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They Have Verified Unjust Things: The Reliability of the Senses in *Much Ado About Nothing*

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Our senses are the foundation of our existence. If we lost all the information given to us by our senses, then the world around us would, for all intents and purposes, cease to exist. Without our senses, we would be suspended in a dark silent void. It is no wonder that Shakespeare constantly refers to the senses in all their different manifestations. How could something so important fail to make it into plays with such universal themes? And yet—the information we receive from our senses is by no means foolproof. In fact, at times it can be ridiculously easy to deceive them, though some are admittedly harder to fool than others. We must constantly interpret the reports given to us by our senses and decide: how reliable are they? This theme of unreliability is one that Shakespeare addresses over and over again in his plays, including Much Ado About Nothing. For the most part, it is the eyes that he deems unreliable, and the ears which are relied on for the truth. At first, Much Ado appears to follow that pattern: the ears reveal truth where the eyes deceive. However, as the deceptions of the play multiply, even the ears appear to be wanting, and it is unclear what faculties remain to discover the truth.

Shakespeare was by no means the first to classify and rank the human senses; on the contrary, the senses have been a subject of study, speculation, and debate from antiquity to modern times. The traditional hierarchy of the senses began with Aristotle’s ranking in his De anima: sight came first, then hearing, smell, taste, and last of all, touch (Jütte 61). Sight and hearing were held above the others as the “higher” senses in terms of usefulness; Charles Bouvelles, a French mathematician and theologian, believed sight and hearing “serve the higher purpose of educating mankind and providing it with spiritual nourishment” (Jütte 61). They are the main vehicles of observation, a quality that certainly makes them the most important senses in the context of Much Ado. However, they are not generally considered to be on equal footing, either in Shakespeare or early modern physiology.

Sight has been considered the premier sense by scholars and philosophers since Plato (he described it once as the “divine” sense) for a variety of reasons (Jütte 35). Aristotle and Plato cited its “cognitive value”, while Charlemagne’s adviser Alcuin credited the eyes’ physical placement in the body as the highest of all the senses (Jütte 64). The most common reason for the eye’s high status was its ability to see over long distances and perceive and identify objects more readily than the other senses (Jütte 65). Visual images were used in education throughout the medieval and early modern periods, and sight was also regarded as the primary source of truth from independent observation (Jütte 67).

Hearing, though seemingly forever doomed to be sight’s “runner-up,” was nevertheless held by medieval Arab and Christian scholars as the primary sense for religious instruction and practice, and was the sense most associated with “knowledge of divine truth” (Jütte 67). Medieval Jewish scholar Bachja be Ascher listed the four main advantages of hearing: it favored those who could be taught only through oratory; anyone could learn by it; it helped resolve any doubts left by visual perception; and when backed up with concrete examples, even oral instruction gains a degree of solidity (Jütte 67). In these cases, hearing and sight might be said to be weighed on different scales, and therefore might be considered equal, as each was the primary sense in a certain field. For the most part, however, Aristotle’s hierarchy held, and sight was generally considered superior to all the other senses, including hearing.

These views did not change much through the early modern era; indeed, they may even have been more widely known in Shakespeare’s time than the Middle Ages. With the advent of the printing press and the renewed interest in classic texts such as those of Aristotle, it is more likely that Shakespeare knew of, or had at least heard of, these scholarly views than if he had lived in an earlier time. However, Shakespeare seems to focus neither on the strengths of the senses nor on which one is the “best,” but rather on their weaknesses, particularly when they are relied on for information without corroboration from another source. For example, in 1 Henry IV, Prince Hal requests verbal confirmation that Falstaff is indeed alive after all, for, he says, “we will not trust our eyes without our ears” (IIV V.v.134-5). Hal mistrusts the evidence of a single sense: sight. He requires confirmation from another source—in this case, his ears—before he will believe what his eyes tell him.

Much Ado About Nothing continues this theme through the multitude of deceptions and “mis-notings” that take place throughout the play. (So many writers have already analyzed the renowned pun of “nothing” and “noting,” which were pronounced the same in the Renaissance, that this writer will simply “note” it, and move on.) Throughout the play, characters are gulled by their senses, a deception that, depending on the situation, either pulls the characters deeper into the mire of conflict, or works to haul them back out again. At first glance, the line between these two types of deception seems to fall between the two main senses in question: sight and hearing.

