"Against her will, as it appears": Making Margaret Quiet and Good in *Much Ado about Nothing*

Kelsey Brooke Smith
Brigham Young University

Much Ado about Nothing, Shakespeare's most frequently performed comedy,[1] often centers on the witty banter and relationship of Beatrice and Benedick. Though the dramatic plot centers around Hero and Claudio, the actors playing Beatrice and Benedick are nonetheless the first billed in theater and film adaptations, and the pair's romance features heavily in *Much Ado* marketing. In their content advisory for example, the Utah Shakespeare Festival described their 2024 production of *Much Ado* by claiming that Beatrice and Benedick are one of Shakespeare's "most popular and best-matched couples" and also warning that the play comes with "sexual puns and innuendo" and "themes of deceit and infidelity."[2] Placing Beatrice and Benedick at the fore is a good marketing strategy, but the omnipresent "themes of infidelity" are often cut or softened in modern productions. One of these softening approaches is the routine abridgment of the character of Margaret—Hero's waiting gentlewoman—who plays a key role in the central deceit of the play.

Despite recent trends which add female roles to modern Shakespeare productions,[3] the paring down of Margaret's character still smacks of a modern agenda. Margaret's character can be interpreted as challenging modern conceptions of "good women" —women who are independent, decisive, fully agential, and who refuse to be pitted against other women either romantically or

Journal of the Wooden O. Vol 24, 41-58

ISSN: 1539-5758

sexually. In her few brief scenes, Margaret demonstrates a wit to match Beatrice's, an impressive knack for innuendo, a purported illicit romantic encounter, and a few flirty moments with Benedick that may tarnish his happily-ever-after with Beatrice. Additionally, Margaret's choices and motivations remain frustratingly ambiguous throughout the play, and her character adds to the play's unpopular subtexts of female rivalry and a wandering male gaze. Yet an unabridged Margaret more faithfully embodies *Much Ado*'s pervasive anxiety about infidelity and reveals modern audiences' continued discomfort around cheating, unstable relationships, and women who do not conform to current ideals of good women.

Margaret's Origins & Textual Persona

Margaret's role, while small, is nonetheless integral to the central plot of the play—the impending marriage between Claudio and Hero. Borachio, a henchman of the play's rather flat villain, Don John, proposes to thwart the upcoming nuptials by staging an amorous encounter between himself and Margaret to fool Claudio into thinking that Hero is unchaste. While the characters of Beatrice and Benedick are largely thought to be Shakespeare's own plot creations,[4] the Hero and Claudio plotline and the Borachio-Margaret deception are drawn directly from Shakespeare's presumed sources.[5] A maid or waiting gentlewoman who assists in her mistress's besmirching, is found in three of his sources: *Orlando Furioso, The Rocke of Regarde,* and *The Fairie Queen*.[6]

In each of these three sources, the motivations and intentions of the Margaret character are much clearer than in *Much Ado*. In Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, the Margaret character, Dalinda, is an "unwitting accomplice" to villain Polinesso's machinations.[7] While Dalinda reveals that she wore her mistress Ginevra's clothes during an amorous encounter with Polinesso, Dalinda does not intend for her temporary roleplay to frame Ginevra. Rather she intends to please Polinesso without knowledge of his devious intentions. While Dalinda does "[take] on greater complexity as a maid who resembles her mistress and enjoys becoming her substitute,"[8] her devious intentions toward Ginevra are minimal. The Margaret character in Edmund Spenser's *The Fairie Queen*, Pyrene, is motivated by similar, unquestioning

devotion to the villainous Philemon. Spenser describes Pyrene as a "Mayden proud through praise, and mad through loue,"[9] who is easily persuaded to don her mistress's clothing in response to Philemon's manipulative flattery. Dalinda and Pyrene are both foolish and perhaps a bit vacuous, but aren't villainous.

In *The Rocke of Regarde,* the Margaret character, Rosina, is more conniving. She is described as "wild" and intends to directly compete with and deceive her mistress, Giletta.[10] Rosina assists the villain Frizaldo in drafting a false letter to her true love interest, Rinaldo, though she doesn't don Giletta's clothing during her amorous encounter with Frizaldo. When Frizaldo inevitably turns on Rosina and tries to kill her, she evades death and later is instrumental in revealing Frizaldo's villainy and ensuring the marriage of Giletta to Rinaldo.[11]

Margaret is in many ways an amalgamation of Dalinda, Pyrene, and Rosina. While Shakespeare's text supports her portrayal as "an unwitting accomplice," Margaret's intentions are more ambiguous than any of her counterparts because there is no written moment in *Much Ado* where Margaret addresses her encounter with Borachio or even performs it. In their respective sagas it is Dalinda, Pyrene, and Rosina who personally confess and vindicate their mistresses. In *Much Ado*, however, it is instead the bumbling Dogberry and his watchmen who uncover Borachio's machinations. While Margaret's existence and purported cooperation with Borachio is pivotal to the plot of *Much Ado*, her small speaking parts in acts 2, 3, and 5 do little to illuminate her intentions and instead present rather bemusing peripheral complications to the central plot.

