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Much Ado About Nothing

Kenneth Branagh's film version of William Shakespeare's "Much Ado About Nothing" focuses on the relationship between Beatrice and Benedict and alters the play's depiction of several characters. The director's control over every aspect of the film allows him to show the audience his interpretation of the play very clearly. Branagh can shape the audience's opinion of each character by selecting lines that reveal specific traits of the speaker. The actor's presentation of those lines is equally important: a potentially serious line can be turned humorous with just a smile and a laugh, and serious scenes can be lightened as well if the order of the scenes is such that the serious scene follows a cheerful one. The director has control over all of these influential factors, and thus can create a film that leads the audience in whatever direction he or she chooses. Branagh makes many decisions in his creation of "Much Ado About Nothing" to minimize the tragic aspects of the play.

The cause of much of the tragedy in the play can be traced to Hero and Claudio's relationship; a relationship that Branagh chooses to downplay by focusing on the interactions of other characters, namely Benedict and Beatrice. Their relationship is the only one that continually improves; while Claudio publicly shames Hero at their wedding, Benedict and Beatrice fall in love ¹(4.1.30-41). Both the text and the film describe the same progression of events in their relationship, the film just works to highlight it. Branagh's shift in focus creates a much more light-hearted version of the original play. Initially the characters are shown to be involved in a long-standing war of words, and both profess that they will never marry (1.1.112-128). As the play continues Don Pedro and his friends trick Beatrice and Benedict into believing the other loves them. The two then fall in love, and finally marry. The dialogue between the two characters becomes funnier for the audience because they have information that Beatrice and

¹ Shakespeare, William. Much Ado About Nothing. New York: Signet Classic, 1998.

Benedict do not. When Beatrice calls Benedict to dinner, he twists all of her words so that they suggest that she loves him (2.3.254-260). However, the audience knows that his interpretation is completely off base and that Beatrice did not hint at love with her words. Benedict just looks foolish as a result.

The film highlights Beatrice and Benedict's humorous moments by cutting some of the other characters' lines. Margaret, for example, loses almost all of her speaking parts. In the play, when she dances with Borachio they tease each other and in a later scene she laments her lack of a lover to Benedict (2.1.99-106)(5.2.1-24). Without those lines the viewer has very little information about Margaret's personal desires and relationships, diminishing her ability to have an impact upon the play. In a sense, by reducing the other characters the viewer is free to focus on Beatrice and Benedict, whose lines remain mostly intact.

The first wedding scene represents one of the few scenes that does not focus on Beatrice and Benedict, in fact Margaret's character raises an interesting question. The film portrays Margaret in the first wedding as aware of her role in Hero's shaming. Once Claudio reveals that he had seen Hero in her room with another man the previous night, the film cuts to Margaret's face. The look of shock and realization in her eyes makes it clear that she knows Claudio actually saw *her* in Hero's room the night before, not Hero herself. Yet, nothing comes of this knowledge. Margaret has the ability to set the whole situation straight and save Hero from losing her reputation, but chooses to remain silent – perhaps to save her own reputation. If self-benefit governs her actions, the film would lose some of its comedy because personal motives generally suggest greed and the “darker” side of human nature.

Branagh prevents the loss of comedy by suggesting an alternative reason for Margaret's inaction. He omits the text's gossiping scene with Margaret, Hero, Ursula, and Beatrice - which

describes how the women interact - and thus makes their relationships ambiguous. In that section of the text Margaret voices her opinion of Hero's wedding dress and fearlessly makes crude sexual references about Hero getting married directly to Hero (3.4.9-10, 26-38).

Margaret's boldness shows that despite the difference in social status between the two women, they are close enough to speak openly to each other. Little evidence exists beyond this conversation to suggest a friendship between Hero and Margaret, so without that scene the film can present an alternative explanation for Margaret's silence at the wedding. If Margaret's role is to simply do whatever tasks her lady requests and not be seen or heard, then her silence at the wedding can be rationalized as just doing her job.

Extending scenes has the ability to clarify characters' motives and alter the focus of the play in much the same way that eliminating scenes affects the interpretation. The film extends the "tricking" scenes where Benedict overhears Don Pedro and Beatrice overhears Hero. Much of the extra footage in these scenes shows Beatrice and Benedict's reaction to what they are overhearing. The text would not include numerous stage directions of the type, "Beatrice expresses shock" or "Benedict smiles" because in doing so one of the fundamental qualities of a play would be limited, the ability for the reader to create his or her own idea of a character's reactions and expressions. The camera allows Branagh to show quick clips of a character's reaction to certain lines, and thus present his interpretation to the audience. At one point in Beatrice's scene Hero says that she will try to convince Benedict to forget his love for Beatrice (3.1.82-85). The film cuts to Beatrice who looks like she is about to object to that idea. Thus, the film clearly implies that Beatrice likes the idea that Benedict loves her and that she might feel the same way toward him.