The seeming dichotomy between eyes and ears in Much Ado can be neatly represented by the two couples of the play: Claudio and Hero’s entire relationship is based on evidence of the eyes, and they quickly find themselves awash in a sea of troubles, while Beatrice and Benedick’s much more solid relationship is a verbal one that relies on hearing to shape its course. From the very beginning, Claudio’s affection is based solely on what he sees. After catching sight of Hero at Leonato’s, Claudio declares to Benedick, “In mine eye, she is the sweetest lady that ever I looked on” (I.i.179). Later on, in his consultation with Don Pedro, he says he has seen her before, but merely “looked on her with a soldier’s eye” (I.i.284). From this we may infer that Claudio has done nothing more than look at his intended bride. He knows nothing of her but what his eyes can tell him: she is pretty. The situation is reminiscent of Romeo and Juliet, another play in which Shakespeare questions the prudence of relying only on one’s eyes. Claudio, like Romeo with Juliet, has no evidence beyond...
that of his eyes to confirm whether Hero is "well worthy," as Don Pedro says (I.i.210), yet he resolves to marry her. He may as well quote Romeo: "Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight. / For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night" (RJ I.v.53-4).

By contrast, Benedick and Beatrice have been long engaged in a "kind of merry war", sparring with words that might well conceal some deeper feelings for each other (I.i.57). Not only have they known each other much longer than Claudio and Hero, they rely on more than visual appearances to form the basis of their relationship (though Benedick does notice that Beatrice "exceeds [Hero] as much in beauty as the first of May doth the last of December" (I.i.183-4)). Their hidden feelings are finally brought to the surface when they overhear their friends' good-natured deception and believe it, thus removing the only obstacle to releasing their own love. David Horowitz describes true love as a religion in which the two people involved are completely committed to each other (51). In the gulling scenes, Beatrice and Benedick's ears fulfill their traditional role as per medieval scholars and reveal the "divine truth" of the couple's love for each other. The deception, in fact, is not a true deception after all: it has merely served as a catalyst to bring about an event that Beatrice and Benedick have been dancing around for some time.

In the second and more serious half of the play, this dichotomy at first seems to continue. It could be said that the reports of the eyes—and various characters' trust in them—are the cause of all the trouble, and the evidence of the ears sets everything right again. Claudio sees "Hero" at the window with another man, and on that evidence denounces her as a wanton; later, the watch overhears Borachio telling Conrad about the deception, and that discovery, along with the hearing held after the wedding, sets the play back on track for a happy ending.

But there are holes in this argument, many and gaping. It overlooks several key scenes in which the ears are just as deceitful as the eyes, or at least are accomplices in the eyes' deception. Often, as pointed out by Nora Myhill, the characters seem to assume that anything they overhear, or that they are told while disguised (as at the masking) must be true, especially if it concerns them: since the person speaking does not know they are listening, they have no reason to dissemble (295). This is obviously not always the case; in these instances, it is the ear that is deceitful.

Claudio is particularly susceptible to these deceptions. He is taken in multiple times by Don John's verbal lies before his eyes ever lead him to believe that Hero has been unfaithful. At the masking, Don John tells him that he "heard [Don Pedro] swear his affection" for Hero (II.i.160). Claudio thinks that Don John took him for Benedick, and with that insurance against deceit, he believes the report without a second thought.

At other times, the characters allow an account given to them earlier to color their interpretation of the information their senses give them. This is what Jackie Shead calls the "power of report": a trust in what one has heard that overrides other considerations. Shakespeare uses it in The Winter's Tale in the scene with the "statue" of Hermione. Leonotes has been told that Hermione is dead, and that the figure in Paulina's gallery (in truth the living Hermione) is a statue. This causes him to reinterpret the evidence of his eyes, and he sees nothing but a magnificently lifelike statue (WT V.iii). Benedick succumbs to this same type of deception after overhearing Pedro, Claudio, and Leonato's conversation in the garden. He believes what he has overheard; that is, that Beatrice is in love with him, and he imagines that he sees "some marks of love in her" (III. i.223). Thus the evidence of the ears becomes an accomplice in the gulling of the eyes.

The most notable of the visual and aural deceptions of the play—and one of the instances where the power of report holds sway—is, of course, the window tableau that Don John arranges for Claudio's benefit. It takes no more than the sight of what appears to be Hero with another man to send Claudio into a rage, although the audience knows that what Claudio thinks he saw was indeed nothing of the sort. Another perfect example of fallibility of sight, one would think—except that, in truth, Claudio plans his revenge on Hero before he has actually seen anything. Even before the actual event, when Don John simply tells him that he knows something to Hero's discredit, Claudio vows, "If I see anything tonight why I should not marry her tomorrow, in the congregation where I should wed there I will shame her" (III.ii.111-113). He expects to see an unfaithful Hero, and so does not question the likelihood of the scenario, but simply accepts it. He, like Benedick and Leonato, has allowed a simple report to influence how he interprets the scene before him.

