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Presentational and Representational Work in

Kenneth Branagh’s *Much Ado About Nothing*

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Abstract

In this paper, I discuss the success which Kenneth Branagh achieved by his approach to updating the play *Much Ado About Nothing* onto film in 1993. Modern audiences are often uncomfortable with the Shakespearean portrayal of male and female relations and their inequalities. Thus, some directors, in an attempt to avoid completely changing Shakespeare’s text or narrative, use the old-fashioned dynamic between men and women on purpose. Branagh’s reading of the play urged him to highlight these gender dynamics by specific characterization. He purposefully uses a contrast of presentational and representational acting in his two major couples (Claudio and Hero, Benedick and Beatrice) to guide the audience from feeling uncomfortable, towards viewing the inherent violence in the play as comedy. Benedick and Beatrice represent relatable characters as they stubbornly pretend hatred and then later, let their insecurities down and realize their love for one another. In contrast, Claudio constantly acts foolishly, doubting everything and becoming ruled by his temper (which results in serious violence), and Hero is insanely quiet, without an opinion, and apparently, unable to defend herself in the face of public repudiation. As viewers come to understand these aspects of characterization, they view the entire Hero-Claudio dynamic as theatrical and comedic, and rely on Beatrice and Benedick for the true representation of love.
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Introduction

Shakespeare and film do not always draw large audiences to the box offices and Hollywood is not necessarily always eager to invest time and money into such productions. However, given the eternal popularity of *Much Ado About Nothing*, Kenneth Branagh was confident that he could create a film which modern cinema audiences could enjoy. In *Much Ado About Nothing: Screenplay, Introduction and Notes on the Making of the Movie*, Branagh praises the piece saying that “it is the detail of humanity amongst the participants that helps make *Much Ado* one of Shakespeare's most accessible works” (ix). And he was right. In *Shakespeare at the Cineplex*, Samuel Crowl addresses the often disappointing reception of Shakespearean films in Hollywood. However, Crowl points out the incredible commercial success of Franco Zeffirelli’s *Romeo and Juliet* in 1968 and says of Branagh’s *Much Ado About Nothing* that it “did prompt a revival of that box-office excitement” (64).

Crowl certainly credits Branagh’s film with the resurgence of Shakespeare in Hollywood and goes on to express his understanding of the film’s influence on other works (Crowl 65). In my opinion, Branagh’s success is in his ability to create an accessible Shakespearean comedy by his manipulation of characterization. Kenneth Branagh’s 1993 *Much Ado About Nothing* tricks audiences, allowing them to view content in the play which might originally be termed outdated and potentially inappropriate as comedy. Branagh achieves this by urging his two prominent couples
(Claudio and Hero, Benedick and Beatrice) to represent a contrast between realistic and exaggerated lovers. Audiences can easily relate to the passionate Beatrice and Benedick as they first feign hatred for one another and then come to their flourishing realizations of love. Hero, however, remains very quiet while Claudio does all the talking (and most of it bad). Even more, Hero’s character seems to melt into the background of the film while Claudio’s overacting sticks out like a sore thumb. Branagh does this in order to represent the entire Hero-Claudio dynamic as a purely ridiculous aspect of the narrative, urging his viewers to look toward Benedick and Beatrice for a mimetic understanding of love and relationships.

The best way to understand how Branagh achieves this distinction is to observe the acting styles which Kenneth Branagh (Benedick) and Emma Thompson (Beatrice) utilize and to contrast it with that of Kate Beckinsale (Hero) and Robert Sean Leonard (Claudio). Branagh’s goal was to allow audiences to relate to the development of love between Beatrice and Benedick. Therefore, Branagh and Thompson’s approach toward their characters and the film is very representational. This type of acting is aimed at engulfing the actor within the character and completely ignoring the audience’s existence.

The representational acting in the film is a rather watered-down version of the powerful and theatrically revolutionary style, realism. Actors near the end of the nineteenth century wanted to climb inside their characters in the most natural way possible. They were trained to be untrained; the texts they worked from called for their personal reactions and interpretations of the characters they became on the stage. George R. Kernodle observes that:
Now man was to be viewed as completely immersed in his environment, dominated by the strong lower drives which he could not understand or control. Realistic plays were to be slices of life, with no sharply defined beginnings or endings. (251)

At the time of realism’s birth, plays became attempts to represent the real, or amplified reality, of life. This involved very heavy interpretations of the day-to-day and theater moved from its usual status of dessert to spinach; audiences no longer went to plays for enjoyment but to expose themselves to hyper-reality and relate to the people they watched.

However, Kernodle points out that the style is “just as mechanical, as artificial, as any other [style of acting], and it develops its own imitations, limitations, and cliches” (252). The longer it was in use, the more realism developed sub-genres which were less intense, as is the case in this film. For example, Branagh and Thompson do not strive to discipline audiences with the reality of their love but rather to treat viewers with a true experience of emotion.

Conversely, Beckinsale and Leonard’s acting styles imply presentational methods. Presentational approaches toward theater and film highlight the actor’s awareness of the audience and therefore, the result is more of a show than an attempt to capture realism. This form of acting is far older than the former. Presentational acting represents the core of acting; that a group of people seek to perform a narrative, inciting the audience to watch and remaining aware of the viewer’s presence.
By defining his two major couples with different acting styles, Branagh suggests that the dynamic between Claudio and Hero is not to be taken seriously and therefore wants his viewers to understand it with a level of theatricality. In doing so, audiences respond by putting less investment into the development of their relationship as they view it as either irresponsible or essentially artificial. Instead, Branagh directs his audience to look toward Beatrice and Benedick for a glimpse of realistic lovers who not only enjoy the benefits of requited love but also the aggravation of warring insecurities and conflict. By doing so, Branagh hoped that his film would fall into the ranks of successful Shakespearean film adaptations. And while Branagh states that “the goal was utter reality of characterization” (ix), I have to disagree. I believe that by exaggerating the characterization of Claudio and Hero, directing the actors to portray them more presentationally than realistically, Branagh invites his audience to identify with Beatrice and Benedick.
Beginnings

“Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more” —2.3.61

I’d like to begin my discussion of Kenneth Branagh’s film by focusing on Branagh’s calculated directorial style. His alterations to the text are definitely significant, including the omission of many lines, and interestingly, the inclusion of several scenes hand-crafted by Branagh. He uses these scenes to express his views concerning gender in the play. For years, *Much Ado About Nothing*, like countless other Shakespearean plays, grappled with a slew of gender critics arguing about the treatment of men and women and the resultant implications about the characters. The entire film works as Branagh’s response to these eternal arguments.

