

Recasting *Much Ado About Nothing* to Appeal to a Modern Audience

The Kenneth Branagh adaptation of Shakespeare's comedy *Much Ado About Nothing* presents a play whose original darker qualities are muted. Shakespeare's comedies often have sinister issues to render their lighter moments more poignant. In Branagh's version, he tones down the darker aspects in favor of a more romantic and comedic production – Claudio and Benedick are more friendly towards women and treat love as romantic or sympathetic, ways more easily acceptable to a modern audience. The two plays' characterizations of Claudio and Benedick during the wooing of Hero best exemplify their differing treatments of comedy.

Shakespeare originally characterized Claudio as noble and honorable, but also gullible and jealous with a mercenary bent. He "hath borne himself beyond the promise of his age, doing in the figure of a lamb the feats of a lion" (1.1.11-2) during the war and is well-respected by Don Pedro. However, Claudio's chivalric image is tarnished by his lack of devotion to his chosen lady-love, Hero. When choosing a wife, he concerns himself with both her wealth as well as her beauty and virtue. In pursuing the affairs of love, Claudio first addresses a monetary issue – Hero's wealth. After Don Pedro assures him that Hero is Leonato's only child and sole heir, Claudio admits he likes her. He intentionally approaches Don Pedro in this matter because his "highness now may do me good" (1.1.238¹), a fortunate decision because Don Pedro then volunteers to negotiate a wedding. This planned courtship evokes the arranged dynastic weddings of royal families during the Renaissance and situates the marriage as a financial and political decision rather than the consequence of love. The calculation that

¹ Shakespeare, William. *Much Ado About Nothing*. The Norton Shakespeare, based on the Oxford Edition. Norton: New York, 1997.

Claudio puts into setting up the marriage is practical and understandable. Marriage does not have to be romantic to be successful; however, it is foreboding how quickly he believes her unfaithfulness on no proof. He is gullible and jealous, traits that Don John plays upon to his own evil ends, but those alone does not satisfactorily explain why Claudio is always so eager to believe Hero is false to him. While he watches Don Pedro wooing Hero on his behalf as prearranged, Don John tells him that Don Pedro is wooing for his own benefit. His gullible nature immediately takes the betrayal to be “certain” and blames Hero’s beauty for charming Don Pedro into wooing for himself. A more reasonable person, and one truly in love with Hero, would blame Don Pedro because his quickness to volunteer his services might suggest he had similar designs on Hero.

Branagh keeps Claudio’s gullible and jealous nature intact, but shows him as more foolish and romantic than in the original play. Claudio is still too quick to believe Don John’s lies. Claudio seems aware he has an impetuous nature: “If my passion change not shortly, God forbid it should be otherwise” (1.1.177-8). Yet more important than his jealousy and impetuosity is his caricature as an young ardent lover in Branagh’s movie. Branagh recasts Claudio’s whole speech to Don Pedro declaring his love for Hero in a sentimental light. Claudio first asks “Hath Leonato any son, my lord” (1.1.242), as though uncertain how to broach the subject of his love to his superior. His moony eyes and sighs express a greater passion than he reveals in his careful words about how he fell in love with Hero. The admission, “I liked her ere I went to war” (1.1.253), seems an understated confidence; Claudio would have liked to continue praising Hero but Don Pedro cuts him off, saying he will “be like a lover presently,/ And tire the hearer with a book of words.” (1.1.254-5). In the movie, Claudio is conscious of Don Pedro’s superior position and is more reserved in his speech with

him than with Benedick. With Benedick, Claudio gives full reign to his enthusiasm – “In mine eye she is the sweetest lady that ever I looked on” (1.1.151-2). He is sentimental and fairly swoons when declaring his love for Hero. The more romantic Claudio is one better suited to today’s conception of love.

Benedick’s character in Shakespeare’s original version, similarly noble and honorable, is also adept at speaking cleverly and amuses everyone with his twisted view of women. He brags to Beatrice that “it is certain I am loved of all ladies, only you excepted. And I would I could find in my heart that I had not a hard heart, for truly I love none” (1.1.101-4). Benedick thinks too highly of himself and is very sensitive to mockery. Beatrice’s insult that “he is the Prince’s jester, a very dull fool” (2.1.118) so outrages him that he hardly can pay attention to Claudio’s woes. When Don Pedro and Claudio imitate his manner of speech to poke fun at him, Benedick replies that they also use those same devices and speech phrasing they mock in him. His response is more civil than that to Beatrice’s teasing – “Nay, mock not, mock not...Ere you flout old ends any further, examine your conscience” (1.1.234,236-7) – but that may be a result of his extreme dislike of women. “Being a professed tyrant of their sex” (1.1.136), Benedick loses no opportunity to exhibit his paranoia about unfaithful women. He decides to love for reasons both selfless and self-interested, a change in his character. He will requite Beatrice’s love and prove wrong Don Pedro, Leonato and Claudio’s censure for being too proud.

Branagh makes Benedick’s character more lovable by retaining his witty dialogue while eliminating many of the lines railing against infidelity in women. He seems to dislike women because he is afraid of their tongue and is not certain any he would consider suitable to marry could love him. He plays the part of the court jester, looking back for approval in the

men's laughter when he and Beatrice first bicker. Much of the imagery that Benedick uses to describe his fear of being a cuckold are cut out of Branagh's version. The lines that remain are obscure and do not immediately indicate that the main reason he doesn't want to be married is that he believes any woman will be unfaithful. He explains his position to Don Pedro and Claudio saying, "That a woman conceived me, I thank her. That she brought me up, I likewise give her most humble thanks. But that I will ... hang my bugle in an invisible baldric, all women shall pardon me...I will live a bachelor" (1.1.195-8, 201). In those lines, Shakespeare plays upon the imagery of horns as indicating the cuckold, but instead of cuckold's horns, he chooses a bugle. That the baldric, the belt to hold the horn, is invisible, indicates the ignorance of the cuckold to his wife's infidelity. However, the movie's interpretation of the bugle and baldric is the abandoning of freedom when married. The movie presents Benedick as a merry bachelor whose reason for not wanting to be married is an aversion for what he expects is the drudgery and boredom of marriage. When he does fall in love with Beatrice, Benedick's love arises out of sympathy – he loves her because she loves him, and since she is such a beautiful, wise and kind woman, it would be a shame to not reciprocate.

