

ARTICLE

Making Something Out of “Much Ado About Nothing”

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Abstract

The phrase “much ado about nothing” in popular discourse attempts to dispel suspicion, including in response to high-profile sexual assault allegations such as those against Harvey Weinstein. This article explores how Shakespeare’s play *Much Ado About Nothing* speaks to this trend. In the play, Claudio falsely accuses Hero of infidelity, abandoning her at the altar. For this play to be a comedy with a “happy” ending, Claudio must admit that he was mistaken. He discovers that consent (or, in the play’s vocabulary, “good will”) is a relational agreement between two equals, not a mediated exchange of property. Claudio’s mistake, the subject of Beatrice and Benedick’s teasing, is inherent to Weinstein’s defense arguments and other usages. *Much Ado About Nothing* provides a model for reforming our cultural concept of consent.

Keywords: Shakespeare; sex; #MeToo; consent; law

On October 6, 2017, one day after *The New York Times* exposed Harvey Weinstein’s decades of sexual abuse, an anonymous Hollywood agent told *Vulture*: “Harvey will be fine.... To me, it’s much ado about nothing.”¹

The phrase “much ado about nothing” is a powerful piece of rhetoric: it vaporizes alleged misconduct while trivializing those making a fuss. Its quaint, literary ring lends its speaker authority. Educated and courteous, the gentleman dispels accusations with a wave of his hand. On the day that I write this, a Fox News headline reads “Complaints over Trump’s luxury jet gift is ‘much ado about nothing.’”²

Shakespeare did not coin “much ado about nothing”; the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes an instance of the expression a quarter-century earlier. However, his play did popularize it as shorthand for a false accusation. In so doing, the play anticipates a #MeToo moment preoccupation: gender-based discrepancy in perceptions of credible testimony.³

Much Ado About Nothing is a play best known for its witty lovers, Beatrice and Benedick. This will-they-won’t-they duo – two centuries before Elizabeth and Darcy – banters, bickers, and,

¹ Kantor and Twohey, 2017; Lee, 2017.

² Fox, 2025.

³ Bailey, 2023; Kolb, 2021; Landis, 2021; Rampone and Utzig, 2023; Sperry, 2017.

ultimately, marries. It is quintessential romantic comedy. But alongside Beatrice and Benedick is another couple, Hero and Claudio, whose plot swerves near tragedy.

In Act 4, Claudio rejects the innocent, rather sheltered Hero at the altar, causing a scandal. He claims that he saw her with another man. “She knows the heat of a luxurious bed,” he tells her father, Leonato, and their wedding guests (4.1.40).⁴ Turning on his would-be bride, he curses, “You are more intemperate in your blood/Than Venus, or those pampered animals/That rage in savage sensuality” (4.1.58–60). She is worse than a beast, worse than lust personified, he claims. Having revealed her crimes to the world – or so he thinks – he departs with his fellow soldiers. Though Hero denies the allegations (“I talked with no man at that hour, my lord”), only Beatrice and the friar believe her (4.1.85). Even her own father takes Claudio’s words for truth.

Despite this horror, *Much Ado About Nothing* has a happy ending. Claudio learns that what he saw through Hero’s window – her bringing a man called Borachio to her bed – was not what it seemed. It was an illusion the nefarious Don John staged to deceive him; actually, he saw Borachio with Margaret, Hero’s cousin. “She was charged with nothing/But what was true and very full of proof,” protests Claudio’s patron, Don Pedro (5.1.105–6). But when Borachio and the others confess, that proof and that truth prove to be nothing after all. Repentant, Claudio goes to the altar a second time, believing Hero has died. To Claudio’s surprise, it is her he meets in the church, where she becomes his wife.

Weinstein is no Hero. The producer has now been charged with dozens of sexual crimes. Additionally, over one hundred women attest to behaviors ranging from innuendo to harassment to rape.⁵ Though his 2020 New York conviction was overturned, at the time of writing, another jury had reached a guilty verdict in the retrial.⁶ Between that and his 2021 California conviction, he will almost certainly spend the rest of his life in prison.

