

SHAKESPEARE'S SENSE OF HUMOR

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For me, Shakespeare's humor is a daunting subject. Fifty years ago, in pursuit of my Master's degree, I read all of Shakespeare's plays under the tutelage of a true Shakespeare

scholar, Professor David Zesmer. I had to learn Elizabethan English, read secondary sources about Shakespeare himself, and study Elizabethan life and history. Since then, I've kept up with Elizabethan history and biography but not theater.

Having neither the will nor the time to read all of the plays again, I decided to choose two, one comedy and one tragedy, focusing on what Shakespeare found humorous.

Theory of Humor

In Shakespeare's time, the word "humor" did not mean comedy or laughter or anything remotely funny. In those days, five hundred years ago, humor referred to four personality types: sanguine, choleric, melancholic, and phlegmatic. The meaning of humor as a comic or amusing state of mind did not enter European thought until the 17th century, well after Shakespeare died. Nevertheless, though Shakespeare would not have used the word in its modern sense, he had a rich sense of humor.

Is there a theory of humor? Unfortunately, yes. It's a dreadfully grim subject, generally discussed without either the author or reader cracking a smile. So that you can digest your lunch, I will touch on the matter only briefly.

First, humor or comedy has through the ages had a bad reputation, viewed as less important and uplifting than tragedy. Many philosophers thought comedy should never be mixed with tragedy. Fortunately, Shakespeare thought otherwise.

Second, humor is dangerous. It's much harder to write than tragedy. Any fool can bring tears to the eyes, pity to the heart, despair to the mood. But humor? It's very tricky and few writers can carry it off.

Third, there are only a few main theories about what humor is and most are at least partially nonsense.

The Superiority Theory started with Plato: Because humor is malicious and scornful, it makes us feel superior to others. We are amused at the inferiority of others. The nobility, the educated, and clergy should avoid humor. This is the theory Shakespeare would have known about as part of his Greek study in grammar school. He probably laughed at Plato in a superior, scornful way.

The Relief Theory arose almost a century after Shakespeare died: Like a pressure valve, humor releases nervous energy. Because of advances in biology, this theory is now repudiated, but I like it anyway. Let's call it the hydraulic theory of laughing so hard you wet your pants.

The Incongruity Theory arose in the 18th century: Something is funny because it violates our mental patterns and expectations. Mae West's line fits this theory: "Marriage is a great institution, but I'm not ready for an institution."

And finally we have the modern theory, Humor as Play: Human babies laugh. Adult humans like to laugh. Laughter is innate. It feels good.

There is a little bit of each of these theories in Shakespeare. He makes fun of others, especially fools like Dogberry and Polonius. Dogberry's malapropisms are Shakespeare playing with language. Polonius's pretensions are Shakespeare playing with class. The sudden appearance of Yorick's skull in *Hamlet* is Shakespeare providing relief and incongruity.

On a more serious note, humor allowed Shakespeare to touch the third rail of Elizabethan politics -- the royal succession -- without getting electrocuted. The Master of Revels was the Elizabethan equivalent of Will Hayes, the famous Hollywood censor. One way to talk about royal succession, a dangerous subject given Queen Elizabeth's lack of an heir, was to set it in another country and cloak it in grim humor. Shakespeare does that in *Hamlet* and almost a dozen other plays.

The Objects of Shakespeare's Humor

So what did Shakespeare find funny? For some Shakespeare commentators, the list is short: sex, violence, and poop. If those three categories are elastic enough, that almost covers it.

But first let me set the stage. I'll briefly look at Shakespeare the man and playwright, the state of England in the 16th century, and the role of the theatre in everyday life.

Then I'll tackle two plays. First, a comedy, *Much Ado About Nothing*. . . .

Let me pause right here. None of you sniggered at the very mention of that title. That means that you have no idea how dirty -- and witty -- the title is. Just saying it ought to make me blush -- though you notice I haven't -- or you laugh. You'll have to wait to find out why.

As I said, I'll look at two plays: the comedy *Much Ado About Nothing*, and the tragedy *Hamlet*. There is no precise evidence when any of Shakespeare's plays were written, but some scholars think *Much Ado About Nothing*, his most popular comedy, is an early work, others that it was written in the middle of his career. *Hamlet* appears to be a later creation.

