

A Fool's Justice: The True Heroes of "Much Ado About Nothing"

by Kelly Garves

"No man is so foolish but he may sometimes give another good counsel [...]" Hunter S.

Thompson is quoted as saying. In the play "Much Ado About Nothing" by William Shakespeare, Dogberry, the constable, embodies this quote. He is very foolish, but in the end, he manages to provide the "good counsel" that is needed. Don Pedro, Benedick, and most typically, Claudio and/or Hero are considered to be the heroes, albeit in the case of Claudio and Hero, tragic heroes, in "Much Ado About Nothing." While they also provide the comic relief, Dogberry and his watchmen are, in their own senseless way, the true, and mostly unrecognized, heroes of this play. Although they have no real understanding of the importance of the information they possess, they manage to pass it on to the right ears, thereby clearing Hero's name and restoring her honor.

When first introduced, it is very apparent that Dogberry and the Watch are intended to be comic relief. Their nonsensical conversation about how to perform the duties of the watch is proof of that. When asked what to do if a man will not stand in the prince's name, Dogberry responds, "Why, then, take no note of him, but let him go; [...] and thank God you are rid of a knave" (Shakespeare 3.3.28-30). This shows that not one of the men has any real idea of what to do in the face of true trouble, for if they cannot handle a simple challenge, how would they be able to handle a real criminal? Although this later proves to be untrue, one is left with the feeling of ineptness on the part of the watch. Most, if not all, of Dogberry's advice runs along those unusual lines. If someone does not answer the challenge, the watchmen are to let the person go, or if they do answer and challenge the challenge, the watchmen are to let the person go. Dogberry has trouble with words and their meanings as well, which also provides a humorous element. In Act 3, Scene 3, lines 35-36, Dogberry says "for the watch to babble and to talk is most tolerable and not to be endured." Of course he means intolerable, but the watchmen seem to understand his meaning. Dogberry's speech is filled with such mistakes. In

spite of their ineptitude and Dogberry's confusing advice, the watchmen manage to apprehend Borachio and Conrade, two of the villains of the story.

Heroes can take many forms, and often are heroes without meaning to be. This is true for the watchmen and Dogberry. They see themselves as just doing their duty, and have no intentions or desires to do more. But when they capture Borachio and Conrade, they unknowingly become the heroes of "Much Ado About Nothing." They drag Borachio and Conrade in front of the town clerk and with his guidance, the watchmen tell the story of overhearing the plan to disgrace Hero. Dogberry, trying to help, adds some odd interjections to the mix, "O villain! Thou wilt be condemned into everlasting redemption for this" (4.2.56-57). These comments again add that mix of comic relief to what could have been, and perhaps should have been, a very tense scene. While the Sexton runs off to inform Leonato of what they have discovered, Dogberry and the watchmen drag Borachio and Conrade behind. When they run into Don Pedro and Claudio, the men are again questioned and once again, recite their tale of treachery. When Don Pedro and Claudio hear the news of this scheme to discredit Hero and finally learn the truth, they give no thanks, give no recognition whatsoever to Dogberry and the watch. Leonato joins the group and has the grace to thank Dogberry and his watch, and even offers them a tip. Dogberry, although an odd man, has grace enough himself to respond, "You worship speaks like a most thankful and reverend youth; and I praise God for you" (5.1.315-316).

Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines a hero as "a person who is admired for great or brave acts or fine qualities." If Dogberry had been listened to by Leonato the first time he approached the man, the tragedy of this play could have been averted. But Dogberry is seen as nothing but a nuisance by the older man. At no point in the play are the watch and Dogberry admired. They should have been. In spite of the oddities and misused words, Dogberry is a good and kind man, with many fine qualities and worthy of the title hero. And, again, while Claudio is often considered the tragic hero of this play, there is little or no heroics in his actions. To find a true hero, one has to look a little deeper. As the Roman poet Horace once said, "The greatest lesson in life is to know that even fools are right sometimes."

Works Cited

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