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Unethical Can Be Good in Messina

by Akbar Khan

(English 1102)

In Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, there is literally much fuss about nothing, all because of one deviant character that felt jealous and wanted to ruin everyone's happiness. But many underlying meanings and themes do exist, and each carries a significant purpose. Among them are shifts in loyalty, usage of words as weapons, and miscommunication. One motif that can be clearly seen in the play is the overhearing of conversations. Shakespeare critic David Bevington says, "The word Nothing in the play's title, pronounced rather like noting in Elizabethan English, suggests a pun on the idea of overhearing..." (216). Although eavesdropping is commonly thought to be unethical, this action committed by Benedick, Beatrice, and the watchmen leads to positive outcomes.

Many overheard conversations can be found throughout the play. One of these instances was when Benedick overhears Claudio, Don Pedro, and Leonato talking loudly about how Beatrice "loves" Benedick in an attempt to make Benedick feel that Beatrice loves him and make him fall for her. Shakespeare critic Nova Myhill says, "Benedick's access to Don Pedro, Claudio, and Leonato's conversation in the orchard is based not on his success in 'hid[ing] me in the arbour,' but his failure (II.iii.28). Three lines after Benedick conceals himself, Don Pedro asks Claudio, 'See you where Benedick hath hid himself?' (II.iii.32), and Claudio has, 'very well, my lord' (II.iii.33)" (295). Benedick believes that he is actually listening to a private conversation but is in fact a victim of a teasing plot. In Act 2 Scene 3, Leonato says, "By my troth, my lord, I cannot tell what to think of it, but that she loves him with an enraged affection, it is past the infinite of thought" (Shakespeare 69). Leonato is saying that Beatrice loves Benedick with such a passion that it is beyond understanding. Benedick upon hearing this refuses to believe such silliness but eventually gives in to loving Beatrice after arguing with himself. Benedick says, "I should think this a gull but that the white-bearded fellow speaks it. Knavery cannot, sure, hide himself in such reverence" (71). He's trying to think of this as a prank being played on him but then rationalizes that Leonato is a well-respected wise man and can't possibly be a jester. Benedick then falls in love with Beatrice and later on confesses his love for her, which brings about celebration. It is because of this instance that Benedick is filled with joy and expresses his feelings for Beatrice. If he hadn't found out what Beatrice felt about him, he would have continued on with his childlike attitude towards her, and any thoughts of marrying Beatrice would have never sprung into his mind.

Another instance where a person overhears a conversation is with Beatrice. Hero and Ursula are in on the plan to talk loudly about Benedick loving Beatrice so that Beatrice can fall for Benedick. Critic Myhill says, "In the parallel scene involving Beatrice, Hero tells Ursula to 'look where Beatrice like a lapwing runs /Close by the ground, to hear our conference' (III.i.24-5)..." (295). So they know that Beatrice is listening to their conversation and go on talking about how much Benedick loves her. In Act 3 Scene 1, Ursula says, "But are you sure that Benedick loves Beatrice so entirely?" (Shakespeare 85). And then Hero replies, "So says the Prince and my new-trothèd lord" (85). Ursula asks Hero if Benedick really loves Beatrice and Hero says that the Prince and her fiancé say so. Beatrice feels bad and argues with herself, like Benedick, and falls for Benedick. She says, "And Benedick, love on; I will requite thee..." (91). She wants Benedick to continue to love her and she will love him back. This furthermore reinforced their love for one another, which was a joyous outcome for them and the people of Messina. If Beatrice hadn't heard

this conversation, she would have continued to hold the same somewhat pitiful feelings for Benedick. More importantly, Benedick and Beatrice would have never gotten together and Beatrice would have lived on longing for a companion.

A third occurrence of an overheard conversation is where the watchmen overhear Borachio and another associate of Don John talking about how they framed Margaret and deceived Claudio and Don Pedro at the same time. Critic Bevington says, "Overhearings are constant and are essential to the process of...clarification as in the discovery by the night watch of the slander done to Hero's reputation..." (216). In Act 3 Scene 3, Borachio says, "But know that I have tonight wooed Margaret, the Lady Hero's gentlewoman, by the name of Hero..." (107). Borachio is telling Conrade that he was with Margaret in Hero's bedroom and he kept calling her "Hero" while Don Pedro and Claudio were spying from outside the bedroom window. He wanted to deceive Claudio and Don Pedro into thinking that Margaret was Hero so that Claudio can call off the marriage after feeling betrayed. The watchmen, after overhearing the slandering by the villains, capture them. They are then later on confirmed guilty of committing deception and framing Margaret, and Claudio and Hero happily reunite since she was proven innocent. The watchmen in this instance are a big factor in shaping the ending of the play. Claudio and Hero would have ended up separated and the other characters would have held negative feelings towards each other if it weren't for the watchmen.

There is an instance where the actions of eavesdropping and spying can be confused with one another and one might think that the action of "eavesdropping" leads to an undesirable or negative outcome, but this is false. Critic Bevington says, "Once again, the villainous Don John first implants the insidious suggestion in Claudio's mind, then creates an illusion entirely plausible to the senses, and finally confirms it with Borachio's testimony. What Claudio and Don Pedro have actually seen is Margaret wooed at Hero's window, shrouded in the dark of night and seen from 'afar off in the orchard'" (218). In this instance, one might think that this is an act of overhearing, but actually it is spying. Spying is secretly watching another person's actions. Eavesdropping or overhearing, on the other hand, is listening to a private conversation without permission. Bevington clearly states that Claudio and Don Pedro have "seen" what they think to be Hero, but is actually Margaret, at Hero's window. The key word used by Bevington is "seen," which is referring to watching secretly or spying and implies that Claudio and Don Pedro were spying. So this instance can be excluded from the list of overhearing instances leading to good outcomes.

For both couples, all ends well due to the overhearing of conversations. What would have ended bitterly for the couples, ended perfectly. Even though eavesdropping is wrong, it aided in uniting newfound love and reuniting resisting love after all the catastrophe. Claudio and Hero finally get married after the villains are proved guilty. And Benedick and Beatrice get back together with the help of their friends throughout the play. Their friends help them out up until the end when love poems written to one another are revealed. This is another form of overhearing because these love poems are someone else's private thoughts. So this brings about the conclusion of Beatrice's and Benedick's fate, which is a long-awaited marriage. Shakespeare critic Norrie Epstein says, "Tricked by friends into admitting their love, Beatrice and Benedick at last reluctantly do so, with Benedick's grudging offer to marry Beatrice" (89). Although eavesdropping is commonly thought to be unethical, this action committed by Benedick, Beatrice, and the watchmen leads to positive outcomes.

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