In addition to the insertion of scenes not included in the original text, Branagh is very specific with the way he directs the acting styles of Beatrice, Benedick, Claudio and Hero. As his leading couples in the film, these four characters represent Branagh’s reading of the play. In order for audiences to view the entire film as comedy (even though there are some seriously negative and violent moments in the text), Branagh directs Claudio and Hero to employ presentational styles of acting, appearing over-theatrical and exaggerated. At the same time, Branagh wants Benedick and Beatrice to capture the reality of love by using the representational acting style. Branagh’s careful attention to
these four characters’ portrayals serve as his thesis concerning the play. If audiences regard Hero and Claudio as foolish, they are less disturbed by their relationship. Instead, viewers can look to Beatrice and Benedick for a glimpse of mimetic love.

Branagh’s film begins, immediately grappling with the forthcoming issue of gender. After introductory credits, single lines from a song appear, white against a black screen, and Emma Thompson’s voice begins to speak the following prose in clear and lyrical tones:

Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more

Men were inconstant ever,

One foot at sea, and one at shore

To one thing constant never

So sigh not so, and let them go,

And be you blithe and bonny,

Converting all your sighs of woe

Into hey, nonny, nonny! (2.3 61-68)

She is reciting the song which becomes a theme in the film. Although the text doesn’t use the song until Act 2, Scene 3 (and originally, it isn’t used anywhere else), Branagh literally defines his film by it. And it’s appropriate, too. The song addresses the woes of womanhood, urging women to relinquish their expectations of a faithful male partner and forgive them their inconstancies. But Thompson’s inflection imparts her own interpretation of the words; she finds the song amusing. Clearly, Beatrice doesn’t exactly believe in what the song is implying about her gender and she certainly isn’t one to be
caught with someone who is “to one thing, constant never” (2.3 64). By beginning his film with Beatrice’s reading of this song, Branagh alerts his audiences immediately that a gender war is about to take place.

After a few lines, the black dissipates and the camera reveals an idyllic villa in Italy surrounded by rolling hills of sun-bathed and glorious land. There is a group of cheerful and laughing picnickers outside, eating and listening to the song. Thompson’s words are punctuated by occasional outbursts of laughter as the picnickers grasp Beatrice’s amusement at the somberness of the woman’s role in life. The camera pans over them slowly, letting audiences take in the splendor of their surroundings accompanied by Thompson’s sultry voice. The entire thing seems almost too idyllic; Branagh’s way of introducing his audience to the lack of realism that some of the characters embody.

Finally, we see a tree with Beatrice lounging on a branch, her leg prominently displayed and bare. She is casually relaxed, the center of attention, and literally glowing in the Messina sun, as she will be displayed again and again. She commands the attention and laughter of the people around her. Clearly, she holds a respected and beloved position amongst the group and will become a very large part of the following narrative. Branagh is showing his audience here, as he will continue to do, to whom this film belongs.

Not only is Beatrice illuminated as beautiful and prominent within the group, but directly after she finishes speaking the song, a messenger enters into the midst of the picnic and Beatrice speaks up, establishing her wit and humor immediately. Branagh describes Beatrice in this moment as “defiantly provocative” (8) as she confronts the
messenger with her jests. Her quips will be endless in the film and Branagh wants audiences to understand her character immediately.

As is often the case, the topic of her jesting is Benedick. Branagh introduces his two major couples in this scene, even though both Benedick and Claudio are not present. Reading from his letter, Leonato (Richard Briers) states, “I find here that Don Pedro/hath bestowed much honour on a young Florentine/called Claudio” (1.1 9-11). At this, the camera cuts directly to a giggling and blushing Hero, establishing the young girl’s affection for the count. Similarly, Beatrice’s attention to Benedick in her jokes to the messenger foreshadows their future relationship.

Leonato further distinguishes Beatrice by commenting, “You will never run mad, niece” (1.1 88) and she quickly replies “No, not till a hot January” (1.1 89). Viewers are not five minutes into the film and Beatrice is already recognized as the most stable and possibly, most independent character, at least in terms of the women. Contrasted to Hero, Beatrice comes a lot closer to representing the way women really act and Branagh wants to establish that immediately. Beatrice’s role in the Messina infrastructure may seem comedic in this scene but it will later cause her some isolation from other women as she remains stubbornly against feminine stereotypes. And, as the narrative of this play boasts, stepping out of stereotypical gender roles opens up doors for jests and insecurities. Beatrice will become the butt of jokes for her loose tongue and stubborn attitude.

Even though the play occasionally heralds seriously dark comedy, Branagh wants the tone for his film to elicit excitement and anticipation. As the Messenger cries, “Don Pedro is approaching” (Branagh 11), the Messinans let out shouts of excitement and
begin to run from their picnic toward the villa. Here, Branagh begins to illuminate the
narrative with a subtle filming strategy. The camera dances between slow motion and real
time with swelling music overwhelming each shot. Branagh uses this specific tactic three
times, and each time either directly involves, or exists near, the previously mentioned
song. He does this in order to incite emotion from his audience, illuminate critical
moments in the work, and to form connections between all three scenes.