Margaret's first appearance in the play comes in act 2, scene 1, when she briefly dances with Benedick and then Balthasar at the beginning of the masque. The first textual indication of any relationship between Margaret and Borachio is in act 2, when Borachio (without Margaret present) tells Don John that his favor with Margaret allows him to "appoint her to look out at her lady's chamber window / . . . at any unseasonable instant of the night" (2.2.16-18).[12] Borachio explains that Don John should position Prince and Claudio so that they can view this late-night encounter and "hear me call Margaret 'Hero,' hear Margaret term / me 'Claudio,' and bring them to see this the very / night before the intended wedding" (2.2.43-45).[13] The window scene itself is

not scripted, and the encounter is only relayed to the audience second-hand by Borachio as he drunkenly recounts to fellow henchman Conrade how he "wooed Margaret, the Lady Hero's gentlewoman, / by the name of Hero" (3.3.145-46). Borachio tells Conrade that Margaret leaned out Hero's window bidding Borachio, "a thousand / times good night" (3.3.147-48), and that his own villainy "and partly the dark night" (3.3.157) convinced the Prince and Claudio that they were witnessing an amorous encounter between Hero and a lover.[14] Later, when Borachio is brought before Leonato in act 5, scene 1, he adds the detail that he courted "Margaret in Hero's garments" (5.1.248), which surely helped the deceit's success.

Margaret's motives and the extent of her unchastity remain unknown during act 4, scene 1, when Claudio shames Hero at the altar. What he sees transpire between Borachio and Margaret is not necessarily an explicitly sexual encounter but a "talk," albeit a rather raunchy one. Claudio asks Hero, "what man was he talked with you yesternight / Out at your window betwixt twelve and one?" (4.1.88-89), and Don Pedro, Don John's non-villainous brother, testifies that he, Claudio, and Don John did see Hero, or rather Margaret,

> talk with a ruffian at her chamber window
> Who hath indeed, most like a liberal villain,
> Confessed the vile encounters they have had
> A thousand times in secret. (4.1.95-99)

Don John probably further hyperbolizes the encounter by describing it as "not to be spoke of! / There is not chastity enough in language, / Without offense, to utter [the vile encounters]" (4.1.101-103). The unchastity that Claudio and Don Pedro have purportedly seen is at most a raunchy conversation, and the encounter's most vile descriptions come from Don John, a particularly untrustworthy narrator.

Margaret's innocence is eventually established by Borachio who defends her when his own villainy is revealed in act 5. Leonato says he believes Margaret "was packed in all this wrong, / hired to it by [Don John]" (5.1.313-314), and Borachio swears,

> No, by my soul, she was not
> Nor knew not what she did when she spoke to me,

> But always hath been just and virtuous
> In anything that I do know by her. (5.1.315-318)

Considering that the Borachio characters in *Orlando Furioso* and *The Faerie Queen* try to kill Dalinda and Rosina after their amorous encounters, Borachio's defense of Margaret is laudable (as far as villains go). Borachio's testimony that Margaret is "just and virtuous" seems to be enough to vouch for Margaret's innocence, and Leonato hurriedly forgives Margaret before the final wedding scene, declaring that Margaret "was in some fault for this / Although against her will, as it appears / In the true course of all the question" (5.4.4-6). Ultimately, Margaret is not given the chance to explain herself. She is portrayed as an "unwitting accomplice," but her role in Hero's besmirching remains enigmatical.

But what are Margaret's intentions toward the man with whom she actually has conversations? While Margaret has no scripted moments with Borachio, she does have two with Benedick, though the first is subject to some editorial disagreement. Margaret's first speaking part in act 2, scene 1, is listed in the 1623 Folio as a short exchange with Benedick and Balthasar[15] during the masque scene:

> *Bene*: Well, I would you did like me.
> *Mar*: So would not I for your own ſake, for I Haue manie ill qualities.
> *Bene*: Which is one?
> *Mar*: I ſay my prayers alowd.
> *Ben*: [sic] I loue you the better, the hearers may cry Amen.
> *Mar*: God match me with a good dancer.
> *Balt*: Amen.
> *Mar*: And God keepe him out of my ſight when the daunce is done: anſwer Clarke.
> *Balt*: No more words the Clark is anſwered.[16]

The 1600 Quarto of *Much Ado* has the same character speech attributions in this scene though they are spelled slightly differently.[17] However, many editions of *Much Ado*, including scholarly editions like the Oxford edition, have "corrected" this scene by assigning all the lines in this exchange to Balthasar.[18] Given the many speech attribution errors in the first editions of *Much Ado*, "corrections" of this nature are often merited, but this is a chaotic scene with few stage directions in general, and assigning Benedick's lines to Balthasar in this scene is presumptuous.