There is another problem with attributing the window deception all to the eyes. This is that, in fact, Claudio's and Pedro's ears are deceived, as well. When they are hatching the plot, Borachio tells Don John that Claudio will not only see him at the window, but also "hear [him] call Margaret Hero, hear Margaret term [him] Claudio" (II.ii.39-40). Later, at the wedding, Pedro tells Leonato that he and Claudio "did see her, hear her" at the window (IV.i.89). The ears played just as much of a role in this deception as eyes, perhaps more—the addition of that extra sense helped improve the illusion and may have helped convince Claudio and Don Pedro that what they were seeing was true.

All this raises a question: if neither the eyes nor the ears can be relied on to reveal the truth of this situation, then what faculties are available? What is it that eventually rights all the wrongs and brings about the happy ending?

Many of the critical essays written on deception in Much Ado credit some sort of instinctual response: intuition, faith in human nature, trust. The problems in the play arise when the characters put too much stock in appearances, in the reports of the senses; these problems are resolved by characters who base their actions on their intuition and faith.

By this argument, Beatrice's belief in Hero's innocence stems from faith. She has no hard evidence that Hero did not speak with a man out her bedroom window, but she trusts, "on [her] soul" that she did not (IV.i.147). In turn, Benedick's belief in Hero's innocence stems from his newfound love and faith in Beatrice. He trusts Beatrice when she says that Hero has been wronged, so completely that he agrees to challenge—and possibly kill—Claudio, one of his best friends. The argument can also go the other way, to explain Claudio's
behavior. He bases his actions not on trust, but on the information he gleans through his own observation. He does not trust Hero, and so he is easily beguiled by Don John’s trickery.

However, intuition and faith alone seem somewhat flimsy to be the only source of truth. Trust must have some basis in fact, something concrete that the trust has grown from. What gives Beatrice such faith in Hero? What is know that they are right? According to Ralph Berry, that question, and in particular the word “know,” is the key. He proposes that the whole play is based around the question “How do I know?” and that the “limits and methods of knowledge” are what inform the actions of the characters (158). For example, Claudio’s method of knowledge is based on sensory perception, and is therefore limited and found to be at fault.

Ergo, it is not simply instinct, but judgment based on previous knowledge that informs Beatrice and Benedick’s faith. Beatrice may not have first hand knowledge of what Hero did on the night in question, but she has “this twelvemonth been her bedfellow,” and in this time has most certainly learned something of Hero’s character (IV.i.149). Beatrice’s trust is based on previous assessment and knowledge of Hero—she knows that Hero would not have done this.

Benedick, once convinced of Hero’s innocence by Beatrice, uses his own knowledge of Claudio and Don Pedro in an attempt to discover the truth of what happened. Having fought with them throughout the war, he knows them as well as Beatrice knows Hero, and he is sure that they both “have the very bent of honor” (IV.1.186), and that there is some other sort of mischief at work (namely, Don John). The fact that Don John was the enemy that they were fighting against further supports this conclusion.

This is not to say that the senses are never to be trusted or may never be used to discover the truth. The friar does rely on observation to form his conclusions: he watches Hero and “mark[s] a thousand blushing apparitions...a thousand innocent shames” flit over her face (IV.1.158-160). But unlike Claudio, he uses his prior experience (the “experimental seal” that “doth warrant the tenure of [his] book” (IV.1.164-5)) to interpret what he sees and form a sound judgment (Berry 161).

It is true that, by themselves, our eyes and ears can distort our perception and affect the way we interpret the events around us. A belief that everything we see and hear is the absolute truth would be naive at best. Shakespeare recognizes this weakness of the senses and addresses it throughout his career. In Much Ado, Shakespeare explores this theme at first through a dichotomy between eyes and ears (in the comparison of the two couples), but he then moves on to the idea that all the senses, not just the eyes or the ears, are at times unreliable, and must be tempered with sound judgment based on what is already known of the situation. Without that judgment, the senses do no more than help the villains “verify unjust things,” as Dogberry has it (V.i.211). In the end, it is not the ears that trump the eyes to discover truth, but the brain that outdoes both and reveals the reality behind the play’s manifold façade.

Bibliography