The residents of Leonato’s home exhibit anticipation and happiness as they scurry
across the hillside, broad smiles on their faces. Branagh wants to get audiences fired with
the same emotion and thus, the first few minutes of the film serve as a billowing
crescendo of frenzied excitement. There follows a montage between the residents, clearly
featuring the hand in hand Hero and Beatrice, and Don Pedro’s men, riding forth on their
galloping horses. The Messinans run forth, a jumbled mixture of excited men and women
in loose, billowing clothing. Conversely, Don Pedro’s men surge forward, their horse’s
hooves striking the ground in unison as their riders, in uniform, approach. It serves as an
introduction to the coalescing of men and women, and while the camera cuts back and
forth, revealing their mutual excitement, it also speaks of the problems that their
socializing will bring.

When both groups reach Leonato’s house simultaneously, they rush, laughing, to
undress and clean themselves quickly. Formality completely slides away as naked men
dive into their outside baths and women toss away clothing in their indoor chambers,
rushing to the showers. Everything is accompanied by shouts and laughs. The entire
series of scenes captures a wonderful level of playful anticipation that literally demands a
lightheartedness from viewers. It’s practically impossible to watch the opening sequence without feeling at least a flit of excitement for the meeting of the two groups.

After the men are clean and dressed, there is an immediate return to form and order. As they approach the entrance to the house, they walk in straight lines and when they enter, they make a strict formation. This not only echoes “military” formality, but also speaks of the lean toward male camaraderie, a recurring theme which is always present in the text and film.

Although the two groups meet and, afterward, merge into one happy crowd, the film constantly reminds viewers that men and women still belong to separate companies. This play discusses the hazards of love and in that war, genders fight in teams against one another. For instance, the men find comfort in each other as they face the anxieties of being potentially “cuckolded” by their feminine adversaries. Women, on the other hand, support each other as they brave the hardships of men that have been heralded as inconstant. Essentially, although they pretend to happily fraternize, men and women constantly rely on their own genders, defining two separate groups throughout the entire work.

When Don Pedro’s men file into Leonato’s courtyard, the much-awaited introductions begin. The camera is quick to take note of Claudio and Hero’s first recognition of each other in the film. It is a short, silent return of looks accompanied only by vague smiles and playful (yet slightly mischievous) music. Significantly, it is not punctuated by any exchange of words (other than those from characters talking around them). However, Branagh plays with his audience through his film. In the very next shot,
Hero is looking over Don Pedro with almost the same amount of interest that she leant Claudio a moment before. Branagh will continue this practice, toying with his viewers by revealing slight contradictions in his characters.

Decidedly unlike that of Claudio and Hero, Beatrice's first acknowledgement of Benedick is not a mutual look. The camera shows Beatrice’s face, which holds a mixture of uncertain emotions, and then shifts back to Benedick, whose focus is on Don Pedro and Leonato and who appears not to notice Beatrice at all. Her look is immediately intriguing; until this point in the film, she has been nothing but smiles and jests. Branagh wants her expression to grab audiences here, giving them a slightly uneasy feeling about the relationship between the two. Their relationship is not going to be idyllic at all, as Claudio and Hero’s may initially claim to be. Instead, they will fight and tease until their hearts alter their attitudes. And also unlike Claudio and Hero, this witty couple’s interaction is all about speech.

At first, their encounter is only between them; others are talking amongst themselves and walking by but no one is paying them much attention. Their words are certainly not kind but they seem to only jest at each other lightly. Once they have attracted other people’s attentions, however, Benedick becomes much more theatrical with his insults and the way he delivers them, inciting laughter from his “audience” of Messinans. Beatrice’s insults also grow a bit harsher and more comedic when she is aware of the attention but she also becomes more upset by Benedick’s jokes.

Benedick makes a final, cutting remark to her, which prompts a chorus of laughter from the surrounded crowd, and cuts her off, leaving no time for verbal retaliation. Her
earlier darkened face is thus explained with a comment she makes after Benedick joins the group of tittering Messinans. With a grimace, Beatrice pronounces, “You always end with a jade’s trick. I know you/of old” (1.1 139-140). This comment hints at a past relationship between the two but mysteriously, it is never fully explained. Moments like this are very important to the film in terms of what Branagh is trying to communicate to his audience. While he, as a vehement editor of the original text, omits line upon line, he carefully selects specific parts of the play to bring forth in the film. Such an argumentative relationship as that between Beatrice and Benedick must, realistically, be the result of some previous feud or, what Branagh seems to imply here and in other instances, an unsuccessful love affair. Branagh leaves hints of this past relationship throughout the film in order to support his argument that they represent realistic lovers. Their earlier quarrel, which is never really addressed, serves as the backbone of their warring wits, establishing them as characters who are acutely vulnerable to the actions of those they love.

Branagh will continue to play with this tense relationship throughout the film. It seems that Beatrice and Benedick are unsure how to understand one another and feel comfortable allowing their relationship to be a sort of comic and public spectacle. However, Thompson betrays her hard shell, often looking genuinely hurt by what Benedick says. While Branagh puts a lot of investment into the comedy of the play, he often specifically shows Beatrice receiving negative comments from the man she favors. Benedick is obviously affected by listeners and deems it important that his character treat Beatrice with much harsher words when he is aware of his male comrades attention.
Carol Cook argues that Messina men feel comfort in their male friends because of their insecurities toward women. Men are expected, as the song at the beginning of the film implies, to have sexual freedom. However, feminine sexuality is viewed by the Messina men as unpredictable and completely able to exist without their knowledge (in other words, women have the power to “cuckold” their men discreetly). Thus, females cannot be leant the same amount of trust that men extend to each other (Cook 186-200).