Shakespeare the Man

I start by confidently asserting that William Shakespeare wrote the plays and sonnets attributed to him. Those who argue for more aristocratic and educated authors do so out of elitism without any contemporary evidence whatsoever. Shakespeare's innate talent and intelligence are simply a rebuke to those who don't possess them.

Shakespeare was born in Stratford -- a village of about 2,000 people -- in 1564, six years after Elizabeth I ascended to the throne. His father, John Shakespeare, was a respectable merchant who rose through the town hierarchy to become high bailiff -- in effect, the mayor. Though John later got into trouble with wool trading and usury, in the prime of his life he was middle class. The year Shakespeare was born his father was fined for keeping too large a

dunghill near his house.

In the sixteenth century, few people reached the biblical age of seventy. The year Shakespeare was born, a new plague swept through England, killing about a quarter of the infants in Stratford. Plagues, sweating sicknesses, poxes, and fevers were still ravaging the country, at one point killing ten percent of Stratford's population in a single year. In 1564, when Shakespeare was born, England's population had not yet recovered to the pre-plague levels of three hundred years earlier. Shakespeare beat the odds; he reached the age of 53.

Shakespeare was well-educated for the time. Most children got a short elementary education, ending around age nine. As the son of a respectable working man, Shakespeare probably also got to attend six more years of grammar school rather than go to work, as very poor boys did. The grammar school curriculum in Stratford -- said at the time to be one of the best in England, by the way -- was all about Latin and Greek, interspersed with various potted histories of the Western world, plus more Latin and Greek. He would have learned geography and history mainly through his Greek and Latin lessons. When Ben Jonson said Shakespeare had small Latin and less Greek, he was wrong.

Shakespeare probably saw many plays while a boy. A few years after he was born, Stratford became a regular stop for touring theater troupes. As high bailiff, John Shakespeare was in charge of approving payment to them. Young Shakespeare may have met some of his theater contacts that way.

Somehow, Shakespeare was one of the lucky ones. He wasn't destitute, he received more education than most, he saw a lot of plays in his youth, and he lived into middle age.

A word about the bard's name. William Shakespeare sounds quite dignified now. The nickname Will suggests will power and determination; shaking a spear sounds rather brave. But

the name Willy Shakespeare is also a triple dirty pun. Spear and willy were slang for penis.

Shake was a euphemism for a solipsistic exercise performed with that organ. Think about that for a moment. Or don't.

Shakespeare's willy got him into trouble very early on. At the age of eighteen, he married Anne Hathaway, who was eight years older and pregnant. At the time, the legal age of marriage for boys was 14 but the average age of marriage for men was mid to late twenties. By getting married, Shakespeare did the right -- in fact the legally required -- thing but would have appeared foolish to many. Though Shakespeare doesn't seem to have been an attentive family man, he stayed married until he died and supported his wife and three children.

Very soon after marrying, Shakespeare made his dangerous way to London, then a city of about 200,000. He rose quickly in the theater world, though there are years where his name appears nowhere in official records. At the age of twenty-eight, he was already a well-known actor and playwright. By the age of thirty he was a shareholder in his theater company. He had some money and, most tellingly, was the object of other playwrights' jealousy.

What can we predict about Shakespeare's humor from his circumstances? Just turn everything on its head. What is deadly or frightening or fraught can be conquered through humor: romance, royal succession, treason, crime, and war. And then there was his father's dung heap. Sex, violence, and poop.

Elizabethan Life

Elizabethan life wasn't funny. It was a little bit medieval, a little bit modern. In *Leviathan*, published after Shakespeare died, Thomas Hobbes described life as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." In 16th century London, it was all that and more.

Entranced as I am with Tudor England, I could happily deliver long lectures on Elizabethan

life. But I'll confine my remarks here to a few themes that inform Shakespeare's plays.

In my view, the 16th century is the hinge of modern British history.

England was undergoing a transition from a government of men to a government of laws, from a land of warring dukedoms to a centralized government. King John's signing of the Magna Carta in 1215 simultaneously set the political course for England away from tyranny toward more democracy while centralizing the power of the Crown. Similarly, King Henry VIII's break from Rome in 1531 set the religious course toward Protestantism while still establishing a national religion, the Church of England. Neither the political nor the religious course took a straight trajectory, however; the trajectory was that of a corkscrew.

