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Paper #2 rewrite

21L.009

11/18/03

The Gap Between Appearance and Reality in Kenneth Branagh's Much Ado About Nothing

Appearances are untrustworthy and unreliable throughout Much Ado About Nothing, but in his interpretation Kenneth Branagh dwells especially on the gap between how things seem and how they truly are. In several places, the text has been trimmed or a scene filmed in such a way that the dilemma of distinguishing reality from deception is brought sharply into focus. Also ever present are situations where the film uses disguises or masks to render characters even more difficult to correctly assess and categorize. Branagh thus increases the significance of one of the themes present in Much Ado About Nothing through his choices of how to costume, what to cut, what to include in this film and what to add to it. He constantly inverts expectation in a radical manner playing on both deceptive similarities and exaggerated differences. The reason why Branagh does this is to present us with an outward appearance of self and an inner truth that have somehow been utterly confused. In doing so, he emphasizes the unknowability of the true nature of people even more strongly than does the text itself. Given the centrality of masks in 2.1, Branagh's alterations in this scene are especially pertinent. When reading the play, it is fairly obvious that all the women know the identities of the masked men

with whom they are converse. For instance, the first thing we hear Ursula say is: "I know you well enough. You are Signior Antonio." (2.1.111-112). Likewise, we get the feeling that Beatrice only taunts Benedick as mercilessly as she does- "Why, he is the Prince's jester, a very dull fool. Only his gift is in devising impossible slanders" (2.1.136-138)- because she is fully aware it's him behind the mask. She drives this point home in telling him she wishes she were actually talking to Benedick: "I am sure he is in the fleet; I would he had boarded me" (2.1.141-142). These men's masks are thus not terribly effective disguises because all the women know better than to be fooled. The film takes this one step further: none of the masked men are truly disguised because the masks they wear are all caricatures or symbols of themselves. Don John, being the moody and dark villain of the play, wears a deep red mask that is a cross between a devil and a bird of prey. Claudio's mask is a childlike pouting cherub, blatantly symbolic of his own naivete and immaturity. Benedick picks out a huge comical mask with a jester-like grin and big silly ears. Hero selects a skeleton mask for her elderly father and the beastly Borrachio chooses to wear the face of a three-eyed monster. Beatrice's catlike mask suggests her own quickness and cleverness. Considering their characteristics, these masks don't do much to hide their true identities. Note that Benedick's mask covers him up the most, but he is the most obviously recognizable. By wearing forms of their own faces as masks, these characters give the appearance of being disguised, but even that is a deception. I would like to propose that Branagh is deceiving by using the self as a disguise to demonstrate how impossible it is to distinguish a character's true nature from his or her outer appearance. The outward appearance here is itself a mask or a facade that disguises what people truly are. In the

masquerade scene characters physically cover their “true” faces with images of themselves because elsewhere many of them do just that only less literally. Branagh thus shows symbolically how the true self can be disguised by the “mask” of outward appearance.

While the masking is particularly well used in 2.1 to emphasize the idea of the self as a disguise, nowhere do similar outer appearances more effectively mask strikingly different natures than in the case of Hero and Margaret. Branagh carefully constructs a very thorough resemblance between Hero and Margaret, both in terms of their physical appearance and their behavior. The actresses are made to look very much alike. In fact, their matching brown curls and slight build render them so physically similar that upon catching a glimpse of Margaret’s back in Hero’s window, we suddenly find Claudio’s mistake more understandable. The illusion Don John sets up for Don Pedro and Claudio is nowhere near as psychologically cunning as anything that Iago improvises in *Othello*, but in the film it is nearly flawless. Margaret and Hero both also wear almost identical pure, virginal white dresses to supplement the similarity of their appearances.