On the one hand, these are inverse scenarios. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, a man accuses a woman of sexual impropriety, but the accusation turns out to be baseless. In today’s headlines, a man like Weinstein dismisses women’s complaints of sexual violence as “much ado about nothing,” but the complaints hold up in court. On the other hand, the question of whose testimony matters is at stake in both instances. And in both, testimonies conflict as to whether and how women consented to relations with men.

Revelations of Weinstein’s abuse catapulted the #MeToo movement, begun a decade earlier by activist Tarana Burke, to worldwide prominence. Subsequent years have seen numerous high-profile cases, including those involving Jeffrey Epstein and Ghislaine Maxwell, R. Kelly, and Sean Combs. At the same time, a backlash has rightfully reasserted the importance of presumed innocence and due process. Nevertheless, #MeToo has prompted American society to define “consent,” especially when it is not coextensive with action, when power dynamics (often, though not always, gendered) limit agency, or other factors (like inebriation) obscure understanding.

In his June 2025 trial, Weinstein’s attorneys echoed the sentiment that #MeToo makes “much ado about nothing.” His defense does not deny that sex acts occurred; rather, it says the acts were “nothing” because they were consensual. The defense claims an implicit *quid pro quo* existed because of Weinstein’s leverage to make or break aspiring actresses’ careers.

⁴ Shakespeare, 2016.

⁵ Kantor and Twohey, 2017.

⁶ Meko, 2025.

“One person has a little bit of power over the other, and there’s a little bit of sex going on,” counsel explained in opening statements.⁷ The defense also cited affectionate messages the women sent to Weinstein as *ex post facto* evidence of their agreement to the encounters. “What were you so confused about for the next three years?” a Weinstein attorney asked one plaintiff, Miriam Haley.⁸ This interpolation of consent crosses over from sexism (a set of beliefs about men and women) into what philosopher Kate Manne distinguishes as “misogyny,” strategies that enforce inequality between these groups.⁹

The word “consent” does not appear in *Much Ado About Nothing*. The phrase Shakespeare uses is “goodwill.” Early in the play – with her characteristic sarcasm – Beatrice says that a hypothetical, ideal man made up of parts of Benedick and parts of Don John could win any woman in the world “...if ‘a could get her goodwill” (2.1.15). Beatrice alludes to her own hesitation about marriage here; even a perfect man might not tempt her. At the same time, because her comment follows the scene in which Claudio has told Benedick and Don Pedro that he wants to marry Hero, it sets an expectation for how courtships or proposals proceed. Goodwill should be gained.

But things go awry. Claudio agrees to have Pedro approach Hero on his behalf during a masked ball. When Pedro leads Hero out of earshot to speak privately, Benedick tells Claudio, “The Prince hath got your Hero.” Claudio, thinking that Pedro stole Hero for himself, storms off. A befuddled Benedick informs the Prince, “I told him, and I think I told him true, that your grace had got the goodwill of this young lady” (2.1.191–2). Pedro assembles everyone to clarify: “Here, Claudio, I have wooed in thy name, and fair Hero is won.” He continues, “I have broke with her father, and his goodwill obtained” (2.1.262–4). Hero and Claudio are now engaged, but contrary to Beatrice’s hypothetical, the would-be lover receives his beloved’s consent by proxy through a series of exchanges between patrons and patriarchs. Adding to the chaos, everyone is in disguise.

Does Claudio get Hero’s goodwill? The audience, like Claudio, might well be in doubt. Claudio relies on the Prince’s word; the Prince, for his part, thinks Leonato’s consent is what counts. “Speak, Cousin!” Beatrice jokes, “Or if you cannot, stop his mouth with a kiss and let him speak neither” (2.1.274–5). This scene, with its repetitions of “goodwill,” underscores Hero’s silence, foreshadowing the wedding scene in which she speaks but is not heard.

Like “consent,” “goodwill” is a multivalent term. Beatrice activates the meaning most common in today’s English: “ready or willing consent; cheerful consent or acquiescence.” However, “goodwill” has long had a commercial definition, too. In the Middle Ages, it was specific to real estate: “permission to enjoy the use of a property.” In today’s mergers and acquisitions, it describes an intangible asset: “the established reputation of a business,” the collective public estimation of a product, company, or brand assumed by a purchaser.¹⁰ Within Claudio, Benedick, and Pedro’s conversations, “goodwill” resonates more with this marketplace meaning. In this way, “goodwill” shares the mixed affective and transactional senses of “consent” in the crosshairs of today’s sexual politics.

