal." In the fourth scene of the play (2.1), when her uncle says to her "Well, niece, I hope to see you one day fitted with a husband," she builds an elaborate response by taking literally the more-or-less figurative biblical passage which reads that "the Lord God also made the man of the dust of the ground" (Genesis 2.7). Combining a literal reading of this verse with the line in the marriage liturgy in which the woman promises to "obey" and "serve" the man she marries, Beatrice responds as follows to Leonato's wish that she find a husband: "Not till God make men of some other metal than earth. Would it not grieve a woman to be overmastered with a piece of valiant dust? To make an account of her life to a clod of wayward marl?" It is

to such language that the male characters in the play respond: "By my troth . . . , thou wilt never get thee a husband if thou be so shrewd of thy tongue."

Benedick, too, uses wordplay centered in the double meanings of words (saying, for example, that Hero is "too low for a high praise, too brown for a fair praise, and too little for a great praise"). But his more characteristic wordplay is with metaphor—or, rather, with metaphoric figures. A true metaphor is a play on words in which one object or idea is expressed as if it were something else, something with which it is said to share common features. (Don John uses metaphor when he says "I have decreed not to sing in my cage," picturing his unfree state as that of a caged songbird.) Benedick's metaphoric figures begin as metaphors or similes but spin out into linguistic cartoons: "Prove that ever I lose more blood with love than I will get again with drinking," he boasts, "pick out mine eyes with a ballad-maker's pen and hang me up at the door of a brothel house for the sign of blind Cupid." With a few phrases, he sketches himself as first blinded, then turned into a signboard, and then hung outside a brothel. "If I [fall in love]," he again boasts, "hang me in a bottle like a cat and shoot at me, and he that hits me, let him be clapped on the shoulder and called Adam." Here the wordplay is built on a simile (i.e., he is to be *like* a cat in a bottle), but again the comparison image expands into an entire scenario in which Benedick is to be hung in a bottle, used for archery practice, hit by an arrow, and the winner congratulated. One of his metaphoric overstatements comes back to haunt him. Answering Don Pedro's quoting of the proverb "In time the savage bull doth bear the yoke," Benedick comically dooms himself by saying "The savage bull may, but if ever the sensible Benedick bear it, pluck off the bull's horns and set them in my forehead, and let me be vilely painted, and in such great letters as they write 'Here is good horse

to hire' let them signify under my sign 'Here you may see Benedick the married man.' " The image produced here—the sensible Benedick wearing the bull's horns and advertising his married state—seems to be a challenge to Don Pedro that is later picked up in his tricking of Benedick and that is alluded to twice toward the end of the play. One of the play's high comic moments rests on Benedick's turning Claudio's taunts about the savage bull back on Claudio, using metaphoric language to shape a truly elegant riposte:

PRINCE
Good morrow, Benedick. Why, what's the matter
That you have such a February face,
So full of frost, of storm, and cloudiness?
CLAUDIO
I think he thinks upon the savage bull.
Tush, fear not, man. We'll tip thy horns with gold,
And all Europa shall rejoice at thee,
As once Europa did at lusty Jove
When he would play the noble beast in love.
BENEDICK
Bull Jove, sir, had an amiable low,
And some such strange bull leapt your father's cow
And got a calf in that same noble feat
Much like to you, for you have just his bleat.
(5.4.41–52)

Benedick's metaphoric conversational style is what leads Don Pedro to characterize Benedick as being "from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot . . . all mirth" (3.2.8–9). This style is also, no doubt, what lies behind Beatrice's taunting characterization of him as "the Prince's jester" (2.1.135).

Because intricate wordplay—whether the intentional elaborations of Benedick and Beatrice or the

unintentional confusions of Dogberry—is so central to the language structure of *Much Ado About Nothing,* one must read the dialogue with special attention to double meanings, elaborated metaphors, verbal confusions, and other forms of linguistic playfulness.

