

**Oregon Shakespeare Festival**  
**Lessons for *Much Ado about Nothing***

**Exploring Word Play**

- ◆ **The lesson supports the following Common Core Standards: Reading Standards for Literature 1-6, 10; Standards for Language 5**
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Tell the students that they are going to focus on Beatrice and Benedick's first encounter in the play to uncover both the rhetorical devices it contains and information about the two characters. Divide the students into two groups and distribute copies of the scene. One group will read Beatrice and the other will read Benedick.

Explain the context of Act I, scene i, lines 116-145: *Returning from war, Benedick and other soldiers arrive at the home of Leonato, governor of Messina and uncle to Beatrice. Beatrice and Benedick know one another from the past and greet each other in the following exchange:*

Ask the students to read the scene out loud in unison. Clarify any difficult words.

After, ask the students what they learned about these two characters from the scene. How do they feel about each other? What specific words provide clues to their feelings about each other? What specific opposites do we hear in their exchange? What repetitions do we hear?

Ask the students to stand up and form two lines – one line is the Beatrice group and across from them in a line is the Benedick group. Everyone should have a partner in the opposite line. Next, move the lines back so that partners are as far away from each other as possible. Then ask them to read the scene out loud again, and each time their character speaks the words “you” or “I,” they are to take a step toward their partner on that word. If they get to the middle before the end of the exchange, tell them to stomp in place on any “you” or “I” references. Reassure them that if they miss one of these pronouns, it is okay. The goal is to discover what is in the text.

Afterwards, ask the students what they noticed about the use of the pronouns “you” and “I.” How often do the characters speak those words? Who stepped forward more, Beatrice or Benedick or did each character take the same number of steps? What does the repeated use of these two pronouns tell us about these characters and about this exchange? What did the physical action of stepping forward reveal to them about these characters? In what ways does this language bring these two characters together?

Ask the students for the definition of antithesis (Definition: opposition; conjoining contrasting ideas.) Ask for examples of contrasting ideas, phrases and words in the exchange. Explain that they will read through the scene again but this time they will begin in the center of the room and step backward, away from their partner each time their character repeats any word (including “you” or “I”) or responds with an antithetical word or phrase. If they move as far away as they can before the end of the exchange, tell them to stomp in place on their repeated or antithetical words.

Afterwards ask the students what they discovered about the repeated or antithetical words or phrases this time through the text. Which specific repeated or antithetical words or phrases did they find to be particularly cutting to their opponent? Who seems to be instigating this verbal battle and at which points in the text? Who stepped away more, or did each character take the same number of steps? What did the physical action of stepping away reveal to them about these characters? In what ways does this language keep Beatrice and Benedick apart?

Finally, ask all the Beatrices to go to one side of the room and all the Benedicks to go to the other side. Explain that since they now have a better grasp of the scene, they are going to see which character, Beatrice or Benedick, wins in this verbal battle, this one-upmanship contest.

Put a call bell on a table between the two lines and explain that the first student from the Beatrice team will begin Beatrice’s first line, speaking either the first phrase or until the end of one sentence, and hit the bell on one word to make a point or score a point with Benedick. Then a second person on the Beatrice team will speak the next phrase or sentence and hit the bell on one word. Then the first student in the Benedick line will speak Benedick’s first sentence, hitting the bell on one word to make a point or score a point with Beatrice. Students must speak the word while ringing the bell. For example: Someone from the Beatrice team steps forward and says, “I wonder that you will still be talking, Signor Benedick,” and hits the bell on the word “talking” to make the point. Then another student from the Beatrice group steps forward to finish the line, “nobody marks you,” and hits the bell on “nobody.” Demonstrate. When students are done, they move to end of the lines and the next Beatrice/Benedicks step forward to the table to speak, ringing the bell on one word. The students are to continue in this same way all the way through the scene. Explain that once they finish the scene, they can begin again to make sure that every student has a turn.

Finally, explain that the rest of the students on the Beatrice and Benedick teams are allowed to cheer on their teammate when a point is scored. Heckling and cheering is encouraged.

Afterwards ask the students what they discovered about this verbal battle. What are the points in which one character seems to outdo the other? In what way are these two characters evenly matched? In this battle or contest of words, who

wins and why?

Discuss: Based on this exchange, what do they know about Beatrice and Benedick? How does Beatrice feel about Benedick? How does Benedick feel about Beatrice? What is behind this “merry war” of words?