Benedick's lines with Margaret in this exchange are clearly flirtatious, which supports earlier textual references to Benedick's reputation as a ladies' man. In act 1, scene 1, Beatrice describes Benedick as a "good soldier to a lady" (1.1.53), and Leonato jokes that he was not worried about his wife being unfaithful before giving birth to Hero "for then [Benedick] was a child" (1.1.105-06). If Benedick is indeed a womanizer, as he's been described, his flirtations with Margaret aren't surprising. Whether Margaret is resisting or responding to them is more interpretive. When Margaret's claims that one of her "ill qualities" is that she says her prayers aloud, and Benedick responds, "I love you the better; the hearers may cry / 'Amen'" (2.1.103-104), Benedick may be insinuating that any hearers of Margaret's prayers would have intimate access to her bedchamber and that such prayers or cries of "Amen" could occur during lovemaking. Balthasar, who is Margaret's next dance partner appears to have overheard their conversation, cheekily opening his exchange with Margaret by saying, "Amen." Of course, how amorous or flirtatious these exchanges are performed or received is largely left up to the actors and directors of *Much Ado*. However, modern adaptations often replace Benedick with Balthasar, or even Borachio during this scene. Perhaps modern directors want to give the audience context for the impending Margaret-Borachio window scene, which is now frequently staged, as well as to downplay any suggestion of romance or sexual tension between Benedick and Margaret.

Margaret in Modern Film & Stage Adaptations

Film and stage adaptations of *Much Ado* in the past four decades regularly abridge and adapt Margaret in favor of a more stream-lined and stable romance between Beatrice and Benedick.[19] The 1984 BBC *Much Ado* adaptation does *not* abridge any of Margaret's lines, but downplays any romantic tension between Margaret and Benedick in both their scenes. The actor playing Margaret is not flirtatious and appears annoyed with both her masked dance partners in act 2. Her line, "God match me with a good dancer," literally refers to her bumbling dance partner's missteps and isn't taken as sexual innuendo. Yet neither of her two masked dance partners are Benedick whose first appearance in the

scene is when he dances with Beatrice a few lines later. The BBC adaptation remains faithful to almost the entire original script and there is no window scene shown between Margaret and Borachio.[20]

The Royal Shakespeare Company's 2014 *Much Ado* adaptation replaces Benedick with Balthasar for the entire conversation, and Margaret, who is Hero's maid in Edwardian England, is clearly of lower social status. This production likewise does not stage the window scene.[21] The Utah Shakespeare Festival's 2024 stage production of *Much Ado* also faithfully omits staging the window scene, though they replace Benedick with Borachio as Margaret's dance partner in act 2, scene 1, implying a clear relationship between the two. In this production, Margaret also draws attention to her sexual desirability. She wears the most cleavage-baring dress of any woman in the play and her exchange with Borachio is decidedly suggestive.[22]

In Kenneth Branagh's 1993 film adaptation of *Much Ado,* Borachio again replaces Benedick in this scene. Margaret and Borachio are depicted as giggling and groping each other in a corner while she admits to saying her prayers aloud. Branagh also stages the window scene as explicitly sexual. There is no talking at the window save for Borachio loudly calling out Hero's name during sex.[23] In Joss Whedon's modernized 2012 film adaptation of *Much Ado*, Benedick is replaced with a nameless henchman who flirts with Margaret, depicted as a maid, during an extravagant garden party. In this adaptation, Margaret's window scene also involves explicit sex between Margaret and Borachio, with the added detail of Margaret wearing Hero's wedding dress which gives interesting context to Margaret's reluctance for Hero to wear it in act 3, scene 1.[24]

Filmed stage adaptations, including Jonathan Coy's 2011 adaptation in Wyndham Theatre and the National Youth Theatre's 2023 performance, also keep Margaret's masque exchange but replace Benedick during this scene. In Coy's adaptation, Margaret flirts with a waiter, not Benedick, during the masque and then has a drunken encounter with Borachio during the bachelorette party. Her character is mistaken for Hero because Borachio has her wear Hero's bridal veil during their drunken hookup, thus implying Margaret's unwitting, and perhaps even nonconsensual participation in the deceit.[25] The National Youth Theatre's

modernized and heavily adapted 2023 stage performance cleverly frames *Much Ado* as a reality television show, and Margaret and Borachio are presented as a couple from the get-go. Benedick is replaced with Borachio in the masque scene, and with the help of Borachio, Don John surreptitiously films one of Borachio and Margaret's sexual encounters in a way that deceives Claudio.[26]

That's all to say that recent adaptations of *Much Ado* tend to explicitly show the window scene and portray it as much more involved than Margaret merely "talking with a ruffian at her chamber window." Perhaps directors feel that making the Borachio-Margaret encounter more explicit is essential for modern audiences' sympathy, or at least credulity—toward Claudio's outrage (even if his determination to humiliate Hero at the altar is still seen as misguided). In a play whose original and derivative dramatic core is not only about Hero's presumed cheating but also her loss of virginity, it's the cheating that's played up in modern adaptations.[27] Ironically, however, many modern adaptations replace Bendick with Borachio or Balthasar in act 2, scene 1, to downplay any insinuation that Benedick is a cheater or interested in Margaret.