However, Branagh doesn’t just stop at physical resemblance. Not only do Hero and Margaret look the same, Branagh also renders them similar in their behavior. A large number of Hero’s lines are cut from the film rendering her even more the “modest young lady” (1.1.159) that Claudio sees in the first scene. However, the film also chooses to cut all but two of Margaret’s lines. Margaret no longer has her witty exchange with Benedick in 5.2 nor does she tease Hero and Beatrice on the morning of the wedding in 3.4. In the play, Margaret is just as involved in baiting Beatrice, telling her:

“Nor I cannot think, if I would think my heart out of thinking that you are in

love, or that you will be in love, or that you can be in love. Yet Benedick was such another, and now is he become a man. He swore he would never marry and now in despite of his heart he eats his meat without grudging” (3.5.81-87)

But in the film she is removed from the scheme entirely. In addition, all of Margaret’s bawdy and suggestive lines have been removed from the film. Quips like “A maid, and stuffed! There’s goodly catching of cold” (3.4.63-64) and “Give us the swords; we have bucklers of our own” (5.2.18-19) are absent. The film transforms Margaret into an even more silent and seemingly timid creature than Hero. The effect of this treatment, coupled with the physical likeness, has a significant effect: it sets them up as nearly identical when judged based on their outward appearances. Branagh will take this and then contrast it with how different their true selves actually are.

But even as the film carefully establishes similarities between Hero and Margaret’s appearances, it also highlights the difference in their true natures. After showing how similar these two women seem outwardly, Branagh then makes a point of showing us how different they actually are. Margaret’s only two lines are delivered on top of Borrachio and, though the script does not call for it, the film version opts to let its audience see Borrachio taking Margaret in the window. Branagh contrasts the sexual intensity of the window scene with a brief scene in which Claudio gently takes Hero’s hand and tenderly kisses it. The effect of these two contrasting moments is to illustrate the fact that Margaret and Hero have vastly different ideas of what constitutes acceptable behavior outside of wedlock. Similarly, in the film’s opening scene Hero girlishly fixes her hair while Hero powders her cleavage and inspects it in a mirror. Branagh is telling us that though Margaret and Hero both appear pure on the surface, only one of them is truly

chaste.

Branagh furthers his point by extending the difference between Hero and Margaret's beyond merely contrasting their morals. Branagh creates a guilt on the part of Margaret to contrast with Hero's innocence and then plays Leonato's response to them in extremely different ways. In the film, Margaret is present at the wedding and witnesses Hero's accusation. The look of horror that crosses her face makes it plainly obvious that she realizes what has happened, but she says nothing. By staying silent, Margaret suddenly becomes guilty. If she had spoken up and explained the mistake, Hero would not have been disgraced and unfortunate tragic events that followed could have been avoided. It is probably no accident that Leonato's referring to Margaret's involvement as "against her will" (5.4.5) is cut. Branagh thus creates an obvious and concrete difference between Hero and Margaret: one is guilty and the other innocent. In looking at them, however, it is impossible to tell which is which. Branagh uses Leonato's response to their guilt to once again illustrate the fact that Hero and Margaret are fundamentally different in spite of their exteriors. In the text Leonato responds extremely violently to Hero's disgrace: "Why doth not every earthly thing cry shame upon her? Could she hear deny the story that is printed in her blood? Do not live, Hero; do not open thine eyes. For, did I not think thou wouldst quickly die, thought I thy spirits were stronger than thy shames, myself would on the rearward of reproaches strike at thy life." (4.1.119-126)

But Branagh takes this even further with Leonato grabbing his daughter by her hair, throwing her across the altar and then striking her. In the film he is so bent on hurting his child that his brother and the priest have to hold him back. On the other hand, Leonato greets Margaret's guilt with an attitude of paternal teasing. He kisses her on the forehead

and says “but Margaret was in some fault for this.” (5.4.4-5). Looking at the film’s treatment of these two characters it becomes clear that the virgin is not easily told apart from a less virtuous woman, neither by appearance nor demeanor, even though they are distinctly and fundamentally different. Hero and Margaret are so different, yet look so much alike. Branagh plays similarity and difference this way because he wants to demonstrate how impossible it is to perceive a person’s true nature and he will continue to emphasize this throughout the film.

