A comedy by William Shakespeare, first performed c. 1598 and published in Quarto (Q1) in 1600 as well as in the First Folio of 1623. The Claudio/Hero plot was already a familiar story and could have been taken from any number of sources. More original is the invention and elaboration of the unwilling love of Beatrice and Benedick.

Claudio, in the service of the Prince of Aragon, Don Pedro, falls in love with Hero, daughter of Leonato, Governor of Messina. The match is welcomed by all but Don Pedro’s discontented brother, Don John, who determines to destroy it. With the aid of his henchman, Borachio, he convinces Claudio that Hero is unfaithful, and Claudio waits till the marriage service itself to reject his intended bride. Hero faints away, and Leonato is persuaded to challenge assumptions of her guilt by announcing that she is dead. When the garrulous Borachio is overheard boasting of Don John's trick, Claudio’s horror is relieved by Leonato’s forgiveness and by Hero's return to life.

In what is formally a sub-plot, but one which attracts more attention than the conventional main plot, Claudio’s friend Benedick and Leonato’s niece Beatrice fight a duel of wit which, through the manoeuvres of their friends, is exposed as a disguise of their real love for each other. That love is tested when Beatrice, outraged by Claudio's treatment of Hero, demands that Benedick kill him. Benedick challenges Claudio to a duel, but the timely discovery of Don John's duplicity spares the two friends that confrontation. It is characteristic of Shakespeare's inventiveness that the real villainy of Don John should be exposed by a fumbling and incompetent constable, Dogberry. A surviving reference makes it almost certain that the part of Dogberry was written for the famous comic actor, Will Kemp, who left Shakespeare's company shortly after the play's first production.

Much Ado about Nothing is a mature comedy with a long history of success in the British theatre. The influence of Beatrice and Benedick was felt in the Restoration comedy of manners, whose competitive loving couples similarly disguise their true affection by verbal combat. Millamant and Mirabell in Congreve's The Way Of The World are the most famous of a number of examples.