It has been epigrammatically remarked by a modern historian surveying the cultural achievements of the Elizabethan age that *Much Ado About Nothing* lives up to its title. While the comment is in no sense intended to be a commendatory one, there is a respect in which it brings into focus what might not inappropriately be described as the philosophical dimension of a work that is perhaps too easily dismissed as a bagatelle unworthy of serious consideration. As the title might be taken to intimate, this is a play “about” what it means to be about anything. It is a play about the interpretation of events, about the difficulty of correlating sign and signification, about the pitfalls inherent in the construction of meaning. Although issues of a similar order come to the fore whenever the trajectory of dramatic action is in some way determined by the significance attributed to signs – whether these be as seemingly trivial as Othello’s handkerchief or as obviously portentous as Hamlet’s ghost – in *Much Ado About Nothing* the problem is radicalized by reducing the sign quite literally to pure cipher. The title of the work thus encapsulates what is perhaps its most suggestive feature, that what the complex machinery of the comedy revolves around in the final analysis is nothing other than the nothing that lies at its core, a vacancy of meaning that paradoxically becomes the centre of significance in the play.

From the point of view at least of the serious strand in the plot, that comprising the vicissitudes of Claudio and Hero, the non-event to which the title of the play alludes is very obviously the liaison unjustly imputed to Hero. Until the suspicion of Hero’s infidelity is implanted in Claudio’s susceptible mind very little occurs between the two

young people that is particularly memorable, and it is therefore to the forces of evil that we have to be grateful for rescuing the world from utter blandness – condemning it into everlasting redemption, as Dogberry might say (IV.ii.55-56). Claudio is a callow boor scarcely emerged from adolescence, Hero a virtual mute who seems in the earlier part of the play to take so little interest in her own destiny that she might be suspected of being under the influence of soporifics. Don Pedro’s genial benevolence creaks like rusty armour, and the repartee of Benedick and Beatrice, however effervescent in itself, is insufficiently compelling as to justify the existence of an entire play. What energizes the comedy, invests it with momentum, confers upon it an archetypal structure and at least a semblance of emotional authenticity, is Claudio’s suddenly inculcated conviction that Hero has a lover, something we know to be utterly false. The much ado that proceeds from this nothing is the *raison d’être* and very substance of Shakespeare’s play. Without that nothing, there would be no play.

Claudio’s belief in Hero’s faithlessness is a construction, or rather a misconstruction, insinuated into him by the malicious Don John. It is Don John who reports to Claudio and Don Pedro that Hero is having an affair, and he who stage-manages an elaborate charade featuring his own henchman Borachio and an unwitting stand-in for Hero to lend credence to this fiction. Perhaps the most significant thing to be noted in connection with this deception is that the spectator does not witness the crucial scene in which Claudio overhears the counterfeit exchanges between Margaret and Borachio that persuade him of Hero’s guilt. We learn of this episode only at second hand, when Borachio boasts of his exploit in the hearing of the Watch:

> I tell this tale vilely – I should first tell thee how the Prince, Claudio, and my master, planted and placed and possessed by my master Don John, saw afar off in the orchard this amiable encounter.

(III.iii.143-46)

What must be assumed to have been a supremely critical event is thus placed at a strategic remove from the audience, apprehended only at a distance as a “tale”, already the product of secondary elaboration. One consequence of this is that in a certain sense the situation of the audience is assimilated to that of the Watch on the stage, that we are obliged to rely on report for whatever information we possess. To put