If in the cases of the masquerade and Hero and Margaret Branagh uses similarity to deceive us, in other cases the exaggerated difference works to deceive instead. One of the most obvious instances in which Branagh uses this is in his treatment of Dogberry. In deviating from Shakespeare’s Dogberry, Branagh makes the watch’s uncovering of the truth even more surprising than it already is in the text. In Borrachio’s confession he tells Don Pedro and Claudio: “what your graces could not discover, these shallow fools have brought to light” (5.1.231-233). Dogberry and the watch seem like incompetent rogues, but they are the ones who do their duty. Conrade and Borrachio are supposedly gentlemen, but they behave like scoundrels. In the film, Branagh builds on this, making it even more surprising. He confounds expectations even more with his take on Dogberry. Michael Keaton is the grimmest, scraggiest and smarmiest Dogberry imaginable. Reading the play I pictured Dogberry as pompous and foolish, but considerably more gentle, elderly and harmless. In the film, Dogberry is played as cruel, nasty and generally unpleasant to be around. He pokes his fingers in Verges’ eyes, strangles him and grabs his crotch violently. He beats his prisoners until they are bloody, head-butting Borrachio and threatening Conrade. Not only does Michael Keaton portray Dogberry as abusive, he

also comes across as completely incompetent. He dozes off in the middle of briefing the night watch. When Leonato tells him “I would fain know what you have to say” (3.5.28) he pronounces each word slowly and loudly with pauses in between his words as though he were addressing a very slow-witted young child. While this did not agree with my image of Dogberry, it is nonetheless clear why Branagh went with this interpretation. The slimier Branagh depicts Dogberry, the wider he stretches the gap between how things appear and how they truly are. Looking at this Dogberry, you expect him to turn out rotten and villainous. However, it is Dogberry- not Claudio or Don Pedro- who brings the guilty to justice and saves the wronged Hero in the end. Here Branagh uses contrast to cause this character’s self and its inner truth to completely oppose one another. As with Hero and Margaret, it is impossible to know Dogberry’s true nature because it has been so confused with his exterior.

Branagh’s treatment of Benedick is very similar to that of Dogberry in that he once again presents an exaggerated difference between what we expect and what actually happens. Though Benedick is comical and seldom serious, he is the one to realize that Hero is innocent. He of all people promptly and correctly guesses who is responsible: “if their wisdoms be misled in this, the practice of it lives in John the bastard” (4.1.186-187). He tries to calm Leonato: “Sir, sir be patient” (4.1.142) and is the only one who thinks to question Beatrice: “Lady, were you her bedfellow last night?” (4.1.146). Branagh brings even more silliness to Benedick than is already present in the text. Branagh is very clumsy with his folding lawn chair in 2.3 and infuses a great deal of humor into most of his lines. When he’s eavesdropping he lets out an extremely audible and indignant noise when insulted that he immediately tries to cover up with an absurd and funny bird

imitation. As with Dogberry, this makes Benedick's keen perception and calm rationality in 4.1 even more unexpected. Once again we find that Branagh has presented us with a mixed up self and inner truth, supporting his argument that people are not easily judged based on their exteriors.

In Much Ado About Nothing deception and disguise are essential elements to the plot and central to the play thematically. But in Branagh's film, disguise and appearance are also used to demonstrate the impossibility of knowing people's true nature. By playing similarities and differences Branagh emphasizes that people are not always what they appear to be, and as a result are not easy to assess correctly. He leads us to expect one thing, then presents us with a radically inverted actual truth. Branagh's choices emphasize that it is never easy to tell what people actually are because their appearances can function like the masks in 2.1 and disguise their true faces. As Claudio puts it:

“Out on thee seeming! I will write against it! You seemed to me as Dian in her orb, as chaste as the bud ere it be blown; But you are more intemperate in your blood than Venus or those pamp' red animals that rage in savage sensuality” (4.1.55-60). Branagh seems to structure his film around this theme, but he presses it even further by playing similarity and difference and building brilliantly on what he finds in the text to emphasize how unknowable a person's inner truth often is.

Shakespeare, William. Much Ado About Nothing. New York: Signet Classic, 1989.