In Shakespeare's time, it was dangerous to be openly Catholic and it was equally dangerous to talk about the royal succession, though both topics were vital to the nation's stability. Queen Elizabeth, a Protestant, had no natural heirs, and her cousin Mary Queen of Scots, a Catholic, constantly threatened rebellion. The question of royal succession appears in a quarter of Shakespeare's plays, but religion does not. Shakespeare, who was probably a nominal Protestant, prudently did not openly take sides on the religious question, though the underlying moral code of Hamlet is largely Judaeo-Christian.

Unlike many of his rival playwrights, like Kyd, Marlowe, and Jonson, Shakespeare created many memorable female characters. That is modern. Women were widely viewed as less intelligent and moral than men, given to hysterics and gossip, not worthy of much education, and constrained by their sex to work in the lowest of occupations. Desdemona, Lady Macbeth, Ophelia, Beatrice, and dozens of other strong women belie the prevailing stereotypes.

Education was changing too. The printing press was invented only a century before Shakespeare was born. While illiteracy was still widespread, more and more people, even the

poorest, were given what we would call an elementary education. It explains why even lowly apprentices who flocked to London's theaters paid a precious penny to watch a play that modern college students would pay a thousand dollars not to read.

Another important change concerned the English language. In school Shakespeare probably didn't study much English because it was the speech of the lower and middle classes. French was still the language of the aristocracy, and bastardized Latin was used in court and church. Old English and Middle English had been abandoned. Elizabethan English was cobbled together from Frisian, Latin, and French with few rules for punctuation and spelling and no dictionaries. English syntax and grammar were nightmares. What could be said in three words was said in ten. But when Shakespeare was born, English was blossoming through loanwords, the use of gerunds (the i-n-g words), and the transformation of adverbs into nouns. By himself Shakespeare, who had a gift, is thought to have added two thousand new words to our lexicon.

Elizabethan Entertainment

Fortuitously, Shakespeare was born just as acting companies were beginning to find aristocratic patrons and permanent structures for their productions. By the time Shakespeare made his way to London, it was truly a city of theaters, almost all built outside the old city walls. Admission was a penny, two pennies if you wanted to sit down, three if you wanted to get above the masses. Theatregoers comprised the whole of society, from aristocrats to apprentices. Plays began at two in the afternoon and usually ran about two hours. The open air structures offered a simple stage, no curtains, and little scenery, though props were sometimes all too real, such as muskets and cannons that set roofs on fire and killed spectators. Scenes were set with words. Costumes were lavish but usually anachronistic. Play manuscripts were not considered literature and thus most disappeared. Playwriting did not pay well, though the demand was great because

a theatre might show six different plays a week. We're lucky to have Shakespeare's plays at all.

Much Ado About Nothing

Much Ado About Nothing is a popular comedy. It is plot-driven, so we can expect to find humor in the plot itself. The lovers Beatrice and Benedick, though not the focus of the story, are so engaging because of their "merry war" that the work is sometimes known by their names. The name "Beatrice" means "she who makes happy." The name "Benedick" (a variant of Benedict) means "blessed." Beatrice makes Benedick happy and he is blessed in her -- eventually.

A word about the title. Again, you didn't laugh knowingly upon hearing it. "Nothing" in Elizabethan English had a slangy subtext, referring to a woman's sexual parts. Men have something between their legs; women were said to have nothing. So on a very base level the play is a lot of kerfuffle about a woman's naughty bits. On a somewhat more elevated level, it's a play about women's sexuality. Happiness hinges on whether the bride is a virgin. Her happiness can be destroyed by vile gossip.

In Shakespeare's day, the word "noting" -- meaning a message or gossip -- was a homophone for nothing, meaning the two words were pronounced the same. The word "note" -- *noth* -- and its variants appear often in the play, suggesting that the play is much ado about forged notes, trickery, mixed messages, staged conversations, and gossip.

The plot is simple: a man is tricked into believing his fiancée is unfaithful. It's a comedy because there is a happy ending for everyone. Two couples get married; nobody dies, and even the villain's punishment is deferred.

It's also an old plot. Shakespeare is sometimes accused of lifting plots from other writers and reworking them, in this case from popular Italian stories. The accusation may be true but is

irrelevant. Because there are only about a dozen plots in the whole world (even fewer than a dozen according to the great Samuel Johnson), all writers lift plots. Then they make them their own, which Shakespeare did in his own inimitable way.