Many of the lines that Branagh cut out have cuckold or jealous imagery that do not translate well to modern language. The image of a cuckolded husband as having bull's horns is eliminated by cutting lines such as "hath not the world one man but he will wear his cap with suspicion" (1.1.160-1) and "thou wouldst be horn-mad" (1.1. 220). The willow as a symbol of unrequited love is also cut from a lengthy metaphor Benedick uses to chide Claudio for being so foolish as to trust Don Pedro to woo on his behalf. In fact, Branagh recasts the whole exchange between Claudio and Benedick, through cutting out lines, to portray Benedick as less cynical about relationships and more interested in his own wounded pride. In the play,

Benedick believes Don Pedro has wooed Hero for himself and counsels Claudio to go “to a willow tree, either to make him[self] a garland, as being forsaken, or to bind him[self] up a rod, as being worthy to be whipped” (2.1.189-191). Benedick suggests a whipping because he believes Claudio foolish to expose his weakness, a love for Hero, and not expect someone to take advantage of it. Branagh may have cut those lines because they were difficult to translate into modern parlance, but he also interprets other, more understandable lines into different meanings, suggesting he is downplaying the importance of cuckoldry in this play.

The movie’s characterization of Claudio and Benedick mitigates their excessive fear of cuckoldry and make them into men more susceptible to romantic love. In the original play, Don John convinces Don Pedro and Claudio that Hero is not as virtuous as she first seems by arranging Margaret, mistaken for Hero, to talk out the window late at night with Borachio. This alone does not seem enough evidence for Claudio to renounce her publicly, but his gullible nature readily accepts Don John’s slanders and his active imagination willingly sees that discourse as a proof of infidelity. That Don Pedro should agree with Claudio’s interpretation of events is troubling, because it indicates that he is also suspicious of women’s honesty. In the movie, Branagh adds more substance to the scene by having Margaret make love to Borachio at the window. Mistaking Margaret for Hero in that instance, Claudio does have grounds for doubting her fidelity and seems reasonable in his decision to renounce Hero at the wedding. Claudio and Don Pedro’s reactions are more understandable; they have seen “proof” of Hero’s infidelity and it is because of that, rather than the product of misogynic imaginations, that they declare Hero’s lack of virtue.

Branagh diminishes the focus on unfaithful women because the original play puts too much emphasis on women as the unfaithful ones in a relationship. The thrice-repeated “Hey

Nonny Nonny” song balances Claudio’s and Benedick’s muted misogyny with the phrase “men were deceivers ever ... to one thing constant never” (2.3.57, 59). Making Beatrice the one who first laughingly reads those lines to a merry, relaxing household, trivializes the idea of infidelity. As a result, Benedick’s later railing against it seems less serious. Taken together, the two viewpoints hint at a more realistic definition of adultery, one where both men and women are at fault. By downplaying Benedick’s obsession with infidelity, his and Claudio’s other, more positive traits stand out. Claudio is dreamy young lover whose gullible tendencies nearly cost him true love twice. Benedick has a facile wit and, stripped of his misogyny, his wordplay with Beatrice entertains without casting doubt as to the fitness of a union between Benedick and Beatrice.

Branagh’s version of the play consciously brings out many of its comedic aspects while suppressing its tragic ones. Just as Shakespeare wrote his play for the intended audience of the Globe Theater, Kenneth Branagh rewrote *Much Ado About Nothing* to appeal to his intended audience – mainstream, movie-going Americans. By making the play fit into one of the established movie genres (romantic comedy), Branagh hoped to attract more people receptive to his story. His casting choices also reflect that – he casts many famous actors without experience in Shakespeare but who are box-office draws in their own rights. The difference in presentation of *Much Ado About Nothing* can be explained as a difference in the idea of comedic entertainment today and in Elizabethan England. Today, comedies are light and fluffy affairs where nothing is taken seriously and characters are endearing if misguided. No one watching a comedic movie would mistakes its exaggerated situations, slap-stick humor and continual perverse misunderstandings for real life. However, in Elizabethan theater, very little separated a tragedy from a comedy – mostly a wedding or the necessity of a funeral at the

ending. Both had whimsical plot twists, jokes and puns, and a serious, grim threat overshadowing the action. Comedy can be interchanged with tragedy by changing the ending – Romeo and Juliet live happily ever after, Egeon is executed and the Ephesuses never discover each other or settle their various fights and debts.

Branagh had the difficult task of updating Shakespearean comedy to one more amenable to today's ideas of romance and comedy. Branagh's adaptation of the play is respectful of the original: he doesn't change the plot and keeps the dialogue the same. He only cuts out dialogue to present a different version of the character. He adds in non-speaking scenes – the bathing scenes at the beginning and the heading and capping Hey Nonny Nonny song. Both the mirrored bathing scenes and the Hey Nonny Nonny song speak to the equality of the sexes in Branagh's version of the play. They offset the slightly misogynist viewpoints of Claudio and Benedick and help make the play into a movie palatable to a wide audience holding today's standards of comedy and relationships.