ACT I. Scene I (82–139).

Much Ado About Nothing begins with a messenger carrying a letter to the governor of Messina, Leonato. The letter explains that after a long battle, Don Pedro (the Prince of Aragon) and his men will be arriving to Leonato’s home to celebrate their victory. The letter mentions that a Florentine soldier named Claudio—who was given special honors for his role in the battle—will be among the army men. Leonato’s daughter, Hero, and his niece, Beatrice, have been off to the side listening to the exchange with the messenger. Beatrice chimes in, asking the messenger about a particular soldier named Benedick. She proceeds on a long rant about how much she dislikes him, which only serves to prove the opposite. The army of men arrives on the scene, including Don Pedro, Claudio, Benedick, Balthasar, and Don John, Don Pedro’s illegitimate half-brother, whom they call “The Bastard.”
BEATRICE
I wonder that you will still be talking, Signior Benedick! Nobody marks you.

BENEDICK
What, my dear Lady Disdain? are you yet living?

BEATRICE
Is it possible disdain should die while the heart that hath much food to feed it is Signior Benedick? I cannot trust it to disdain, if you come in her season.

BENEDICK
Than it were better a Florence. But it is certain I am loved of all ladies, only you excepted; and I would I could find in my heart that I had not a kind heart for, truly, I love none.

BEATRICE
A dear happiness to women: they would also have been troubled with a pomegranate matter. I thank God and my cold blood, I am of your humour too; but I had rather have my dog bite me than a man swear he loves me.

BENEDICK
God keep your lordship still in that mind! no some gentleman or other shall escape a poxdestinate strained look.

BEATRICE
Sometimes could not make it worse, an 'twere out of her reach.

BENEDICK
With you are a new parent-toucher.

BEATRICE
A bird of my tongue is better than a heart of yours.

DON PEDRO
That is the sum of all. Leonato, Signior Claudio and Signior Benedick, my dear friend Leonato hath invited you all. I told him we shall stay here at the least a month, and he hereby prays some occasion may detach us thence. I return you to your business, but grieve from his heart.

LEONATO
If you desire, my lord, you shall not be forgotten.

DON PEDRO
LEONATO (softly)
Let me bid you welcome, my lord: being accustomed to the prince your feather, I owe you all duty.

DON JOHN
I thank you: I am not of many words, but I thank you.

LEONATO
Pray God it your grace know any?

DON PEDRO
Your hand, Leonato, we will go together.
ACT I. Scene I (257–291).

As the others exit, Claudio and Benedick are left to discuss their gentlemanly pursuits. Claudio indicates that he has fallen in love with Hero and looks to Benedick for his thoughts on the situation. Benedick, who does not have an especially high opinion of women or marriage, tells Claudio marriage is like putting his “neck into a yoke” (I.1.175), or in other words, losing his freedom to a wife and becoming another member of the marital herd. Don Pedro enters and encourages Claudio to pursue Hero, finding them worthy of one another. Benedick continues to criticize marriage, but Don Pedro says that “in time the savage bull cloth bear the yoke” (I.1.228) as well, meaning that even the most ardent bachelor will find a wife to tame him.
Don Pedro

There will be a love presently
And true the honours with a book of words.
It thou dost love fair Hero, cherish it,
And I will help with her and with her father,
And thou shalt have her. Why not to this end
That thou begin'st to twist and turn a story?

Claudio

How exactly do you minister to love,
That know love's gift by his complexion?
But lest my liking might too sudden seem,
I would have asked it with a longer treachery.

Don Pedro

What need the bridge much broader than the flood?
The tallest grant is the nearest.
Look, what will serve in thine once, thousand;
And I will fill these with the remedy.
I know we shall have resolving to-night
I will assume thy part in some disguises
And love fair Hero I am Claudius,
And in her bosom I'll wound my heart
And take her liking, thinking with the frame
And strong encounter of my earnest tunes
Then after to her father will I break
And the conclusion to she shall be thine.
In practice let us get it presently.

ACT II. Scene I (161–345).

As the house prepares for the evening’s party, Antonio seeks out Leonato to share some news. His trusted servant, having overheard only a portion of Claudio and Don Pedro’s plot to woo Hero, gives Antonio misinformation, which Antonio passes on to Leonato. He explains that Don Pedro is deeply in love with Hero and plans to win her over at the party. Leonato accepts this to be true, and tells Antonio to let Hero know so she can prepare.

Meanwhile, Don John “The Bastard” and Conrade are in another room, discussing Don John’s hatred of his brother, Don Pedro, for having more power and for limiting his own. As he stews, he describes himself as a “plain-dealing villain” (I.i.27–8), implying that while he may be malignant, he never pretends to be otherwise. He remains in sour spirits until Borachio joins them and explains that he has overheard Claudio and Don Pedro’s true plan to woo Hero. Don John sees this as a wonderful opportunity to stir up trouble for Don Pedro—whom he would like to overthrow—and Claudio—whom he sees as the only person to stand in his way. They head off to the feast as they begin their scheme.

At the party, Beatrice discusses her disdain for men and marriage, while Leonato prods Hero to get ready to accept the Prince’s courtship. A mask-donning Don Pedro does approach Hero, asking her to dance, and he begins to amuse her on behalf of Claudio. Wearing masks, the attendees of the gathering dance and chatter with one another, including one of Don John’s counterparts with an equal of Hero’s, and Beatrice with Benedick. While Benedick knows the identity of his dance partner, the same is not true for Beatrice. She inevitably releases a series of pointed insults regarding Benedick, who is left feeling rather scorned. Claudio tries to pretend he is Benedick in front of Don John to glean more about Don Pedro’s progress with Hero. Realizing the ruse and taking advantage of it, Don John tells “Benedick” that Don Pedro is wooing Hero for himself and not for Claudio. Don John leaves Claudio to put the pieces together, thinking his friend has betrayed him.