## Implied Stage Action

Finally, in reading Shakespeare's plays we should always remember that what we are reading is a performance script. The dialogue is written to be spoken by actors who, at the same time, are moving, gesturing, picking up objects, weeping, shaking their fists. Some stage action is described in what are called "stage directions"; some is suggested within the dialogue itself. We must learn to be alert to such signals as we stage the play in our imaginations. When, in *Much Ado About Nothing* 2.3, Benedick says "I will hide me in the arbor," and a few lines later Don Pedro says "See you where Benedick hath hid himself?" it is clear that the stage action involves Benedick's hiding behind a stage tree (or some structure onstage that represents part of an "arbor"). Again, in 3.1, the stage action is mapped out rather precisely in Hero's line "For look where Beatrice like a lapwing runs / Close by the ground," followed by Ursula's "Beatrice . . . even now / Is couchèd in the woodbine coverture," and Hero's "Then go we near her, that her ear lose nothing / Of the false sweet bait that we lay for it."

At several places in *Much Ado About Nothing,* signals to the reader are not quite so clear. Early in the first wedding scene, Claudio, having been "given" Hero, gives her back again to her father with the lines "There, Leonato, take her back again. / Give not this rotten orange to your friend" (4.1.31–32). It is unclear just

what Claudio's actions are as he delivers those lines. In many productions, he throws her toward Leonato, sometimes with such violence that she hits the stage in a bruised heap. One could argue that since this is early in the scene's action, before Claudio's rage truly builds, a less violent gesture is more appropriate, but a range of stage actions offers itself. Again, later in the same scene, Beatrice's question "Why, how now, cousin, wherefore sink you down?" makes it clear that Hero falls to the stage. When she should get back up, however, is left to the imagination of the director, the actor, or us as readers to determine. Learning to read the language of stage action repays one many times over when one reads the play's final scene, with its entrance of masked ladies, its powerful unmasking of the "Hero that is dead," its discovery of the love letters that demonstrate that Beatrice and Benedick do, in fact, love each other, and its final dance. Here, as in so much of *Much Ado About Nothing*, implied stage action vitally affects our response to the play.

It is immensely rewarding to work carefully with Shakespeare's language—with the words, the sentences, the wordplay, and the implied stage action—as readers for the past four centuries have discovered. It may be more pleasurable to attend a good performance of a play—though not everyone has thought so. But the joy of being able to stage one of Shakespeare's plays in one's imagination, to return to passages that continue to yield further meanings (or further questions) the more one reads them—these are pleasures that, for many, rival (or at least augment) those of the performed text, and certainly make it worth considerable effort to "break the code" of Elizabethan poetic drama and let free the remarkable language that makes up a Shakespeare text.

# Shakespeare's Life

Surviving documents that give us glimpses into the life of William Shakespeare show us a playwright, poet, and actor who grew up in the market town of Stratford-upon-Avon, spent his professional life in London, and returned to Stratford a wealthy landowner. He was born in April 1564, died in April 1616, and is buried inside the chancel of Holy Trinity Church in Stratford.

We wish we could know more about the life of the world's greatest dramatist. His plays and poems are testaments to his wide reading—especially to his knowledge of Virgil, Ovid, Plutarch, Holinshed's *Chronicles,* and the Bible—and to his mastery of the English language, but we can only speculate about his education. We know that the King's New School in Stratford-upon-Avon was considered excellent. The school was one of the English "grammar schools" established to educate young men, primarily in Latin grammar and literature. As in other schools of the time, students began their studies at the age of four or five in the attached "petty school," and there learned to read and write in English, studying primarily the catechism from the Book of Common Prayer. After two years in the petty school, students entered the lower form (grade) of the grammar school, where they began the serious study of Latin grammar and Latin texts that would occupy most of the remainder of their school days. (Several Latin texts that Shakespeare used repeatedly in writing his plays and poems were texts that schoolboys memorized and recited.) Latin comedies were introduced early in the lower form; in the upper form, which the boys entered at age ten or eleven, students wrote their own Latin orations and declamations, studied Latin

Title page of a 1573 Latin and Greek catechism for children.
From Alexander Nowell, *Catechismus paruus pueris primum Latine . . .* (1573).

historians and rhetoricians, and began the study of Greek using the Greek New Testament.

Since the records of the Stratford "grammar school" do not survive, we cannot prove that William Shakespeare attended the school; however, every indication (his father's position as an alderman and bailiff of Stratford, the playwright's own knowledge of the Latin classics, scenes in the plays that recall grammar-school experiences—for example, *The Merry Wives of Windsor,* 4.1) suggests that he did. We also lack generally accepted documentation about Shakespeare's life after his schooling ended and his professional life in London began. His marriage in 1582 (at age eighteen) to Anne Hathaway and the subsequent births of his daughter Susanna (1583) and the twins Judith and Hamnet (1585) are recorded, but how he supported himself and where he lived are not known. Nor do we know when and why he left Stratford for the London theatrical world, nor how he rose to be the important figure in that world that he had become by the early 1590s.