Yet the specter of cheating is paramount to the play itself. Beatrice and Benedick are clearly preoccupied with infidelity. In act 2, scene 1, Beatrice implies that she and Benedick have had a past relationship, and something went awry: "Marry once before [Benedick] won [my heart] of me with false / dice" (2.1.275-76). In the same scene, she responds to Leonato' s joke that she'll never marry by implying that any husband of hers would have horns because she would surely cuckold him (2.1.25-27). In some of the last lines of the play Claudio states that Benedick will be a "double-dealer" unless Beatrice "look exceedingly narrow to [Benedick]" (5.4.118, 120), and in the most nascent stages of marriage, he nevertheless implies that to marry is to be cuckolded: "There is no staff more reverend than one tipped / with horn" (5.4.127-28). These persistent references to Benedick's reputation and the propensity of both Beatrice and Benedick to stray don't mean that cheating is inevitably in the couple's future. Yet the omnipresent fear of cuckolding and infidelity is textually supported, and Margaret's deception and flirtatious interactions with Benedick certainly highlight those themes.

Margaret as Beatrice's Rival?

It goes against a fundamental theme of the play to minimize scenes that support widespread anxiety of cheating and cuckolding. Yet the almost ubiquitous removal of Margaret's initial exchange with Benedick, in both text and performance, suggests that modern directors and audiences are a bit squeamish about cheating. This may be why many productions of *Much Ado* also often cut or abridge the conversation between Margaret and Benedick in act 5, scene 2. This conversation is already short, only 25 lines, and occurs after Beatrice and Benedick have declared their love for each other but before they discover that Hero's innocence has been proven. What Margaret knows or doesn't know about Claudio's accusations against Hero and her pretended death remains unknown. The conversation between Margaret and Benedick begins with Benedick's request that Margaret help him "to the speech of Beatrice" (5.2.2). Benedick's desire to speak to Beatrice is clear, but Margaret is determined to turn the focus on her:

Margaret: Will you then write me a sonnet in praise of my beauty?

Benedick: In so high a style, Margaret, that no man living shall come over it, for in most comely truth, thou deservest it.

Margaret: To have no man come over me why, shall I always keep below stairs?

Benedick: Thy wit is as quick as the greyhound's mouth, it catches.

Margaret: And yours as blunt as the fencer's foils, which hit but hurt not.

Benedick: A most manly wit, Margaret, it will not hurt a woman. And so I pray thee call Beatrice. I give thee the bucklers.

Margaret: Give us the swords. We have bucklers of our own.

Benedick: If you use them, Margaret, you must put in the pikes with a vice—and they are dangerous weapons for maids.

Margaret: Well, I will call Beatrice to you, who I think hath legs.

Benedick: And therefore will come. (5.2.4-25)

In this exchange Margaret is clearly the character who introduces flirtation and innuendo. Magdalena Adamcyzk argues that

Benedick's "come over" is literal and gentlemanly while "Margaret's intention behind using it is to communicate bawdry."[28] Yet Benedick's and Margaret's intentions can be read in myriad ways: as an innocent or meaningless interaction, a more involved "skirmish of wit" (1.1.61), or perhaps a revelation of genuine sexual or romantic interest. Benedick does praise Margaret's beauty, "for in most comely truth, thou deservest it," and Margaret eventually relents and fetches Beatrice, though perhaps Benedick's comment on "pikes in vices," a culmination of the phallic and vaginal references, could be read as Benedick's dismissal.

Carol Cook reads this exchange as a larger commentary on female and male relations within the play. She argues that *Much Ado* consistently uses phallic imagery in a violent way: "In exchanging quips with Margaret, Benedick describes her wit as a 'grey-hound's mouth' that 'catches' (5.2.11-12), but he claims swordlike phallic wit as a masculine prerogative that women only wield through usurpation."[29] Johannes Ungelenk similarly argues that the "phallic implication [of the conversation] is exposed by Margaret in an exchange of witty remarks with Benedick, who, tired of talking to her (instead of Beatrice), acknowledges his verbal defeat."[30] Whether this exchange is a symbol of the limits of female (or male) wit or a gesture of sexual interest—either solely by Margaret or by both Margaret and Benedick—is unclear.