Back to the story. Upon his return to Messina from a battle he helped win, Count Claudio falls in love with Hero, the daughter of Leonato, the Governor of Messina. On the eve of his wedding, Claudio is tricked into believing that Hero is having an affair with an unknown lover. The trickery has been arranged by Don John, the rebellious and illegitimate half-brother of Don Pedro, the Prince that Claudio the bridegroom serves. Don John is jealous of Claudio and does evil things for the sheer fun of it.

Instead of calling off the wedding, Claudio goes to the ceremony and there falsely and publicly accuses Hero of infidelity, a very serious charge in those days. Hero is so mortified that she falls into a faint that mimics death. Claudio is led to think she really is dead. When he learns that she was actually a virgin, he feels so much remorse that he accepts Leonato's demand that he marry Hero's look-alike cousin as a way of making amends. To Claudio's delight, it is Hero herself who shows up to marry him.

The serious story about Hero and Claudio has its counterpoint in the bumpy love affair of Beatrice and Benedick, two secondary characters that practically take over the play with brittle repartee. Beatrice is Hero's cousin; Benedick is Claudio's best friend. They are powerfully attracted to each other but can't admit it. Both Beatrice and Benedick have vowed to avoid marriage because they believe the opposite sex is disloyal and unfaithful. They bicker and spar and insult each other until they are tricked into believing the other is dying from unrequited love; then they really fall in love.

Here we might want to take a deep breath. What's so funny about this plot? An innocent

woman is falsely accused of being a whore, forever impugning her reputation, and is jilted at the altar. On very flimsy evidence -- the nothing of the title -- her father Leonato believes she *was* a whore. He goes into a rage and is glad she's dead -- until he learns that she was a virgin.

Realizing Hero was a virgin but still believing she's dead, Claudio, a man of shallow affections, agrees to marry her cousin as a way to make peace.

The comedy lies in deception, trickery, and gossip on one subject: sexuality. Some of the trickery is meant to do good: get Hero to fall in love with Claudio, get Benedick and Beatrice to fall in love with each other, and make Claudio redeem his mistake at the altar. The trickery of Don John and his servants is meant to do harm: convince Claudio that Don Pedro wants Hero for himself, defame Hero at the altar, and cost Claudio his true love. The good tricks produce happiness; the evil tricks temporarily produce misery but ultimately fail. Good prevails over evil.

All of the tricks are about sex. They were funny to Elizabethan audiences because of three prevailing memes: women are creatures of unbridled sexuality, they aren't very smart, and they're full of deception.

Beatrice and Benedick stand those memes on their heads. Take their brittle repartee. It is stunningly clever and startling in its structure. Beatrice talks a lot. She's educated. She's witty, even though to our ears the repartee is a little juvenile. Beatrice says Benedick kills things for fun, pretends to be a great soldier, eats too much, and is likely to be unfaithful. He says she's too sharp-tongued and smart for her own good and is likely to be unfaithful.

Here you see Elizabethan humor at work. A smart woman dared talk back to a man and minimize the value of marriage. That was as startling as discovering that a dog could talk and the first thing out of his mouth was that he didn't want to go for a walk. Beatrice claims she

doesn't want to marry. But since marriage was the best option for a woman, rejecting marriage was preposterous. It was so crazy, it was actually funny.

In addition, Beatrice and Benedick were cloaking their attraction to each other in clever insults; the audience knew more about their real motives than the sparring lovers did. The audience's secret, superior knowledge made them laugh.

Finally, the play stands Elizabethan sexual stereotypes and prejudices on their head. The whole world thought women were uncontrollably lusty and unfaithful; men, poor dears, were always getting cuckolded, ending up with horns on their head. What is shocking in the play is that women are depicted as secretly thinking the same of men. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, the secret is out. Neither sex trusted the other. That's so surprising it's funny in a nervous kind of way.

It isn't just the plot of *Much Ado About Nothing* that's funny. So is the famous character Dogberry, the night constable, who elicited giggles from the audience both because of his name and his occupation. The name Dogberry elicited giggles because it references the nether parts of an unneutered dog. In Shakespeare's time night constables and watchmen were the butt of jokes because they were so stupid, cowardly, and ineffective. What makes Dogberry especially funny in this case is that he violates expectations by uncovering Don John's perfidy when he arrests the villainous servants and gets them to spill the beans. For once, the constable does what he's supposed to, albeit by accident.