We do know that by 1592 he had achieved some prominence in London as both an actor and a playwright. In that year was published a book by the playwright Robert Greene attacking an actor who had the audacity to write blank-verse drama and who was "in his own conceit [i.e., opinion] the only Shake-scene in a country." Since Greene's attack includes a parody of a line from one of Shakespeare's early plays, there is little doubt that it is Shakespeare to whom he refers, a "Shake-scene" who had aroused Greene's fury by successfully competing with university-educated dramatists like Greene himself. It was in 1593 that Shakespeare became a published poet. In that year he published his long narrative poem *Venus and Adonis;* in 1594, he followed it with *Lucrece.* Both poems were dedicated to the young earl of Southampton (Henry

Wriothesley), who may have become Shakespeare's patron.

It seems no coincidence that Shakespeare wrote these narrative poems at a time when the theaters were closed because of the plague, a contagious epidemic disease that devastated the population of London. When the theaters reopened in 1594, Shakespeare apparently resumed his double career of actor and playwright and began his long (and seemingly profitable) service as an acting-company shareholder. Records for December of 1594 show him to be a leading member of the Lord Chamberlain's Men. It was this company of actors, later named the King's Men, for whom he would be a principal actor, dramatist, and shareholder for the rest of his career.

So far as we can tell, that career spanned about twenty years. In the 1590s, he wrote his plays on English history as well as several comedies and at least two tragedies (*Titus Andronicus* and *Romeo and Juliet*). These histories, comedies, and tragedies are the plays credited to him in 1598 in a work, *Palladis Tamia,* that in one chapter compares English writers with "Greek, Latin, and Italian Poets." There the author, Francis Meres, claims that Shakespeare is comparable to the Latin dramatists Seneca for tragedy and Plautus for comedy, and calls him "the most excellent in both kinds for the stage." He also names him "Mellifluous and honey-tongued Shakespeare": "I say," writes Meres, "that the Muses would speak with Shakespeare's fine filed phrase, if they would speak English." Since Meres also mentions Shakespeare's "sugared sonnets among his private friends," it is assumed that many of Shakespeare's sonnets (not published until 1609) were also written in the 1590s.

In 1599, Shakespeare's company built a theater for themselves across the river from London, naming

it the Globe. The plays that are considered by many to be Shakespeare's major tragedies (*Hamlet, Othello, King Lear,* and *Macbeth*) were written while the company was resident in this theater, as were such comedies as *Twelfth Night* and *Measure for Measure.* Many of Shakespeare's plays were performed at court (both for Queen Elizabeth I and, after her death in 1603, for King James I), some were presented at the Inns of Court (the residences of London's legal societies), and some were doubtless performed in other towns, at the universities, and at great houses when the King's Men went on tour; otherwise, his plays from 1599 to 1608 were, so far as we know, performed only at the Globe. Between 1608 and 1612, Shakespeare wrote several plays—among them *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*—presumably for the company's new indoor Blackfriars theater, though the plays were performed also at the Globe and at court. Surviving documents describe a performance of *The Winter's Tale* in 1611 at the Globe, for example, and performances of *The Tempest* in 1611 and 1613 at the royal palace of Whitehall.

Shakespeare seems to have written very little after 1612, the year in which he probably wrote *King Henry VIII.* (It was at a performance of *Henry VIII* in 1613 that the Globe caught fire and burned to the ground.) Sometime between 1610 and 1613, according to many biographers, he returned to live in Stratford-upon-Avon, where he owned a large house and considerable property, and where his wife and his two daughters lived. (His son Hamnet had died in 1596.) However, other biographers suggest that Shakespeare did not leave London for good until much closer to the time of his death. During his professional years in London, Shakespeare had presumably derived income from the acting company's profits as well as from his own career as an actor, from the sale of his play man-


Ptolemaic universe.
From Marcus Manilius, *The sphere of* . . . (1675).

uscripts to the acting company, and, after 1599, from his shares as an owner of the Globe. It was presumably that income, carefully invested in land and other property, that made him the wealthy man that surviving documents show him to have become. It is also assumed that William Shakespeare's growing wealth and reputation played some part in inclining the Crown, in 1596, to grant John Shakespeare, William's father, the coat of arms that he had so long sought. William Shakespeare died in Stratford on April 23, 1616 (according to the epitaph carved under his bust in Holy Trinity Church) and was buried on April 25. Seven years after his death, his collected plays were published as *Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies* (the work now known as the First Folio).