The text of *Much Ado About Nothing* clearly demands that special attention be paid to speech, as it characterizes the relationships between the two leading couples with such importance. Cook observes that Beatrice is a specifically odd character in terms of speech. She fits into the strained dynamic between the genders in a profoundly different way. Her interactions in conversation set her apart from other women in the play; she is willing to jump into masculine witty banter and she often succeeds in making fools of her male linguistic adversaries. As Cook sees it, the role Beatrice plays allows her character to be less intimidating toward male characters in the play because her speech aligns herself with that of a man’s. Thus, although Benedick is a cynic, he is able to come to terms with his feelings for her (no matter how illegitimately he comes across said emotions in the first place) because he can relate to and trust her by the way she communicates. However, because Beatrice’s speech comes across as masculine, it isolates her from other women in the play. A basic review of the female characters in *Much Ado* reveals that most of them occasionally join into the witty banter but never as often or with such tenacity as Beatrice (Cook 190-192).
Branagh’s hand is very methodical and precise when it comes to his characters. In order for his interpretation of the text to play out on screen, Branagh requires very specific work from the actors portraying the main characters in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Specifically, he brings out realistic, relatable qualities in the love conflict between Beatrice and Benedick and then, in contrast, blows the dynamic between Claudio and Hero out of proportion to a point of excessive theatricality. He does this not only to present his thesis through his actors, but also to con audiences into enjoying parts of the play which modern viewers might find a bit ridiculous and outdated. In fact, Branagh infiltrates the entire film with specific overtones of representational and presentational acting in order to justify one scene in particular. As Claudio is represented as a fool throughout the entire film, his actions in the wedding scene can be interpreted as overblown comedy instead of containing an uncomfortable level of misogyny. At the time of the play’s original performance, it would not have been inconceivable for audiences to accept the Claudio/Hero dynamic. Claudio’s inconstancy to anything would be accepted as pure, stereotypically masculine comedy and his repudiation of Hero, not so unbelievable considering women were property and men did not appreciate used goods.

After the introductions in the courtyard of Leonato’s house have been made, Claudio and Benedick are left alone. The audience knows little about Claudio other than the messenger’s earlier words of valor and the camera’s few acknowledgements of him as a prominent figure in the film. Claudio establishes himself here as a rather over-dramatic character. With wistful eyes, he stares upward to the balconies above and says, of Hero, “Can the world buy such a jewel?” (1.1 174). Although he does later explain that he’d
met Hero previously, he admits now to Benedick that he is in love with the lady, although he can boast no real knowledge of her person. Next to the cynical and dismissive Benedick, Claudio already looks like a fool.

Branagh certainly wants Claudio to come off this way. His character is quick to make a decision, immature about each choice and conclusion, and throws tantrums when things don’t appear to go his way. Branagh capitalizes on these aspects in Claudio’s behavior, trying to communicate such childish tendencies and establish the count as comedy. If audiences view Claudio as foolish, his actions aren’t taken seriously.

His Hero, on the other hand, has established herself as a character of little words. She has no lines in the group’s first meeting, although she is addressed by Don Pedro, and even when seen from the balcony above by Claudio, Branagh is clear to illustrate Beatrice whispering to her cousin, illuminating a yet quiet Hero. Her silence, not only in the introduction but in the rest of the film, is absolutely overwhelming. Her lack of speech says more than many of the other characters do with their words.

If his earlier, silly behavior doesn’t convince audience’s of Claudio’s immaturity as a character, than Branagh certainly tries to illuminate it later as Claudio and Don Pedro speak about Hero. When Don Pedro explains his simple plan to woo Hero, Claudio looks at first, completely confused and then dreamily overjoyed. It is difficult for audiences to take Claudio seriously and here, Robert Sean Leonard utilizes presentational acting tactics to establish the character’s peculiar personality.

Overacting seeps into the character Don John (Keanu Reeves) as well. When we encounter him, he establishes himself as a rather un-dimensional character. By using
similar tactics of presentational acting, he too appears immature, like Claudio. Don John clearly states “I am a plain-dealing villain” (1.3 29-30) in his first moment alone and Branagh doesn’t feel the need to have him represent anything more to the audience. He is constantly sulky, monotone, grave, and separated from the group. Not once does he prove to anyone that he deserves the trust of his brother and the count and yet, they lend it him later. In this and all other parts, he seems to only go through the motions of being “bad” without really committing to representing anything realistic.

Further evidence of this is found later in the film. Branagh chooses to show a shot of Don John directly after the wedding scene smiling, and then, escaping down a darkly lit corridor, laughing. It’s so stereotypically “villain” that it is clear that Branagh isn’t asking audiences to consider Don John as a multifaceted character. Not that the text ever really offers us this option, but Branagh refuses to let his audiences regard Don John as more than a cardboard cut-out villain. And by using such a “non-character” in his work, Branagh makes it easy for us to also see Claudio and Hero as such.
The Revelling

“Thou wilt be like a lover presently
And tire the hearer with a book of words.” —1.1.294-5

The beginning of the film certainly introduces the key characters and the general atmosphere of Messina, but conflict and narrative really begin that evening. The Revelling is a masked dance and feast, the first celebration of Don Pedro’s success at war. However, it looks more like a mating dance as couples flirt behind masked faces. Beatrice and Benedick join in the festivities, throwing jokes at one another, although this time much milder than their first encounter. Everyone seems to have fallen under a playful spell as the camera pans the crowd, showing the hidden faces of dancing couples.

In this film, Branagh never misses a chance to influence his scenes (and thus, his viewers) with comedy. He maintains an atmosphere of brightness throughout most of his scenes, urging his viewers to thoroughly enjoy the film. Essentially, Branagh hopes that the overall sentiment of the work will override separate aspects which make audiences uncomfortable, such as Hero’s treatment in the first wedding scene.

Branagh strengthens the immaturity of his Claudio character in the Revelling scenes by disguising him in a mask resembling a Cherub. In this case, it is not symbolizing love but immaturity and childishness. Additionally, whether on purpose or
not, Claudio’s voice occasionally cracks at certain points in the film, also symbolizing youth. Branagh continuously presents this character in ways that allow audiences to view him as decidedly young.

The Revelling contains another point in the film when Branagh chooses to toy with his audience. When he woos Hero, Don Pedro kisses her hands in quite a seductive way just after Claudio has been misinformed about Don Pedro’s intentions by Don John. Claudio reacts (and overacts) immediately but there lies the question as to whether his reaction is so uncalled for. Don Pedro and Hero do appear to be rather physically attracted to each other at this point. Clearly, Branagh wants viewers to regard Claudio’s actions as immature, but his motives, partially justified.