The part of Dogberry was played by Will Kempe, the top comedian of his day; his name even appears in place of Dogberry's in certain "foul papers" as prompt papers were called. Audiences probably laughed the minute Will Kempe -- known for his wild jigs and comedic over-acting -- strode confidently onto the stage. Kempe's reputation preceded him; his comedic skill was no

doubt enhanced by his crazy makeup and costume.

Living up to his name, Dogberry utters one malapropism after another, usually saying exactly the opposite of what he means and finding excuses to let criminals go free instead of arresting them. Here's a sample of Dogberry's report of the crimes of Don John's servants. If you can't imagine Will Kempe reciting the lines, remember Michael Keaton in Kenneth Branagh's film: "Well, sir, they have made a false report; moreover they have lied; secondarily, they are liars; sixth and lastly, they have lied about a lady; thirdly they have verified unjust things; and in conclusion, they are lying rascals."

Another time Dogberry means to condemn someone to eternal damnation but instead condemns him to eternal redemption.

The humor of the play was enhanced by the stage action and the hammy, exaggerated style of acting. Characters skulk and hide in arbors and bushes to overhear gossip. They wear masks at a masquerade ball. The masks mean they either don't know who they're talking to or they do, but in either case they say things that are misconstrued or have hidden meanings. Since the audience has superior knowledge, it can laugh at the characters' misunderstandings.

In short, the theme of sexuality and the motif of comic deception appear in every aspect of *Much Ado About Nothing*: plot primarily, but also in character, setting, dialogue, and stage business.

The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark

Hamlet is English -- not Greek -- tragedy. There is nothing funny about the basic plot. But in a macabre way the play is as humorous as *Much Ado About Nothing*.

The plot has a fairytale quality. It is a story of revenge against a wicked uncle. (Wicked royal uncles were as notorious as wicked stepmothers once upon a time.) In Shakespeare's play,

revenge is difficult and ultimately not useful to Hamlet's purpose of gaining the throne unless he can first prove that the new king is a murderer. In other words, Hamlet is a man of law and morals, not a pagan brute fated to make the wrong decision. Hamlet is often viewed as a man who thinks but does not act. That's a bad reading of the play. Hamlet has two problems if he is to avenge his father's death and become king lawfully: one is to confirm that the new king is a murderer; the second is to avenge the regicide without appearing to be murdering his way to the throne.

Hamlet, the title character, is the prince of Denmark. While he's still mourning the death of his father, his mother, Gertrude, marries Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, who has taken the throne. The spirit of Hamlet's dead father appears twice as a ghost to Hamlet. The first time the elder Hamlet debunks the official story that he was stung by a serpent and says that his brother murdered him by pouring poison into his ear. He urges the young Hamlet to seek revenge against Claudius but not against Gertrude, his mother, even though she shouldn't have married the murderer.

Fearing the ghost is a demon, Hamlet decides to test the idea by staging the Mousetrap play in which the murder is reenacted. Claudius visibly reacts like a guilty man. Though convinced the ghost really is his father's spirit and has told the truth, Hamlet still does nothing because when he has the chance to kill Claudius, the king appears to be praying and would go to heaven at that moment of death. When Hamlet confronts Gertrude, his mother, the ghost reappears, rebuking Hamlet for not getting revenge against Claudius while accusing his mother of unseemliness. Hamlet impulsively thrusts his sword through a curtain where he thinks Claudius is hiding like a spy but instead kills Polonius, the King's advisor.

Everything goes downhill from there. Ophelia, Polonius's daughter and Hamlet's love,

thinks Hamlet is mad and drowns herself. To avenge his father's death, Polonius's son, Laertes, kills Hamlet with a poisoned sword; during the fight they switch weapons and Laertes too is killed with his poisoned sword. Gertrude drinks from a poisoned cup intended for Hamlet. Claudius dies both from a poisoned blade *and* poisoned wine. Horatio, Hamlet's friend, tries to kill himself but is prevented by Hamlet so the tale can be told. Then Fortinbras, Denmark's Norwegian enemy, takes over by conquest, not by law.

So with royal corpses littering the stage, blood carmining every surface, and Denmark's enemy in control of the country, where's the humor? Nowhere and everywhere.

Let's start with the famous Mousetrap play. When the acting troupe first appears at court, Hamlet predicts Polonius will bustle up to announce them as if he'd seen them first. And Polonius does, explaining the kinds of plays the actors perform (in modern English):

"They were the best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral" Act 2, Scene 2.

