

Disguise in Shakespeare's 'Much Ado About Nothing'

Task 1: Read about disguise in 'Much Ado About Nothing'. Then discuss the questions below.

Disguise is very important in 'Much Ado About Nothing', particularly in the relationship between a woman called Beatrice and a soldier called Benedick. Beatrice and Benedick, who are both playful and clever, have disliked each other for many years. They often argue and insult each other. At a party, the characters use masks to hide their faces, and pretend to be someone else. This is great fun, as they can say whatever they like without being recognised. Beatrice and Benedick begin a conversation. Benedick is disguised, but Beatrice is not, and she doesn't realise who she is talking to. Benedick tells Beatrice that no one thinks she's funny. Beatrice tells Benedick that everyone thinks he's an idiot. This leads their friends to make a plan. They decide to stop Beatrice and Benedick arguing, and make them fall in love instead.

1. What do you learn about Beatrice and Benedick?
2. What does Benedick say to Beatrice at the party?
3. What does Beatrice say to Benedick?

Task 2A: Read some of the things that Beatrice says about Benedick. Try to guess what they mean then match them with the modern translations.

1. he is the Prince's jester, a very dull fool
2. none but libertines delight in him
3. strikes him into melancholy
4. he both pleases men and angers them
5. only his gift is in devising impossible slanders

Task 2B: Match sentences 1-5 in Task 2A with their modern translations below.

- a. he's only really good at inventing lies about other people
- b. he makes people laugh and at the same time he makes them furious
- c. makes him feel miserable
- d. only immoral people enjoy spending time with him
- e. he's the Prince's clown, a stupid idiot

Task 3: Read an extract from 'Much Ado About Nothing' Act 2, Scene 1.

BENEDICK: I pray you, what is he?

BEATRICE: Why, he is the Prince's jester, a very dull fool, only his gift is in devising impossible slanders. None but libertines delight in him, and the commendation is not in his wit but in his villainy, for he both pleases men and angers them, and then they laugh at him and beat him. I am sure he is in the fleet. I would he had boarded me.

BENEDICK: When I know the gentleman, I'll tell him what you say.

BEATRICE: Do, do. He'll but break a comparison or two on me, which, peradventure not marked or not laughed at, strikes him into melancholy, and then there's a partridge wing saved, for the fool will eat no supper that night.

Modern translation

BENEDICK: Who is this man? Tell me!

BEATRICE: He's the Prince's clown, a stupid idiot. He's only really good at inventing lies about other people. Only immoral people enjoy spending time with him, and that's not because he's funny – it's because he's outrageous. He makes people laugh and at the same time he makes them furious. They laugh at him and then beat him up. I'm sure I saw him out there with the dancers. I'm sure he stepped on my toe!

BENEDICK: When I meet this gentleman, I'll tell him what you've said.

BEATRICE: Yes, please tell him. He'll probably make a joke or two about me – and if no one laughs, that'll make him feel miserable. But that will mean there will be more food for us, as he won't eat anything.

Now discuss these questions.

1. How does Beatrice feel about Benedick? How do you know?
2. What sort of people like him?
3. What effect does he have on people?
4. How does he respond when people don't laugh at his jokes?