Speech between Beatrice and Benedick once again contrasts the relationship between Claudio and Hero. When Claudio is informed that he is to wed Hero, who has been wooed according to the plan, he is dumbstruck and like his timid bride-to-be, speechless. Beatrice prompts him: “Speak, Count. ’Tis your cue” (2.1 291). Here, more than anywhere else, it is clear that there may be talking on the part of Claudio but his relationship with Hero is certainly not punctuated or defined by speech but instead, by silence. Claudio, in a moment of ironic awareness to his relationship with Hero, says, “Silence is the perfectest herald of joy” (2.1 292). But is it? Or is it the perfect herald of doubt?

Sofia Munoz Valdivieso argues that the silences noted in Branagh’s film serve as a ploy to elicit some sympathy for Claudio and Hero. Certainly, these two character’s positions in the play present great difficulties for modern adaptations. Hero appears to
accept Claudio’s mistreatment without worry and Claudio continues to abuse her.

Valdivieso notes that Branagh, in an attempt to step away from this understanding of these characters, “cuts some of Claudio’s harsh lines” and “uses silence...to dispel darkness and make the final happiness of the characters acceptable” (191). She muses that these actions allow audiences some closure at the end of the film, where, left without these ploys, modern viewers feel uncomfortable with the happy resolution.

This certainly makes sense in this scene, where Leonard stands opposite Beckinsale, still stunned at what he has been told. Pushy as she is, Beatrice doesn’t leave the young couple alone and bids Hero either to speak or to kiss Claudio. Hero remains silent but chooses to kiss him instead. This act is understandably uncomfortable for Claudio. As a woman, Hero is actively choosing not to communicate and instead, to take part in a physical act, which builds anxiety in him. If anything, Branagh is trying to set his viewers up even more here by pressing the theory of Hero’s absence as a character. In the text, Hero already has sparse lines, but Branagh punctuates this by making her silence more important than anything she utters.
Beguiled Beatrice and Benedick

“When I said I would die a bachelor, I did not think I should live till I were married.” —2.3.238-9

Critical readers may argue against my thesis at this point, grappling with the idea of Beatrice and Benedick as representational lovers. After all, these two come to the realization of their love for one another only after overhearing other Messinans, who falsely gossip about it in order to unite the two. If Branagh was intending to introduce a true representation of love with this couple, then is his film flawed for making such a grand display of it? Furthermore, is Branagh’s attempt at representing realistic love founded in the first place? Shakespeare was, after all, a playwright and not a historian. His characters are assembled mechanisms within a piece of comedic fiction. Beatrice and Benedick were not necessarily conceived to showcase life but mock it, instead.

In my opinion, Branagh’s film doesn’t exactly disagree with Shakespeare’s intentions, but it does align itself with more modern expectations of narratives. Works of Shakespeare are characterized, not only in language but also in theme, by archaic customs. Branagh, in an attempt to bring Shakespeare back to the masses, makes a valiant attempt at building a relationship between viewers and his characters. And what better
Thus, Branagh’s choices for the two subsequent, mirroring scenes with Beatrice and Benedick actually further his thesis concerning the leading couples of his film. Even the text makes it clear from the beginning of the play that Beatrice and Benedick are too proud and stubborn to realize their attraction to each other on their own. They must be flattered into their feelings.

When Don Pedro, Claudio and Leonato are trying to fool Benedick, they are all, essentially, putting on an act. While Don Pedro and Leonato struggle to have a realistic but passionate conversation about the pangs of Beatrice’s feelings for such an unrequited love, Claudio pushes the limits of a believable discussion. Claudio participates in the reenactment of Beatrice’s suffering by crying out, “Then down upon her knees she falls, weeps, sobs, beats her heart, tears her hair, prays, curses, ‘O/sweet Benedick, God give me patience’” (2.3 149-152). He is noticeably the most outspoken and over-dramatized of them all. He receives an odd look from his two companions after his short input in their conversation about Beatrice, clearly signaling that he should tone down his part. Understandably, the character Claudio’s approach to theater is, indeed, overblown as the character himself is understood in the film to overact. His “acting” in this scene thus mirrors Branagh’s overall interpretation of the Claudio character; he is simply too ridiculous to be taken seriously.

Branagh, as Benedick, certainly portrays the surprised but flattered lover well in his scene. As his character demands, he is quite egotistical about the conquering of
Beatrice’s heart but there is a definitive change in him. After Don Pedro, Claudio, and Leonato have left, Benedick has a lengthy monologue discussing why he should convert to married life. If anything, Branagh wants viewers to see a character unconsciously struggling to mature. Benedick has long renounced marriage and though he may have other reasons for it, it seems very clear that he has some severe insecurities about leaving bachelorhood. Here, Benedick grapples with them face-to-face while still trying to preserve the man who he believes himself to be. Like many aspects of the play, it can be interpreted as comedy but it really reflects human conflict and serious struggling to compromise and come to grips with the opposite gender. Furthermore, Benedick has proven in the film several times that he cares greatly what his male comrades think of his actions and words. Accepting his feelings and acting upon them represents something which Benedick fears. He will have to become a hypocrite to embrace a life with love.

The following moments in the film are a slow motion montage of Benedick and Beatrice celebrating their love. Much like Branagh’s opening of the film, the camera pans over the idyllic house while combining the happy couple in separate areas, with swelling music overwhelming everything. These two characters, who have been difficult and headstrong the entire film, now portray their emotions in an incredible flourish, laughing and smiling with their newly discovered love. These scenes support my statements about Branagh’s interpretation of this couple’s love.

