Act I

Scene One [I.1] War ends between Don Pedro and his rebellious bastard sister Don Anna. All come to Messina, governed by Lady Leonata, to celebrate the peace. LEONATA’S garden. [Enter LEONATA reading letter, HERO, and BEATRICE, Antonia, with BALTHASAR]

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

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

Leonata.
How many gentlemen have you lost in this action against Donna Anna?

Balthasar.
But few of any sort, and none of name.

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

Balthasar.
Much deserved on his part and equally remembered by Don Pedro: he hath borne himself beyond the promise of his age.

Beatrice.
I pray you, is Signior Mountanto returned from the wars or no?

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

Leonata.
What is he that you ask for, niece?

Hero.
My cousin means Signior Benedick of Padua.

Balthasar.
O, he’s returned; and as pleasant as ever he was.

Beatrice.
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 killing.

Balthasar.
He hath done good service in these wars.
And a good soldier too, lady.

Beatrice.
And a good soldier to a lady: but what is he to a lord?

Balthasar.
A lord to a lord, a man to a man; stuffed with all honorable virtues.

Beatrice.
It is so, indeed; he is no less than a stuffed man: but for the stuffing,—well, we are all mortal.

Leonata.
You must not, sir, mistake my niece. There is a kind of merry war betwixt Signior Benedick and her: they never meet but there’s a skirmish of wit between them.
Beatrice.
Alas! he gets nothing by that. In our last conflict four of his five wits went halting off, and now is the whole man governed with one: so that if he have wit enough to keep himself warm, let him bear it for a difference between himself and his horse; for it is all the wealth that he hath left, to be known a reasonable creature. Who is his companion now? He hath every month a new sworn brother.

Balthasar.
I see, lady, the gentleman is not in your good books.

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

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

Beatrice.
God help the noble Claudio!

Balthasar.
I will hold friends with you, lady.

Beatrice.
Do, good friend.

Balthasar.
Don Pedro is approached. [Enter DON PEDRO, DONNA ANNA, CLAUDIO, BENEDICK, Borachio, Constance]

Don Pedro.
Good Madam Leonata, you are come to meet your trouble: the fashion of the world is to avoid cost, and you encounter it.

Leonata.
Never came trouble to my house in the likeness of your grace: for trouble being gone, comfort should remain; but when you depart from me, sorrow abides and happiness takes his leave.

Don Pedro.
You embrace your charge too willingly. I think this is your true daughter.

Leonata.
Her father did many times tell me so.

Benedick.
Were you in doubt, ma’am, that you asked him?

Leonata.
Signior Benedick, no; for then were you a child.

Don Pedro.
You have it full, Benedick: we may guess by this what you are, being a man. Truly, the lady proclaims herself. Be happy, lady; for you are like your honorable mother. [He and Leonata talk aside.]

Benedick.
Though Madam Leonata be her mother, she would not like a gray head on her shoulders, as like her as she is.

Beatrice.
I wonder that you will still be talking, Signior Benedick: nobody marks you.

Benedick.