

Character List

Narrators

*The 3 narrators introduce, explain, describe
and sometimes comment on the action*

Leonato's Household

Leonato: Hero's father, the Governor of Messina

Antonio: Leonato's brother

Hero: Leonato's daughter

Beatrice: Leonato's niece

Ursula & Margaret: Hero's Gentlewomen

Don Pedro's Household

Don Pedro: Prince of Aragon

Don John: Don Pedro's illegitimate brother

Claudio: A young nobleman

Benedick: A gentleman

Conrad & Borachio: Followers of Don John

Balthasar: Musician

Messenger

The Watch

Dogberry: In charge of the Watchmen

Verges: Dogberry's assistant

Sexton

1st Watchman

2nd Watchman

3rd Watchman

&

Friar Francis

Attendant

Introduction

Narrators 1 and 3 are sitting talking. Narrator 2 joins them

Narrator 2:

My sister's getting married next spring.

Narrator 1:

Poor man – that's his life over then, being nagged all the time and worrying if his wife is looking at other men. What's the point of getting married in this day and age anyway?

Narrator 2:

To show you love someone?

Narrator 1:

You don't need a piece of paper to show you love someone and plenty of people who do have that piece of paper don't love each other. People don't marry for love – it's for convenience. Or money. Or security. Stuff like that. But not for love.

Narrator 2:

That's a very cynical point of view. What about Romeo and Juliet who had to marry in secret because their families hated each other?

Narrator 1:

Come on, that's just a story. It was written over 400 years ago. That's what people did in those days – got married. They used to worry about what their parents thought. It's different now.

Narrator 2:

Not for everyone. Perhaps some people have more choice about what they do these days, especially women. Women don't need a husband to protect them any more and they can choose whether or not they want a family...

Narrator 1:

And men don't need wives to nag, sorry – 'to look after' – them.

Narrator 2:

But people do still marry for love.

Narrator 1:

Love? or lust? How long does love last anyway? Surely not a whole lifetime? That's why so many people get divorced.

Narrator 2:

I think love that lasts is based on friendship and trust.

Narrator 3:

I know a story you might like. It's about two couples and why they get married. It might help with your argument. It's called a comedy - bits of it

are sad, bits of it are funny, bits of it are romantic. Like Romeo and Juliet it's a play written 400 years ago, so you can think about what's changed since then and what hasn't. Let me show you.

As Narrator 3 introduces the characters they step forward to form a freeze frame

The whole play takes place in and around the house of a widower called Leonato. He is the governor of a town called Messina on the island of Sicily in Italy.

Living with Leonato are his beautiful daughter, Hero, and his niece, Beatrice. Beatrice is also beautiful but better known for being bright and witty. They have two ladies in waiting, Margaret and Ursula. Leonato also has a brother called Antonio.

Don Pedro, the Prince of Aragon, has just won a war against his brother, Don John. Now they are friends again and are coming to visit Leonato. With them are two young gentlemen, who fought alongside Don Pedro: Signor Benedick, also renowned for his wit and Count Claudio.

Narrator 1:

Hang on, Don Pedro and Don John fought a war and now they're friends again?

Narrator 3:

Well 'being friends again' has been forced on Don John; he's not happy about it. Don John is a bastard – I mean he's illegitimate, not that he's a horrible person. (Actually he's that as well.) In Shakespeare's time that meant that you were a dangerous person – you weren't conceived in the proper way so you could upset the proper order of things.

Narrator 2:

Like claiming money or property when your father died which should, according to this proper order of things, only go to the legitimate children?

Narrator 3:

400 years ago in Shakespeare's time they took these inheritance issues very seriously. That's part of why it was so important for women, noble women anyway, to be virgins when they married. A husband wanted to be sure that he was passing his wealth and titles to his own son, not someone else's.

Narrator 2:

The men might have affairs, but if the women had affairs their husbands were called cuckolds and said to be wearing horns. There's a lot of jokes about horns in Shakespeare's plays.

Narrator 3:

And being faithful is an important issue in this play. Watch.

The narrators and characters leave the stage

Act 1 Scene 1

The gardens of Leonato's house

Leonato comes on with a messenger who has just given him a letter. He is followed by Beatrice and Hero

Leonato:

I learn in this letter that Don Pedro of Aragon comes this night to Messina.

Messenger:

He is very near by this. He was not three leagues off when I left him.

Leonato:

How many gentlemen have you lost in this action?

Messenger:

But few of any sort, and none of name¹.

¹ no men of
high rank

Leonato:

A victory is twice itself when the achiever brings home full numbers. I find here that Don Pedro hath bestowed much honour on a young Florentine called Claudio.

Messenger:

Much deserved on his part. He hath borne himself beyond the promise of his age, doing in the figure of a lamb the feats of a lion.

Beatrice:

I pray you, is Signor Montanto returned from the wars, or no?

Messenger:

I know none of that name, lady. There was none such in the army, of any sort.

Leonato:

What is he that you ask for, niece?

Hero:

My cousin means Signor Benedick of Padua.

Messenger:

O, he's returned, and as pleasant as ever he was.

Beatrice:

¹ this suggests that Benedick has boasted about how many he would kill and Beatrice has mocked him by promising to eat everyone he kills

I pray you, how many hath he killed and eaten in these wars? But how many hath he killed? For indeed I promised to eat all of his killing¹.

Leonato:

² find fault with

Faith, niece, you tax² Signor Benedick too much. But he'll be meet with you³ I doubt it not.

Messenger:

He hath done good service, lady, in these wars.

Leonato:

³ get even with you

You must not, sir, mistake my niece. There is a kind of merry war betwixt Signor Benedick and her. They never meet but there's a skirmish of wit between them.

Beatrice:

⁴ limping

Alas, he gets nothing by that. In our last conflict four of his five wits went halting⁴ off, and now is the whole man governed with one. Who is his companion now? He hath every month a new sworn brother.

Messenger:

Is 't possible?

Beatrice:

Very easily possible. He wears his faith but as the fashion of his hat.

Messenger:

⁵ in your good books, in your favour

I see, lady, the gentleman is not in your books⁵.

Beatrice:

⁶ someone who loves a quarrel

No. An he were, I would burn my study. But I pray you, who is his companion? Is there no young squarer⁶ now that will make a voyage with him to the devil?

Messenger:

He is most in the company of the right noble Claudio.

Beatrice:

O Lord, he will hang upon him like a disease. He is sooner caught than the pestilence, and the taker runs presently mad. God help the noble Claudio if he have caught the Benedick.