### **Benedick’s Speech.**

◆ **The lesson supports the following Common Core Standards: Reading Standards for Literature 1-6, 10; Standards for Language 5**

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Ask the students to read Benedick’s speech all together. Clarify any difficult words.

Afterwards, ask the students what they noticed about the speech. What does Benedick feel about the change in Claudio? What specific words provide clues to his feelings about Claudio? What is Benedick’s attitude about falling in love? What specific words provide clues to his opinion about love? What is his opinion of his ideal woman? What words provide those clues? Is the speech in prose or in verse? What repetitions does it contain? What antithetical words does it contain? What antithetical phrases does it contain?

Ask the students to get a pen or pencil and have a seat. Explain that as they have already noted, there is a lot of antithesis in Benedick’s speech. In fact, there is a bit of a mathematical formula to it. Keeping that idea in mind, as a group they are going to come to a consensus about which phrases in the speech are positive from Benedick’s point of view and which are negative. Then work through the speech with the students, phrase by phrase, and decide which are positive and which are negative. Tell the students that as the group reaches a decision, they are to underline the phrase and place a plus or minus sign above it.

Once this work has been completed, tell the students that they are going to read through the speech again using the plus and minus signs as a guide. As they read, every time they get to a phrase that has a plus sign, they are to stand. Every time they get to a minus sign, they are to sit. Ask the students to begin the speech standing. Then read through it out loud and all together.

Afterwards, ask the students what they discovered about Benedick. What are some of the things that Benedick approves of? What are some of the things that he disapproves of? Which parts of the speech make it harder to determine Benedick’s approval or disapproval? Why? Who is he talking about in the first half of the speech? (Claudio.) What does he want in that section? (Claudio to return to his former self and cease being in love.) Who is he talking about in the second half of the speech? (Himself.) What in the text tells you that he is against

falling in love? What in the text tells you that he is perhaps hedging, considering, bargaining about his own potential conversion?

Discuss: In what way is prose an effective vehicle for word play? How does Shakespeare use antithesis in the speech? In what way is antithesis an effective tool for expressing a character's conflicting desires?

### **Beatrice's Speech**

#### **◆ The lesson supports the following Common Core Standards: Reading Standards for Literature 1-6, 10**

The following speech occurs in Act III, scene i, lines 107-116, after Beatrice overhears the news of Benedick's affections.

Read the speech out loud in unison. Afterwards, ask the students what words or phrases they remember from their first reading. Ask them what they notice about the language. Is it written in verse or prose? Point out to the students that it is not only written in verse (iambic pentameter) but has an alternating rhyming scheme. Clarify any difficult words.

Explain that they are going to read the speech out loud again in unison, and when they get to a piece of punctuation (comma, colon, question mark, etc.), they are to lean to one side. When they get to the next bit of punctuation, they are to lean to the other side. They are to continue leaning side to side at each bit of punctuation as they read through the entire speech.

Afterwards, ask them what they discovered about the length of Beatrice's phrases and how her thoughts were cut up. Does she have short, direct thoughts or long, winding thoughts? By physically moving on each of the phrases, what impression do they have of Beatrice's state of mind?

Tell the students that a full stop (period, question mark, exclamation point) indicates the completion of a thought. How many full stops or different thoughts does Beatrice have in the speech? (Seven.) Long thoughts have a flow and may indicate an abundance of thought or feeling. Find an example in this speech (line 7-10). Why is this thought long? What does the length of this thought tell us about Beatrice? In contrast, short thoughts are lean, direct and may indicate rigidity or tension. Is there an example in this speech? (Line 1.) What does it tell us about Beatrice?

Tell the students that they will now focus on the seven thoughts in the speech. Ask the students to gather at one end of the room. Explain that they are to read the speech aloud as they run to the other side of the room. When they get to a full stop, they are to change direction and run back to the other side of the room.

They are to read this way running from one side of the room to the other side of the room on each new thought. Demonstrate.

Afterwards, ask them what they discovered about the length of Beatrice's thoughts. How does the length of her full thoughts change by the end of the speech? By physically moving on each of these full thoughts, what impression do they have of Beatrice's state of mind? Given that Beatrice has spoken entirely in prose up to this point in the play, why might she be speaking in poetry at this moment? What conversion is she undergoing and how is it reflected in her language?

*The inspiration for the above lessons came from voice teacher Ursula Meyer, of the University of California San Diego, and Cicely Berry's book The Actor and the Text.*

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Members of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's Education department created the "Lessons for *Much Ado about Nothing*".

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