Consequently, many modern portrayals cut this scene which can feel abrupt and contextless especially if Benedick has already been replaced with Borachio or Balthasar in act 2. Three adaptations of the six previously discussed keep most or portions of this scene: the BBC's 1984 adaptation, Whedon's 2012 modernized adaptation, and the RSC's 2014 adaptation. Only the BBC adaptation retains the entire exchange and Margaret, who has been portrayed as whiny and generally unappealing throughout the adaptation, is a clear annoyance to Benedick who just wants to talk to Beatrice. While Margaret seems flirtatious, Benedick's line, "you must put in the pikes with the vice," offends Margaret who leaves in huff.[31] In Whedon's version, Margaret performs the line "Will you then write me a sonnet?" sadly and wistfully. In Whedon's adaptation, Margaret is portrayed as sincerely interested in Borachio and is perhaps becoming aware that she's being used. Benedick's offer to write her a sonnet is more gallant than

flirtatious in this context. In this film Benedick never delivers the "pikes with a vice" line, and Margaret leaves of her own accord after admonishing Benedick that women "have bucklers of their own."[32] In the RSC version, where Margaret has been portrayed as a kindly, older servant, Benedick and Margaret's conversation is cut after Benedick's line where he calls Margaret's wit "quick as the greyhound's mouth," and before Margaret introduces any explicit innuendo.[33] While this scene can be performed in a way that doesn't threaten the development of Beatrice and Benedick's relationship, its smutty potential is perhaps troubling enough that it's frequently cut or abridged.

Yet in the text Margaret clearly serves as a witty foil and possible romantic rival for Beatrice. Furthermore, her banter with Benedick and Beatrice is laced with innuendo and points toward a reality wherein if "men were deceivers ever" (2.3.65) there must be women that assist them in that sexual deceit (and Margaret may have already assisted Borachio). Margaret's social status, and thus romantic rival potential, is also up for interpretation. In *Much Ado*, she is Hero's "waiting gentlewoman" and not a maid as Whetstone's *The Rocke of Regarde* portrays her, and ladies-in-waiting were often prime objects for sexual conquests and, if of high enough status, romantic rivals for the ladies they waited upon.[34] Margaret's cheeky punning and banter may also imply an elevated social status. In her study of punning ladies-in-waiting in Shakespeare's plays,[35] Adamcyzk posits that during "Elizabethan times puns enjoyed their highest status ever," so lower-ranking characters like Margaret punning with their social superiors of Beatrice and Benedick "was not necessarily considered an outward [indication] of . . . impertinence."[36] But Margaret's play on language does serve as a persuasive argument that she is meant "to be perceived as a sharp-witted [figure]."[37]

Paul Rapley interprets Margaret as Shakespeare's clear nod to the "frequency of extra-marital intercourse among the highborn" and argues that her "lexical knowingness . . . [in her conversation with Benedick in act 5]" implies obvious sexual experience. Rapley further insinuates that Margaret's potential sexual rivalry with Beatrice would have been familiar to London audiences: "the boy playing Margaret certainly has been given plenty with which to project a type of woman who might, indeed, dwell in London

or be watching from the galleries."[38] While Margaret is generally interpreted as an "unwitting accomplice" in *Much Ado*, she can still be interpreted as a symbol of the reality of extra-marital escapades and perhaps as a threat to Beatrice's relationship with Benedick.

This is reinforced by Margaret's longest verbal exchange where she establishes herself as a rival to Beatrice's wit. In act 3, scene 4, a scene less frequently abridged in *Much Ado* productions, Margaret has a passive aggressive conversation with Hero about Hero's wedding dress.[39] When Hero responds that her heart is heavy (perhaps dismayed to be the vanguard of quaint fashion), Margaret saucily responds that her heart will "be heavier soon by the weight of a man" (3.4.27-28). Margaret then defends her remark by claiming she was ostensibly defending marriage: "Is there any harm in 'the heavier / for a husband'? None, I think, an it be the right / husband and the right wife" (3.4.34-36).

When Beatrice enters the scene, Margaret swiftly makes Beatrice her new target and leaves behind any pretense of honorable marriage in her innuendo when she riffs on Beatrice's declaration that she has a cold and is "stuffed" or unable to smell (3.4.62): "A maid, and stuffed! There's goodly catching of cold" (3.4.63-64). Beatrice is a "maid" with purportedly no current romantic attachments, and to be stuffed—either pregnant or sexually penetrated—would be a tad more scandalous. Beatrice professes shock at Margaret's "apprehension" (3.4.66) to which Margaret proudly declares that her wit "become[s] me rarely" (3.4.67-68) and then pointedly prescribes "distilled carduus benedictus" for Beatrice's "stuffing" (3.4.71). Margaret proceeds to deliver something of a sermon, admonishing Beatrice that she believes Beatrice looks "with [her] eyes as other women do" (3.4.88-89), and that she too will be converted to love.[40] The scene ends quickly after that, but the audience is given a rare moment where Beatrice is bested in a battle of wits. Margaret gets the literal last word declaring that her own wit keeps the pace of a "fast gallop" (3.4.91) which, in this case, is faster than Beatrice's. While Margaret's "witty reveal" doesn't occur until this scene, her emergence as a sparring partner worthy of Beatrice does make her conversation with Benedick in act 5, scene 2 smack more of rivalry.

