IN MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING, APPEARANCES ARE ALMOST ALWAYS DECEPTIVE. DISCUSS.

“Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more,
Men were deceivers ever,
One foot in sea and one on shore,
To one thing constant never:”

Indeed, as the jolly musician Balthasar sings, misleading appearances and the deceit of men in particular underpin the entirety of William Shakespeare’s Much Ado About Nothing. With few exceptions, the dramatis personae of the Bard’s Elizabethan comedy engage in frequent dishonesty, both benevolent and malevolent, while navigating a 16th century society fixated upon honour and chastity. In shaping audience perceptions and adding humour with convoluted webs of lies and miscommunications, dramatic irony is essential to the play. A multitude of appearances are built and subsequently amended: those of individual character, those conceived out of spite and those assumed and expected of certain societal roles. In doing so, Shakespeare delves into the complexity of human façades, and the effects of the lens through which we perceives them. Although the audience is privy to all machinations and manipulations within Much Ado About Nothing, to the those staying at Leonato's home, all is rarely as it seems.

Illusory appearances are most evident in misleading personas constructed as deliberate tools of deceit, both well-intentioned and malign. Being the first instance, towards the play's beginning, the masked ball revolves around foregoing one's own identity for a night of joy and revelry. Within this, Shakespeare divides the central theme of deception into two directly contrasting halves: the benevolent and the malevolent. The former, begun by Don Pedro in his honest courting of Hero, disguised as Claudio, is promptly soured by the latter, as Don John's attempts to "vex Claudio" with false allegations that "the Prince woos for himself." This spiteful trickery from the bastard is of course no mystery to a viewer, given Don John's self-confession as "a plain-dealing villain", yet is not publicly discovered by all until nuptial denouement. Shakespeare’s continuation in depicting the harmful consequences of false labels deepens the gravitas appearance holds- perhaps a comment on his contemporary society. The virgin Hero is in fact exactly as she appears in terms in many respects, the pinnacle of modesty, revered during the Elizabethan epoch, yet “slander” prompts others into incorrectly believing otherwise. Truly the “jewel” Claudio adores, the vile chicanery of Don John leads to Hero’s misrepresentation in Messina, as she is consequently considered “but the sign and semblance of her honour.” As always however, the deeper one looks the more can be found: despite her trained female reticence, Hero possesses sharper mental acuity than displayed, evidenced by her understanding of the pervading princely wish to “advance their pride”. The gullible tendency of Messinians is most blatant in the incompetence and malapropisms of Dogberry, the bungling head of the watch. Ironically charged with observing, his inability to differentiate between “suspect” and “respect” makes comic parallel with the actions of others, highlighting an inability of many to truly “note” the happenings around them. Appearances are the manner in which one is observed, and are thus deceptive if the observer’s eye is tainted by fraud or hidden behind a mask.

Other characters are expected to be of certain disposition, fulfilling noble or immoral societal archetypes, yet such glowing assumptions are unravelled. Initially, the host of the play, Leonato, appears just that: a welcoming, avuncular, “honourable father”, who would rather "weep at joy than joy at weeping". Yet as the tragic denunciation of his chaste daughter, his blood runs cold with vindictiveness, wishing to “strike at [her] life”. This makes one rare example in which the audience themselves may be deceived. Similar nuance is revealed behind the noble fronts of Claudio and Don Pedro in their own acts of vehement condemnation. The youthful Florentine count, acting "beyond the promise of his age" is

lauded for his talents, his arrival eagerly awaited by all in the play's bustling commencement. Analogously, the Prince Aragon too, sits elevated in his “grace”, respected by all- save his malign half-brother. Although the images these three men possess are unlikely the result of meditated perfidy, but rather nobility determined by society, their honours are humbled if one critiques their behaviour. As he has been conditioned to, Leonato doubts “the two princes [would] lie”; much the same Claudio places his trust in his ostensibly venerable patron, yet although all three have been gulled, they fail to respond rationally. Rather than question his bride-to-be personally, Claudio allows a callow impetuousness to prevail, and Don Pedro, despite his influence, contemptuously permits the premature damning of “the old man’s daughter”, deeming her a “common stale”. As such, the notion of deceptive appearances extends beyond deliberate facades in Much Ado About Nothing, to include the misguided assumption that honour in one regard encompasses the entire character of an individual.

Deceptive appearances can further stem from uncertainty within individuals, more specifically those who fear unrequited love. The pair of gulled lovers, Beatrice and Benedick are both the most vocal in the play, peppering its acts with dithyrambic repartee, and most concerned with their own appearances. A sworn bachelor, Benedick claims with machismo to “truly love none”, yet is eager to bolster his own image: “I am loved of all ladies”. In a similar manner, Beatrice’s pejorative jabs at the “valiant dust” that masculinity represents and attempts to satirise marriage and love as a “cinque pace” are designed to protect her own image as an independent woman- perhaps admirably, given she bucks the trend of a patriarchal society. Neither the “pernicious suitor” nor “Lady disdain” are initially willing to risk face; to risk their precious appearance. It is clear that much of Messina has fallen for their façade, that they “cannot love”, but not all: Margaret for one, recognises the obstinate bachelorette’s need for some “Carduus Benedictus”- a bawdy quip emblematic of Shakespearean comedy. If these two have convinced even themselves that wish never to bear the “yoke” of marriage, their the deception is inward. Moreover, it in fact requires the benevolent trickery of “love gods” to bring the pair to wedlock, past the thick walls they surround their hearts in. As such, it seems that appearances can be not only deceptive to the observer, but those who devise them.

By providing his audience an all-seeing eye into a world of misprision and misconception, Shakespeare invites consideration of the complexity of appearances. In Much Ado About Nothing, whether due to contrived pretences, fixed societal labels or the result of indecision, a plethora of individuals present as but a semblance of their true selves. Appearances are changeable, subject to slander and misperceptions alike, thus in a town were deceit pervades, appearances are by nature, deceptive.