The text only reveals Beatrice's reaction to what she hears in the last eight lines of a soliloquy. Her words are somewhat ambiguous because the text does not specify facial expressions or vocal cues to show the emotions behind the lines. In both the film and the text Beatrice says "Stand I condemned for pride and scorn so much?/Contempt farewell! And maiden pride, adieu!" (3.1.108-109). A reader could interpret those lines to mean that Beatrice decided to make herself love Benedict because other people condemn her for not loving a man. The film eliminates that possibility by showing images of Beatrice swinging in the garden and smiling broadly, and by having her deliver her lines in an excited tone of voice. Her manner and actions do not reflect the determination and resolve one would expect to see from a person who just made a pledge for self-improvement: they portray a person in love. Thus the film relies on the actors to show that love creates the foundation for Beatrice and Benedict's relationship, not a desire to fix personal flaws.

The importance of the actors makes it clear how essential careful casting is for a director to create a film that follows his or her idea of how the play should be performed. The actors also possess the power to share their interpretation of their character with the audience. For example, Roberts Leonard, who plays Claudio, works to create the impression that his character is very emotional; the text alone does not accomplish this as definitively. When Claudio asks Leonato for forgiveness because his slander led to Hero's "death" he says, "Yet sinned I not/But in mistaking" (5.1.275-276). Without the tone of voice or manner of delivery this line could convey Claudio's refusal to accept his role in Hero's fate and his unmoved pride, or it could reflect a distraught man begging to be forgiven for the part he may have played in the death of a loved one. Claudio could easily be thought of as a proud, brave man based on the heroic reports of his actions in war (1.1.9-17). However, the tremor in the actor's voice and the barely

restrained tears indicate that the actor has chosen the latter, emotional, interpretation. In fact, Leonard consistently portrays Claudio as very sensitive throughout the film. At Hero's funeral he falls to his knees crying, and when he shames Hero his voice shakes with emotion. Later, when Claudio discovers that Hero is alive, he cannot speak. The film cuts his lines at that moment, and all that he seems capable of is staying on his feet and taking short breaths. Hero, on the other hand, remains composed and delivers her lines eloquently. By making strong emotional responses like this typical for Claudio, he loses his ability to affect the viewer. When he mourns his responsibility for Hero's "death" there's nowhere for him to go; he already reached his emotional peak earlier in the film when he shamed Hero and when he believed Don Pedro was wooing for himself (4.1.29-41)(2.1.170-180). Thus Claudio cannot convey the belief that Hero's death is more traumatic than the other events in the play, sparing the viewer much distress. Since it's hard for any one of Claudio's reactions to stand out in contrast as more powerful than another, all of his emotions lose much of their power to impact the viewer. Thus the play as a whole diminishes in tragedy.

Branagh reduces the contrast between the sections with "villain-characters" and "honorable-characters" by altering the order of several scenes. The film places section where Don John comes up with his plan to break up Claudio's marriage immediately before the scene where he puts the plan into action: by telling Claudio and Don Pedro that he has proof of Hero's disloyalty (2.2)(3.2.76-130). Branagh places the altered sequence in the middle of the first Dogberry scene. His directorial decision groups many of the darker aspects of the play into one section of the film and frames them with the very humorous scenes involving the watch. The new order reduces the sinister undercurrent of the play because the transitions from the lighter humor to the evil plotting are less numerous and therefore less noticeable.

The film's more comedic interpretation of the text changes the power and impact of the play. Much of the play's power stems from the fact that it uses marriage, a traditionally happy form of closure, as a cause of grief. This use of marriage reminds the reader that nothing in life is certain, and calls a basic belief about love and life into question. The closer the play comes to a tragedy, the more apparent this uncertainty becomes. Branagh chooses to downplay the tragic aspects of the play, and therefore downplays the notion of uncertainty. The viewer can depend on marriage being the closure to the film, and never has to question the common assumption that weddings always lead to happiness. Without that questioning the movie does not give the viewer as much to think about, and thus loses some of its potential to create a lasting impression on him or her.

The text and film both deal with false information and the dangers that it creates. Characters from Don John to Hero make use of spying and trickery throughout the play to achieve their purposes. Don John tricks Claudio into believing that Hero is not a maiden, and Hero allows Beatrice to overhear her conversation about Benedict's emotions (3.2.105-112)(3.1.1-12). If the play comes close to becoming a tragedy as a result of those tricks, the consequences of false information appear very grave. Branagh's film, however, remains fairly positive and focuses on Benedict and Beatrice's relationship. Therefore the film highlights a case where deception works out well and actually promotes lying and trickery. The text argues against such actions because it concentrates on Hero and Claudio's relationship; which is almost destroyed by deception.

Intentional or not, Branagh actually changes several of the themes of the play and diminishes some of its emotional power because he limits the tragic aspects of the play. By focusing less on Hero and Claudio's relationship, less sadness and uncertainty exists to contrast

with the jubilation at the end of the play. The happy marriage of the couples does little too excite the viewer because there really was not much fear of a tragic ending. The converse applies to “Romeo and Juliet.” Had the reader not experienced the characters’ love, and not known how close they came to being able to live happily, their suicides would not have been as poignant. The diminishment of sadness in Branagh’s film actually makes it less memorable. Without emotional contrast the film becomes just another comedy with little to distinguish it from other romantic comedies. Shakespeare carefully wrote and ordered his lines with a specific goal in mind. When a director makes decisions on how to act and film those lines, the effect of the play changes. Since written words only provide an outline for the characters and the plot, a truly “correct” version of a Shakespearean play does not exist.