In the film, there are only a few scenes which contain the same level of excitement. These two interlaced scenes represent the center of the film whereas the other two similar scenes come at the beginning, with the character’s excited rush toward
bathing before their meeting, and at the end with the wedding celebrations. It cannot be clearer that Branagh is staking a lot of importance in these three scenes. It is thus obvious that Branagh wishes his audience to celebrate the love of Benedick and Beatrice more than anyone else’s in the play. For example, where is the swelling music behind Claudio’s admission of love? And where does Hero celebrate her love of Claudio? These scenes are very obviously missing from Branagh’s work, thus placing a lot of emphasis on Beatrice and Benedick instead. Not coincidentally, the song spoken in the opening of the film is sung to Don Pedro, Claudio and Leonato just before they beguile Benedick.

Branagh illuminates his thesis in the scenes which he authors. In other words, when he inserts the flourishing scenes of Benedick kicking water out of the fountain and Beatrice, joyously swinging, Branagh is demanding that viewers see the play his way. These scenes are the most influential in his work, acting as Branagh’s direct voice. Branagh is clearly identifying this as an important moment in the film. He is really attempting to create a strong bond between the viewers and these two characters. By persuading audiences to become emotionally invested in Benedick and Beatrice (and conversely, making no attempt to do the same thing with Hero and Claudio), Branagh does two things. First, he focuses the attention of viewers onto Beatrice and Benedick, making their relationship much more important than the other couple’s. Then, he proves that Hero and Claudio, to whom audiences cannot relate, are, by nature of their characters, not true representations of lovers and their relationship cannot be taken seriously.
The Lost Humor

“But masters, remember that I am an ass;
though it be not written down, yet forget not that I am an ass.” —4.2.76-8

While Branagh’s subtle changes to script and characterization do achieve a lot of positive alteration to the text, he does lose part of the original comedy in the play. As it is a comedy, Shakespeare does not disappoint his audiences by including a few token clowns, specifically Dogberry, Verges, and the Watch. Their role in the comic structure of the play is to offset the other characters, establishing themselves as farcical idiots. The contrast is meant to allow audiences to view Messinans as on higher intellectual planes than these clowns. However, their comedy poses a problem for modern-day adaptations. Dogberry and Verges illuminate their idiocy by spewing off a slew of incorrect verbiage which completely changes their intentions. To an Elizabethan audience, these slips-of-tongue might have been uproariously amusing, but clearly, Branagh doesn’t feel the same way.

The comedy of the clowns in his film is thus transformed from verbal to visual. In their first entrance in the film, Dogberry (Michael Keaton) and Verges (Ben Elton) come galloping into the scene on their feet and pretend to dismount their imaginary horses in front of their volunteer police force, the Watch (composed of actors Andy Hockley, Conrad Nelson, and Chris Barnes). Branagh describes them as “comic psychopaths” (51)
and Keaton and Elton certainly live up to that characterization. Instead of the countless, confused phrases and words, Dogberry and Verges invade personal space, spit, abuse one another, act wildly, and ride everywhere on imagined mounts. Their comedy is entirely slapstick humor from the way they interact with one another and other characters, down to the way they dress and move.

Their role in the play has certainly shifted as a repercussion of Claudio’s overacting. If audiences are supposed to assume that Claudio is immature and grapple with relating to his thoughts and actions throughout the narrative, then the clowns are forced to become over-exaggerated in every aspect of their characters. Clowns often boast characters who are merely present to add comedy and not understood to be realistic aspects of the narrative. However, as Branagh reserves this role partially for Claudio, then Dogberry and Verges must go above and beyond.

While the comedy of the play does not suffer from this (Keaton and Elton should be congratulated for their success in the roles), it does tend to create a rift in Branagh’s otherwise seamless film. The slapstick aspects of the film do not fit in with the rest of the actors, causing the clowns to appear quite stagey in the process.
**The First Wedding**

“You seem to me as Dian in her orb,
as chaste as is the bud ere it be blown;
But you are more intemperate in your blood
Than Venus, or those pampered animals
that rage in savage sensuality.” —4.1.56-60

Essentially, every aspect of Branagh’s film up to the wedding scene is preparatory work. Branagh faced (as all directors of outdated texts do) the difficulty of representing a gender dynamic which a 1993 audience would find acceptable. Shakespearean adaptations are often cornered by the desire to remain true to the original text, and the push to reinvent characters and their relationships to one another in an attempt to create situations to which modern audiences can relate.

Almost all of Shakespeare’s plays come with a gender conflict and the comedies are certainly no exception. In particular, *Much Ado About Nothing* contains events in the first wedding scene which are hard to stomach. Unlike other directors, though, Branagh doesn’t try to diminish Hero’s poor treatment. In fact, he seems to emphasize it, as he does with certain aspects of his characterization. By making it seem ridiculous, however, Branagh succeeds in gaining acceptance from his audience. Viewers would rather see
unrealistic character development culminating in an immature uproar than witness a jealous and untrusting man abuse a sweet and innocent woman with violence and harsh words.

But even Claudio’s outrageous behavior in Branagh’s wedding scene isn’t the most disturbing thing in the entire encounter. While he is truly a crescendo of emotion in the scene, the audience is aware that he was deceived the night before. This becomes a little difficult to accept; it means that Claudio has had the entire night to simmer about his supposed betrayal and after all that time, he responds with violence and overwhelming brutality. It therefore appears that his actions toward Hero must be planned. At this point, it is difficult for any audience to accept Claudio’s behavior as a realistic interpretation of the noble man he is supposed to be.

Sofia Munoz Valdivieso believes that this puts Claudio under unnecessarily harsh speculation. According to her, she believes that Branagh tries to de-emphasize the fact that the young count has had all night to simmer and scheme by removing certain lines from scenes before and after Claudio’s deception. Claudio speaks much less of the betrayal that night to Don John and Don Pedro and chooses to let other characters speak for him instead. As opposed to Borachio’s line in the play, “away went Claudio, enraged;/ swore he would meet her, as he was appointed, next/morning at the temple, and there, before the whole/congregation, shame her with what he saw o’ernight/and send her home again without a husband”(3.3, 156-61), Branagh chooses to have Borachio simply say “Away went Claudio, enraged” (qtd. in Valdivieso, 193). There seems to be an attempt to dissuade audiences from thinking about Claudio’s stream of thought but there is no way
to avoid it; the simple fact is that Claudio observes what he believes as betrayal during the night and responds with violence in the morning.