This is Hamlet making fun of the theatre industry through Polonius.

When Polonius isn't explaining the obvious, he's spying on his son, Laertes, in France. His method is ridiculous. Polonius wants his servant to tell false stories to strangers about Laertes to see if they connect the bad behavior to his son. Here's a sample (again in modern English):

"You can accuse Laertes of anything you can think of. Of course, nothing so repulsive that it would be dishonorable to him; make sure of that! Only the sportive, wild, and common blunders that naturally come with youthful age and liberty, like gambling, drinking, fencing, swearing, quarreling, consorting with prostitutes. But you shouldn't bring scandal on him, by saying that he is habitually licentious." Act 2, Scene 1. Polonius' cruel and stupid spying techniques would have tickled an Elizabethan crowd, for the Tudors practically invented spy networks, which were

feared and hated and which the populace was happy to mock.

Shakespeare finds humor in Polonius's pretentious utterances. Polonius, the King's advisor, pretends to be wise, but really he's a fool. The courts of old kept fools and jesters around to mock the pretensions of their rulers and deflect the wrath of the gods. Those ancient court fools were typically deliberate jesters, but Polonius is different, for he's a fool without trying, without self-awareness. He's verbose and trite, condescending, self-important, and impossible to understand.

Then there is the Mousetrap play itself. When Hamlet instructs the itinerant actors about humor, he's ridiculing the form of bawdy physical humor for which Will Kempe was famous. Humor was changing in England; whether Shakespeare was partly responsible for that or simply reflected changing taste isn't clear. Here is Hamlet's instruction to the players: "And let your comedy characters speak no more than what has been written for them to say. There are some comedians who laugh in order to make dull spectators laugh as well. In the meantime, some necessary part of the play may be overshadowed. That's awful and shows an unnecessary ambition in the fool who does it." Act 3, Scene 2.

From this passage we see that Shakespeare wants his comedy dignified, to speak to reason as well as emotion, to be integral to the sense of the play.

We might note another source of very grim humor. Two courtiers, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, are instructed by Claudius to take Hamlet to England, supposedly to rest. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are secretly carrying a letter bearing Claudius' seal instructing the King of England to execute Hamlet. Hamlet discovers the trick and substitutes a letter instructing the King to kill the bearers of the letter instead. In the news that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were executed in place of Hamlet -- the news that they were hoist with their own

petard -- there is a certain mordant hilarity. The audience may not have laughed outright but they surely smiled inwardly.

Then we come to the idea of comic relief, that is, a break in the tension. Two of the characters in the play are called clowns; they are the gravediggers who bury Ophelia after she goes mad and drowns herself. It's a terrible event, illustrating the price Hamlet pays for his failure to kill Claudius when he had the chance and his impulsive murder of Polonius, Ophelia's father.

Despite the coroner's ruling that Ophelia is entitled to burial in consecrated ground, the gravediggers are uneasy, for they believe she killed herself and as a suicide is not entitled to Christian burial. So the gravediggers do what all ill-informed but basically good-hearted people do. They debate and argue and speculate without any facts or philosophical grounding whatsoever. Perhaps, they say, Ophelia drowned herself in self-defense; that would mitigate the offense of self-murder. They blithely pronounce themselves expert in coroner's inquest law: that is, whoever is not guilty of his own death has not shortened his own life. Still, the clowns are suspicious that if Ophelia had not been a gentlewoman, she wouldn't receive a Christian burial. That fact is very irritating to them and inadvertently hilarious to us, for one of them says: "It is a pity that great folks should be allowed to drown or hang themselves in this world, unlike their fellow Christians." Act 5, Scene 1.

There is no time to deal with the sexual puns in *Hamlet*. Puns normally tickle our comic fancies, but what Hamlet says to Ophelia about "country" matters, though meant to protect her, is too mean to be funny.

Summary

How would I summarize the humor in these two very different plays? Remember,

Shakespeare declared that humor must speak to reason as well as to emotion. It must be integral to the sense of the story.

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, humor is the story. The play is true comedy, sweet, frothy, often silly. The humor, which suffuses the play, is the song of a light heart.

In *Hamlet*, the humor bubbles like methane out of the mud of human conflict and despair, honing rather than blunting the horror of the tragedy. The humor is mordant, dark and earthy, the dangerous effusions of a heavy heart.

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