The years in which Shakespeare wrote were among the most exciting in English history. Intellectually, the discovery, translation, and printing of Greek and Roman classics were making available a set of works and worldviews that interacted complexly with Christian texts and beliefs. The result was a questioning, a vital intellectual ferment, that provided energy for the period's amazing dramatic and literary output and that fed directly into Shakespeare's plays. The Ghost in *Hamlet,* for example, is wonderfully complicated in part because he is a figure from Roman tragedy—the spirit of the dead returning to seek revenge—who at the same time inhabits a Christian hell (or purgatory); Hamlet's description of humankind reflects at one moment the Neoplatonic wonderment at mankind ("What a piece of work is a man!") and, at the next, the Christian view of the human condition ("And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?").

As intellectual horizons expanded, so also did geographical and cosmological horizons. New worlds—

both North and South America—were explored, and in them were found human beings who lived and worshipped in ways radically different from those of Renaissance Europeans and Englishmen. The universe during these years also seemed to shift and expand. Copernicus had earlier theorized that the Earth was not the center of the cosmos but revolved as a planet around the sun. Galileo's telescope, created in 1609, allowed scientists to see that Copernicus had been correct: the universe was not organized with the Earth at the center, nor was it so nicely circumscribed as people had, until that time, thought. In terms of expanding horizons, the impact of these discoveries on people's beliefs—religious, scientific, and philosophical—cannot be overstated.

London, too, rapidly expanded and changed during the years (from the early 1590s to 1610 or somewhat later) that Shakespeare lived there. London—the center of England's government, its economy, its royal court, its overseas trade—was, during these years, becoming an exciting metropolis, drawing to it thousands of new citizens every year. Troubled by overcrowding, by poverty, by recurring epidemics of the plague, London was also a mecca for the wealthy and the aristocratic, and for those who sought advancement at court, or power in government or finance or trade. One hears in Shakespeare's plays the voices of London—the struggles for power, the fear of venereal disease, the language of buying and selling. One hears as well the voices of Stratford-upon-Avon—references to the nearby Forest of Arden, to sheepherding, to small-town gossip, to village fairs and markets. Part of the richness of Shakespeare's work is the influence felt there of the various worlds in which he lived: the world of metropolitan London, the world of small-town and rural England,

the world of the theater, and the worlds of craftsmen and shepherds.

That Shakespeare inhabited such worlds we know from surviving London and Stratford documents, as well as from the evidence of the plays and poems themselves. From such records we can sketch the dramatist's life. We know from his works that he was a voracious reader. We know from legal and business documents that he was a multifaceted theater man who became a wealthy landowner. We know a bit about his family life and a fair amount about his legal and financial dealings. Most scholars today depend upon such evidence as they draw their picture of the world's greatest playwright. Such, however, has not always been the case. Until the late eighteenth century, the William Shakespeare who lived in most biographies was the creation of legend and tradition. This was the Shakespeare who was supposedly caught poaching deer at Charlecote, the estate of Sir Thomas Lucy close by Stratford; this was the Shakespeare who fled from Sir Thomas's vengeance and made his way in London by taking care of horses outside a playhouse; this was the Shakespeare who reportedly could barely read, but whose natural gifts were extraordinary, whose father was a butcher who allowed his gifted son sometimes to help in the butcher shop, where William supposedly killed calves "in a high style," making a speech for the occasion. It was this legendary William Shakespeare whose Falstaff (in *1* and *2 Henry IV*) so pleased Queen Elizabeth that she demanded a play about Falstaff in love, and demanded that it be written in fourteen days (hence the existence of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*). It was this legendary Shakespeare who reached the top of his acting career in the roles of the Ghost in *Hamlet* and old Adam in *As You Like It*—and who died of a fever con-