Further evidence that Branagh doesn’t wish for these two characters to be perceived as realistic people lies in Hero’s response, or lack thereof. At this point in the play, the audience is aware that Hero is innocent; Don John is clearly orchestrating the distrust between the characters. In the text, Hero defends herself. Even as Claudio and the Prince argue about their evidence, she denies what she can, trying to prove her innocence although she doesn’t have a very sound argument (her facts cannot be corroborated and her accusers run her into several verbal traps).

However, Branagh doesn’t want a strong Hero in any sense of the word and thus, she is physically pushed down by the enraged Claudio and is barely able to utter words in-between her sobs. In an ironic mirror to her overacting groom, Hero, hearing Don Pedro joining in Claudio’s accusation, gives a guttural, anguished cry and faints. Her dramatic actions echo Claudio’s, allowing Branagh to illuminate the absurdity of the two characters. However, the events which take place directly after the ruined wedding in the same scene provide a disappointing mirror of Claudio’s misbehavior in Beatrice.

It is clear from the very first scene of the film that Beatrice and Benedick are stubbornly in love with one another. Therefore, every encounter and argument is almost annoying to watch as the audience waits for the two to finally come together and set aside their insecurities. Thus, after the climatic and violent scene between Claudio and Hero, Benedick and Beatrice’s admission of love for one another is a relief to viewers, bringing some comfort after the distressing wedding scene.
However, they are unaccustomed to treating each other kindly and their attempts to communicate affection are awkward. Beatrice and Benedick, although they are trying to speak to each other of their love, let elements of their old banter fall back into their speech. While earlier in the play, they joked about eating the men that Benedick killed at war, they now apply the same terms to discussion their love.

Benedick: By my sword, Beatrice, thou loveth me.

Beatrice: Do not swear, and eat it.

Benedick: I will swear by it that you love me; and I will make him eat it that says I love not you.

Beatrice: Will you not eat your word?

Benedick: With no sauce that can be devised to it. I protest I love thee. (4.1. 273-279)

Clearly they are completely unaware of how they should interact at this point, after spending so much time teasing and insulting one another. They find that affection is so foreign that they must struggle to express it. But just as they seem to be getting onto stable, mutual ground, Beatrice disrupts the new-found dynamic in their relationship. Benedick seeks to prove his love to her by saying “Come, bid me do anything for thee” (4.1.287) and Beatrice replies with perhaps the heaviest statement in the film: “Kill Claudio” (4.1.288). She knows what effect her “bidding” will have on Benedick. Thompson’s face, which before had been lit up with new-found affection, sobers completely as she glares at Benedick.
This line, and those which Beatrice states afterwards, seem nearly as immature as Claudio’s earlier outburst. She does indeed have reason to hate Claudio; he has bruised the name of her kinswoman. However, even though Beatrice professes to know Hero and is sure that the slander cannot be true, she has no honest way to check this fact as the two did not share a bed on the night in question, as they usually did. Therefore, her following shower of curses toward Claudio and her desire to injure him can arguably be observed as just as unfounded as the disgruntled groom’s.

Shakespeare, it seems, is determined to flirt with his audience, offering them the potential resolution of requited love and pulling it back by reminding viewers of the character’s stubborn attitudes. But Branagh doesn’t view this moment as merely a reminder of this couple’s obstinate behavior. Instead, he sees realistic conflict. Their “falling out” in the chapel only illuminates the character’s realistic attitudes toward each other. Beatrice is not willing to fawn over her Benedick without straying far from her purpose. She is resolved, in this scene, to represent her anger and desire for Hero’s absolution. Perhaps not so innocently, she calculates the vulnerability that this moment evokes from Benedick and uses it to her advantage. She attempts to marry Benedick’s profession of love with her attempts to clear Hero’s name.

Benedick and Beatrice’s relationship is defined by the short, tense pause which Thompson and Branagh master in this scene. When Thompson looks into the camera sternly and speaks her line “Kill Claudio” (Branagh 65), Branagh pauses a moment before saying “Ha! Not for the wide world” (Branagh 65). This quick transition from their admission of love to being once again at complete odds illustrates a certain realism
in their relationship. Branagh and Thompson move this transition along very quickly to keep the idea clear that their hot-and-cold temperaments have not changed and still exist in any established relationship they share.

This scene is arguably the most important in the establishment of Beatrice and Benedick’s relationship. Many different film and theatrical versions of this play treat their interactions here in various ways but Branagh’s is surely a production with one of the shortest pauses between the two lines. He does this in an attempt to reinforce his argument that Benedick and Beatrice, despite their ability to entertain romance in their lives, will not fall into prototypical Shakespearean lover stereotypes. In other words, once they have found love, they do not simply let it master their lives, as other characters are wont to do in similar plays. This couple doesn’t let their admission of love stand for very long before forcing more conflict into their relationship, something which seems to give them comfort.

In fact, once Benedick agrees to side with Beatrice, Thompson and Branagh almost seem estranged by the idea that their views should agree. They leave each other with no sense of compassion; it appears as though that they have just completed a business transaction. Understandably, both are uncomfortable with the idea that their opinions should align, as the couple is so often at war with one another. I believe this slight strain that Branagh and Thompson portray is a good representation of each character’s uneasiness with the new dynamic that their relationship seems to be shifting toward. To me, it’s another sign of realistic growth between them, one which we do not witness in Claudio and Hero.
The Second Wedding

“One Hero died defiled, but I do live,

and surely as I live, I am a maid.” —5.4.63-4

After the supposedly deceased Hero has been proven innocent, Claudio’s character doesn’t boast the greatest popularity by token audiences. For centuries, Claudio has been criticized by audiences and critics alike who claim that he not only doesn’t deserve his happy ending with the innocent Hero, but that his temper runs too hot and cold (and untrusting) to represent a realistic character. Branagh seems pointedly aware of this ostracism and he makes an attempt in his film to soften Claudio’s character in many ways (Valdivieso 192).