A Quiet and Good Margaret

Much Ado thematically centers on the tenuousness of reputation and reality and how easily hearsay can undo and create realities. Yet modern adaptations rarely rely on Margaret to communicate any sort of thematic tenuousness. Instead, her character is abridged or performed to make her as unproblematic as possible. She is often portrayed as a maid, or someone clearly less marriageable than Hero and Beatrice: a minor character who is sexually interesting to Borachio but irrelevant to Benedick. Margaret's wittiest exchanges are cut or abridged not only because they involve Benedick but because they are difficult to contextualize within the broader context of her deceit. Is Margaret unbothered that Hero's been declared as dead after she is accused of unchastity? Does Margaret not realize the devastating effects of her roleplay with Borachio?

Directors and actors are frequently keen to answer those questions by visibly exonerating Margaret from culpability in Don John's deceit to soothe audiences who may be distracted by the lack of closure regarding Margaret's intentions. In Branagh's film version of *Much Ado,* there's a close-up of Margaret during Hero's initial wedding scene where she appears shocked and horrified that her rendezvous with Borachio is the source of Claudio's accusations. Margaret is also shown during the final wedding scene, visibly flustered and penitent, as she is pithily cleared by Leonato's statement that she participated in Don John's scheme "against her will, as it appears" (5.4.5).[41] In fact, most adaptations include Margaret in the final wedding scene to provide the audience with a sense of clear, positive resolution.

In a "Roundtable Discussion" focusing on the Utah Shakespeare Festival's 2016 production of *Much Ado*, director David Ivers explained that he included Margaret in the final wedding scene to provide that sense of resolution:

> There's no prescription for Margaret being in the scene or not [but] I think it's seriously troubling if she's not . . . Kelly Rogers, who plays Margaret, felt very strongly that we should find a moment for her to have a chance to say, 'Whoa, this thing . . .went too far.' . . . that might go a long way with a modern audience to validate this larger family. After all, the whole play is about watching how information affects people to change or not. I have to believe in the choice because I

> believe it gives someone voice, potentially, that doesn't have one.[42]

Leslie Lank, who played Hero in the 2016 adaptation also explained that this moment between Hero and Margaret allowed audiences to see a positive relationship between the two women:

> Kelly [the actor who played Margaret] and I have also found a moment at the end where Leonato says that Margaret was a part of the deception but she didn't know what was happening. Then Kelly comes over to me and we have a little silent moment of forgiveness. I love it. We kind of just hold each other, and sometimes she says, "I'm sorry." If that moment didn't exist at the wedding, if she stood away from me, and I obviously don't know what's happening and why she's avoiding me, it might be harder for me to forgive her. After all, the girls have each other's backs, and that's a truly important relationship.[43]

Karen Martin-Cotton who played Beatrice concurs,

> I also love that in this production, David has Margaret woven in closely as one of the girls who are almost part of the family. I like the dynamic of a world in which women can live different ways. For some women, it is part of what they're expected to do to be chaste, but other women certainly can make their own choices.[44]

Modern audiences *are* seriously troubled when women don't have each other's back: when Margaret is either villainous or completely unwitting, when Margaret appears unconcerned with Hero's fate, or when Margaret is too flirtatious with Benedick. It's an intriguing idea that a visual reconciliation between Margaret and Hero gives Margaret "a voice" when her original textual voice is so frequently tweaked, abridged, and cut to make her, and *Much Ado's* plot, more palatable to modern audiences.

Margaret's literary predecessors, Dalinda, Pyrene, and Rosina, are absolute pawns to the men they wish to end up with. But whether unwitting or purposefully deceitful, women who allow themselves to be controlled and used by men at the expense of their female relationships are often considered the worst types of women by modern audiences. These bad women sacrifice female comradery on the altar of patriarchy, and use their agency to go after other women and prioritize misguided self-interest.

Shakespeare's Margaret is a more nuanced rendering than her predecessors, but her character functions to serve the plot's focus on hearsay and infidelity rather than provide any further insight into her motivations or desires. While it's speculative to wonder at early modern reactions to Margaret, Dalinda, Pyrene, and Rosina, it's likely these women would be interpreted as bad for their unchastity rather than for their lack of agency and self-respect.

Making Margaret "good" in service of creating a more modern comedy is an appealing and marketable project. So many aspects of *Much Ado* read as modern and inclusive; Beatrice is one of Shakespeare's most well-developed and agential female characters. Messina is a lovely setting where men repent of their troubling treatment of women, where women have each other's backs, and where egalitarianism in heterosexual relationships is hopefully gestured at. But by portraying and buying into that Messina, we, like the play's main characters, are complicit in choosing a fantastical reality that ignores the unresolved issues surrounding infidelity, relationship instability, and the tenuous social positions of the female characters. The neat packaging of Margaret as a good and sympathetic woman for modern audiences reflects our continued discomfort with infidelity and relationship instability. When we are clamoring for more female representation in modern Shakespeare adaptations, it is ironic that modern adaptations largely silence a female character who doesn't support contemporary ideals of good monogamy, good friendships, and good women.