Recent trials have followed the Weinstein model. “The evidence is going to show you a toxic, dysfunctional relationship between two adults,” said Sean Combs’s lawyer of the “freak offs” Cassie Ventura testified that Combs pressured her to hold with male sex workers.¹¹ Ventura and

⁷ Meko, 2025.

⁸ Meko, 2025.

⁹ Manne, 2017.

¹⁰ “consent, n,” 2023.

¹¹ Coscarelli, 2025.

another, anonymous plaintiff wanted financial stability, the defense argued, including homes that Combs paid for and access to the celebrity world. Text messages played a significant role in this trial, too, substantiating the argument that Ventura and “Jane” voluntarily participated in the “freak offs.” “She is a woman who actually likes sex,” said one lawyer of Ventura. “Good for her.” (Scandal surrounding Anthony Ricco’s departure from the defense team before the case began was, his remaining lawyers assured TMZ, “much ado about nothing.”)¹²

In a case that shook France and the world in 2024, Dominique Pelicot was convicted of repeatedly drugging his wife, Gisele, and inviting more than fifty men that he found on the internet to rape her between 2011 and 2020. He documented the assaults with thousands of photos and videos later discovered by police. Even Pelicot’s co-defendants parroted the Weinstein argument. “I was told Mme. Pelicot had taken something because she was nervous, but that she was in on the arrangement,” one man testified. Another claimed that he thought a husband’s consent was “enough.”¹³ The operative definition of “consent” in this argument is a tacit adherence to masculine will undergirded by a projection of erotic fulfillment (plus, in the Weinstein and Combs cases, material gain). It fills in the blank of women’s silence with a “yes” to the proprietary usage connoted by “goodwill.”

Claudio is willing to believe that what he sees in the window proves, as Don John says, that Hero is “Leonato’s Hero, your Hero, every man’s Hero” because his and Hero’s engagement was predicated on assuming consent in her silence (3.2.89). Claudio can testify before God that Hero “knows the heat of a luxurious bed,” despite her denial, because John’s fabrication of a Hero-Borachio liaison is a distorted reflection of Pedro brokering Hero and Claudio’s union. His accusation and its apparent tragic consequences force him to confront his shaky ideas about sex.

Beatrice and Benedick offer an alternative notion of consent. When Leonato asks Benedick to declare his “will,” he stutters: “But, for my will: my will is, your goodwill/May stand with ours, this day to be conjoined/In the state of honorable marriage” (5.4.28–30). Theirs is a face-to-face agreement, a relationship built on the mutual recognition of two equals. Benedick even mocks Claudio for his mercantile thinking – for his attachment to the *quid pro quo*. He teases Claudio for sounding like a cattle trader (“so they sell bullocks”) when he courts women (2.1.174–5). Even if Benedick and Beatrice are tricked into admitting their desires, their goodwill, expressed with the first-person plural possessive (“our”), points up what Claudio must learn.

In fact, Shakespeare’s play reaches its comic resolution through exposing and overcoming a nightmare world in which only men decide when consent occurs and in which only male speech accounts for whether it did – both in the court of law and in the court of public opinion. The ambiguities of goodwill that *Much Ado About Nothing* explores are precisely those of patriarchal control, coercion, and economic exchange. This play has a happy ending because Claudio realizes that he was wrong, that he made much ado about nothing, and that he ought to believe his beloved. When he and Hero marry, they remove their masks.

It is a poignant coincidence that Kate Beckinsale, who plays Hero in Kenneth Branagh’s film, is among the actresses publicly accusing Weinstein of abuse.¹⁴ Her story and the hundreds of others like it highlight the irony of claiming that alleged sexual misconduct makes “much ado about nothing.” With its dramatic reconfiguration of the relationship between gendered testimony and goodwill, Shakespeare’s play holds insights for the #MeToo era.

¹² TMZ Staff, 2025.

¹³ Seckel, 2024.

¹⁴ Branagh’s 1993; Carras, 2020.

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