Branagh attempts to firmly establish Claudio as youthful, if not immature, especially contrasting him with the seasoned Benedick and Don Pedro. This practice is particularly successful as it accompanies Leonard’s presentational approaches to his character’s reactions. When Claudio receives good news, his face lights up, his eyes glisten, and he can barely control his rampant happiness. Branagh’s screenplay directions include Claudio breaking “into a broad grin” (21), his “head...beginning to swim” (35), and the vague indication that he should be “Hero-struck” (14). Similarly, his anger is fiery and overwhelms him completely. The first wedding scene leaves no need for further
examples; it is proof enough and more. His sadness is no less pronounced, if not more so. He is “devastated” (Branagh 73) at the news of Hero’s innocence and barely makes it through the reading of her epitaph, finally falling to his knees to weep. Interestingly, Valdivieso notes that many productions of the play omit Act 5, Scene 3, where Claudio repents the lost innocent. She says of the scene:

As Stanely Wells indicates, 5.3 is ‘scenically awkward, requiring props and stage movements at odds with the rest of the play’ (quoted in Zitner, 70). It seems that not all directors have seen its importance, but Branagh devotes some time to showing us the suffering in his face while reading the epitaph on Hero’s tomb. (193)

Clearly, Branagh’s intent is to try to gain some sympathy for Claudio so that audiences can feel closure with the second wedding scene (Valdivieso 194). Carol Cook agrees with Valdivieso here, saying that this scene is meant to show “a change in Claudio sufficient to warrant his good fortune in the next scene, where Hero is restored to him” (Cook 198).

However, there are critics who don’t believe that there needs to be any attempt to restore sympathy to Claudio in the first place. Kirby Neill defends Claudio, stating that “it is the belief in the slander, not the subsequent repudiation of Hero, which is the crux of the problem” (92). Neill goes on to argue that Claudio, like many other hero figures from classic texts, is put in an unfair position: “shall he trust in his lady or shall he believe the ocular proof of her guilt?” (93-94). Audiences must not forget, after all, that while it is indeed not Hero at the balcony, Claudio does witness a woman and a man
outside his lady’s room and is fully convinced of her betrayal by what he witnesses. Branagh hoped that these facts would be taken into account as he entered the second wedding scene.

Whether or not the audience accepts Claudio as a suitable husband, Hero certainly does. In the final scene, she unveils herself and through tears, explains her innocence and agrees to wed him. This is the final example of their theatrical position in the play; Beckinsale acts overjoyed to have her Claudio back, when the last time they were together, he was cursing her and throwing her to the ground. And Claudio seems all-convinced of her absolute virtue even though his belief in her has run hot and cold through the entire narrative. If audiences aren’t convinced by now that these two aren’t meant to be taken seriously, then they haven’t been watching carefully enough.

Beatrice and Benedick are relentlessly true to their personalities in this scene. They quickly figure out that the others have beguiled them into their admission of love and at first, seem resolved to once again be at war with one another. They are always realistically quick to fall back on insecurities, and this is no exception. However, as the resolution of the play demands, they are united by their own emotions and this time, it is more honest. It is no longer by the words of their friends that they realize their love, but by their own written verses.

Benedick then calls for dancing and even though Leonato tries to convince him to wait until after the marriage, the couples are firmly set in the idea. Thus begins the bookend scene, which characteristically reminds viewers of the first scene and that of Beatrice and Benedick’s realization of love. With the swelling sound of the song Branagh
has carefully used throughout the film, everyone joins hands and streams through outdoor
courtyards and into the elaborate gardens beside Leonato’s Villa. Everything is
overwhelmingly positive and cheery as the camera pulls further and further away.

Ironically enough, the wedding which everyone has been waiting for never takes
place on screen. Much ado about nothing!
It is widely agreed that Branagh’s film was a success. A star-studded cast of American and British actors pulled audiences into the movie theaters, inciting a popularity that Shakespeare’s name hadn’t enjoyed in some time. Through the litany of great reviews of the work, there are few that don’t follow fashion, and proclaim the film unimpressive. For the most part, however, reviews of the film at that time boast that Branagh brought Shakespeare back to the silver screen and that Franco Zeffirelli’s cinematic success could finally be shared.

In his 1993 review, Roger Ebert from the *Chicago Sun-Times* proclaims that Branagh is “nothing if not a film director of high spirits and great energy.” He goes on to say that, “A play like *Much Ado About Nothing* is all about style. I doubt if Shakespeare’s audiences at the Globe took it any more seriously than we do. It is farce and mime and wisecracks, and dastardly melodrama...because this is a Comedy. The key to the film’s success is in the acting.” Desson Howe from *The Washington Post* agreed with this sentiment, stating that Branagh had “blown away the forbidding academic dust and found a funny retro-essence for the ‘90s.” Howe also adds that “though Branagh transmogrifies the play for the modern, box-office light, he and...Thompson are keepers of the poetic flame.” Like other critics, Howe believes that Branagh’s rendition certainly modernizes aspects of the work but retains the true essence of Shakespeare in the film.
However, there are those who did not agree with the overwhelming sense of success that critics brought to the film. The Apollo Guide criticized Branagh for his “utter lack of subtlety” and claims that the film “leans heavily toward the wearily ham-fisted” (Sanders). In a moment of true harshness, the review goes on to state:

Although Branagh’s interpretation does much to make Much Ado About Nothing comprehensible, it ultimately fails to create any kind of enduring watchability. (Sanders)

However, negative attention toward the film is scarce, with the majority of the responses overwhelmingly positive. Clearly, Branagh’s careful attention toward characterization, and his manipulation of specific acting styles in his cast, deserved the compliments it received. Branagh was able to bring this text back into the limelight, proving that Shakespeare is accessible to any generation.
Works Cited


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