Notes

1. Royal Shakespeare Company, "Much Ado about Nothing Dates and Sources," 2024. https://www.rsc.org.uk/much-ado-about-nothing/about-the-play/dates-and-sources.

2. Utah Shakespeare Festival, "Much Ado About Nothing," 2024. https://www.bard.org/plays/much-ado-about-nothing/.

3. These casting choices may involve protagonist gender-reversals like Helen Mirren as "Prospera" in the 2010 film version of *The Tempest*, but more often female actors are cast in smaller male roles, e.g., The Royal Shakespeare Company cast Nadia Albina as the Duke of Venice in their 2015 production of *Othello*, and Claire Price as Escalus in their 2019 adaptation of *Measure for Measure*. When director Simon Godwin cast a female actor in the role of "Timon" in the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2018 *Timon of Athens*, he stated that when women are cast in "parts traditionally played by men," modern audiences can then "discover that Shakespeare was really interested in what's humane, what's universal, [not]

what's gender specific": Royal Shakespeare Company, "Women Playing Male Roles," 2018. https://www.rsc.org.uk/news/archive/women-playing-male-roles.

4. Royal Shakespeare Company, "Much Ado about Nothing Dates and Sources."

5. Kenneth Muir, *Shakespeare's Sources: Comedies and Tragedies* (London: Methuen & Co. LTD, 1957): 53.

6. Geoffrey Bullough, ed. *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), 62-66. Another of Shakespeare's presumed sources is Matteo Bandello's *Novelle* (1554) which features a heroine whose chastity is unfairly maligned but includes no lady-in-waiting character.

7. Muir, *Shakespeare's Sources*, 53

8. Jack D'Amico, "The Dangers and Virtues of Theatricality in Ariosto's Orlando Furioso," *MLN* 130.1 (2015): 42-62, 43.

9. A. C. Hamilton, Hiroshi Yamashita, Toshiyuki Suzuki, and Shohachi Fukuda, eds. *Spenser The Faerie Queen*. 2nd ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 10.2013), 192.

10. George Whetstone, *The Rocke of Regard Divided into Foure Parts: The First, the Castle of Delight...* (London: H. Middleton for Robert Waley, 1576. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Digital Collections): 46-47. https://name.umdl.umich.edu/A15046.0001.001.

11. In these stories, the unchastity of the heroine's "waiting gentlewoman" provides a startling counterpoint to stories whose dramatic core hinges on the consequences of the presumed unchastity of their mistresses. There's very little plot devoted to unpacking the consequences of the unchastity of the lady-in-waiting or maid.

12. William Shakespeare, *Much Ado about Nothing*, ed. Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018).

13. Editors disagree on whether Margaret calling Borachio "Claudio" is a printing error. Either this is a mistake, though this "mistake" is found in both the Quarto and Folio editions of *Much Ado*, and should be replaced with "Borachio," or rather, as the Folger editors Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine suggest: "Margaret may be led to think that she and Borachio are pretending to be Hero and Claudio," 202.

14. Borachio's admonition is fortuitously overheard by Dogberry's watch and is what leads to Hero's eventual exoneration.

15. Balthasar's only other speaking moment in the play is when he sings "Sigh No More" in act 2, scene 3.

16. Folger Shakespeare Library, "Read a Shakespeare First Folio," 2025: 124-25 of 912. https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeare-in-print/first-folio/bookreader-68/

17. The1600 First Quarto lists Margaret in this scene as "Mar." or "Marg." Benedick is listed as "Bene" only, and Balthasar is listed as both "Balth" and "Balsth." Boston Public Library, "Facsimile Viewer: Much Ado About Nothing, Quarto 1," 2025: 16 of 76. https://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/facsimile/overview/book/Q1_Ado.html.

18. William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, The Oxford Shakespeare The Complete Works, Second Edition, eds. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 575.

19. For this project, I analyze seven productions of *Much Ado about Nothing*. I watched six film and filmed stage adaptations of Much Ado available via Digital Theatre Plus, the BYU Library. I also attended the Utah Shakespeare Festival 2024 stage production in August 2024. The modern adaptation of *Anyone But You* that I mention in footnote 23 is available on various online streaming services. Additionally, in lieu of available copies of the filmed stage adaptations of the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2012 *Much Ado* and the Utah Shakespeare Festival's 2016 *Much Ado*, I analyzed textual critiques.

20. This BBC stage production was performed in 1984 but transferred to DVD in 2001: *Much Ado about Nothing*, ed. Jonathan Miller et al. Performed by Robert Lindsay, Cherie Lunghi, Jon Finch, and Pamela Moiseiwitsch (New York: Ambrose Video Pub., 2001), DVD.

21. *Love's Labour's Won* (*Much Ado about Nothing*), directed by Christopher Luscombe and Robin Lough. Performed by Edward Bennett, Michelle Terry, John Hodgkinson, and Emma Manton (Royal Shakespeare Company, 2014), Digital Theatre+.

22. *Much Ado About Nothing*, directed by Brad Carroll. Performed by Walter Kmiec, Melinda Parrett, Rodney Lizcano, and Valerie Martire (Utah Shakespeare Festival, August 7, 2024), Stage Performance.

23. *Much Ado About Nothing*, directed by Kenneth Branagh. Performed by Kenneth Branagh, Emma Thompson, Denzel Washington, and Imelda Staunton (MGM Domestic Television, 1993), Prime Video.

24. *Much Ado About Nothing*, directed by Joss Whedon. Performed by Amy Acker, Alexis Denisof, Reed Diamond, and Ashley Johnson (Lionsgate, 2012), Prime Video. The 2023 romantic comedy *Anyone But You*, loosely based on *Much Ado*, features Margaret as Ben's (Benedick's) ex-girlfriend with no connection to the Hero or Beatrice characters. Margaret is a straight-forward romantic rival for Beatrice and there is no cheating deception in the film. *Anyone But You*, directed by Will Gluck. Performed by Sydney Sweeney, Glen Powell, Gata, and Charlee Fraser (Sony Pictures Entertainment, 2023), Netflix.

25. *Much Ado about Nothing*, directed by Josie Rourke. Performed by David Tennant, Catherine Tate, Adam James, and Natalie Thomas (Wyndham's Theatre, 2011), Digital Theatre+.

26. *Much Ado about Nothing*, directed by Josie Daxter. Performed by Daniel Cawley, Isolde Fenton, Jack D'Arcy, and Nathaly Sabino (National Youth Theatre, 2023), Digital Theatre+.

27. Some modern adaptations, including Iqbal Khan, *The Oxford Shakespeare The Complete Works*, 2nd ed.'s 2012 adaptation of the Royal Shakespeare Company's *Much Ado* continue to emphasize the themes of chastity and honor. In this adaptation, set in contemporary India, Khan stages act 4, scene 1 as something that Meera Syal, who played Beatrice, describes as "almost an honour killing . . . where the men turn like a pack of dogs on an innocent woman." Sita Thomas, "*Much Ado about Nothing*, dir. by Iqbal Khan (review)," *Asian Theatre Journal* 32.2 (2015).

28. Magdalena Adamczyk, "Interactional Aspects of Language-Based Humour in Shakespeare's Comedies: The Dynamics of Punning by Ladies-in-Waiting," *Atlantis* 36.1 (2014): 11-30.

29. Carol Cook, "'The Sign and Semblance of Her Honor': Reading Gender Difference in Much Ado about Nothing," *PMLA* 101.2 (1986): 186-202.

30. Johannes Ungelenk "Caressing with Words: *Much Ado about Nothing*," *Touching at a Distance* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 170-171.

31. *Much Ado*, Jonathan Miller.

32. *Much Ado*, Joss Whedon.

33. *Love's Labour's Won*, Christopher Luscombe.

34. Some fifty years before *Much Ado* was first performed around 1598, Henry VIII had numerous affairs with his wives' ladies-in-waiting, and did, over the course of his life, marry three of them. John S. Morrill, "Henry VIII, King of England," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, June 29, 2024. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Henry-VIII-king-of-England.

35. In her study of punning ladies-in-waiting in *Twelfth Night*, *The Two Gentleman of Verona*, and *Much Ado*, Adamczyk acknowledges the ubiquity of punning in Shakespeare's plays, but demonstrates that ladies-in-waiting discourse is "proportionately more punning than that of seemingly more heavyweight punsters" (15). For example, Margaret's "pun-to-word ratio" is 7.3%, far higher than the clown Feste, from Twelfth Night, who has a ratio of 2.6% (17).

36. Adamczyk, *International Aspects*, 18

37. Adamczyk, *International Aspects*, 26

38. Paul Rapley, "Fudging the Outcome of *Much Ado about Nothing*: How the Villains, Don Pedro and Count Claudio, Are Allowed to Stay and Dance," *Critical Survey* 34.1 (2022): 56-73.

39. Margaret declares that she's seen the Duchess of Milan's dress and then comments that while the Duchess's dress has "cloth o'gold" and is "laced with silver, set with pearls" (3.2.19-20), Hero's gown is only "fine, quaint, graceful, and excellent" (3.2.22) in comparison.

40. At this point in the text Beatrice has not gone public with her affection for Benedick and she does not know she has been tricked into this affection by the machinations of Hero, Ursula, and Margaret in act 3, scene 1.

41. *Much Ado*, Kenneth Branagh.

42. Michael Don Bahr, "Acting Shakespeare: A Roundtable Discussion with Artists from the Utah Shakespeare Festival's 2016 Production of *Much Ado About Nothing*," *Journal of the Wooden O* 16 (2016): 38-55. 49-50.

43. Bahr, "Acting Shakespeare," 50.

44. Bahr, "Acting Shakespeare," 50.