

‘Silence is the perfectest herald of joy’:
The Claudio-Hero Plot in Kenneth Branagh’s
Much Ado About Nothing

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Shakespeare’s comedy *Much Ado About Nothing* has dark and problematic areas in character and mode in the story of Claudio and Hero, who are sometimes described as superficial and ordinary (Hero is the quintessence of docility and Claudio is mean-spirited and cruel to her), and whose wedding at the end of the play is seen as an inadequate romantic solution. Kenneth Branagh’s 1993 film version of the play tries to dissolve the dark strain of cruelty in the Claudio-Hero story so as to subsume it into the bright festivity that shines through the action. He cuts some of Claudio’s harsh lines, foregrounds (by the use of close-ups) both his silences and those of Hero that can best engage our sympathy for them, and uses the power of the cinematic image to diminish the troubling aspects of their story. Thus, he uses silence, understood in a wide sense as both lack of words and cinematic foregrounding, to dispel darkness and make the final happiness of the characters acceptable. We could then describe his approach to the Claudio-Hero story in his film with Claudio’s words in 2.1: “Silence is the perfectest herald of joy. I were but little happy if I could say how much”.

Most critics agree that the Claudio-Hero story is the ‘main plot’ in *Much Ado About Nothing*, “although they literally or figuratively put the term in quotation marks and are quick to point out that Beatrice and Benedick overshadow this ‘plot’, however ‘main’ it is” (Neely, 56). Branagh’s film shows Claudio and Hero together on more occasions than the text of the play suggests, in an attempt to bring them more to the center of the action. As Branagh himself has indicated, “there is room in a movie to give a different kind of space to the Claudio/Hero plot” (Branagh, vii), and in the lineup of portraits on the film poster Hero and Claudio take the central position. The text of the play introduces their romantic attachment halfway through the first scene, when all the main characters have been presented and Beatrice and Benedick have had their first verbal skirmish. Branagh chooses to call the viewers’ attention to their love in the very opening of the film. When Leonato reads the letter about the victorious army and Claudio’s name is mentioned, the close-up of Hero’s blushing face tells us that she is already interested in the young man (no such suggestion exists in the text of play). “[T]he camera’s ability to register feeling in an actor’s face” (Jackson, 117) is also put to use when Hero and Claudio meet for the first time in the film, and their brief exchange of looks is a silent conversation that the camera records for us. Later in the film, when Claudio is confessing his love to Benedick, Hero is shown lingering on a balcony as she looks down on Claudio, her attentive silence as eloquent as Claudio’s own words. Thus from the beginning the film foregrounds her presence in silence and suggests her feelings for Claudio.¹

¹ In the text of the play, Hero is present in the first scene but remains silent except for a sentence clarifying the meaning of Beatrice’s “Signor Mountanto” (“My cousin means Signor Benedick”). In Renaissance terms her silence would be the sign that she is a dutiful daughter and a modest maid. She never initiates a conversation and only responds when directly or indirectly asked. She is the counterpart of Beatrice, whose silence, Don Pedro indicates, “most offends” (2.1, 328).

Much Ado About Nothing is different in structure from Shakespeare's other so-called romantic comedies, which typically begin with the lovers in a undesirable situation that brings them apart, so that the story leads toward their coming together. In *Much Ado*, Beatrice and Benedick in a sense follow this pattern in that they overcome their own personality in order to come together; the main lovers, on the other hand, present a different pattern. The play opens in happiness and celebration, and Hero and Claudio have no obstacles to overcome. However, more than half way through the play the festive mood is broken and a dark shadow of cruelty is cast over Messina,² when Claudio is deceived into believing that Hero has betrayed him, and rejects his bride at the altar in Act 4. The problematic areas in the comic structure of the play have to do with the character of Claudio and with the resolution of their story. As critics have frequently indicated, the festive ending in the play is mainly centered on Beatrice and Benedick. Their union is satisfactory and can be considered a marriage of true minds. The union of Hero and Claudio is much less satisfactory, especially for contemporary readers of the play. As Carol Cook indicates, "the play's attempt to move toward a comic conclusion and to evade what its plot has exposed places a strain on the fifth act, producing a peculiar shiftiness of tone and mode" (198). At the end of the play the submissive Hero accepts without questioning a young man that has repudiated her in the most violent terms, and we are expected to accept a briefly repentant Claudio as her ideal husband. (We must remember he is repentant not when he learns that she has died of sorrow, but when external witnesses confirm that she has died innocent.) The happiness of this conventional romantic resolution to their plot is perceived as flawed by many recent critics.³

In Branagh's film there is no striving to elicit from the audience the contradictory responses that postmodern critical readings find in the comedies, and thus some critics have objected that "Branagh has 'thinned' his original more than was needed" (Barton, 13), and produced a simplification of the original play, so that "a vigorously pruned script reduces this dark and complex comedy to a single idea [...] the celebration of love" (Barr, 39). There is no doubt that the film "locates Shakespeare's play as a comedy firmly within the festive tradition rather than as a precursor to the problem plays that follow" (Crowl, 39). The festive mood is made clear in the rumbustious opening that shows happy people in an idyllic country atmosphere. In his film Branagh moves the location of the play from the original Messina in dry Sicily to lush Tuscany, and takes what is mainly an urban play in the original to a sunny rural setting. As Branagh indicates in the scriptbook, "the play seemed to beg to live outside, in a vivid, lush countryside" (Branagh, viii). Most of the scenes are shot outdoors, and even the chapel wedding is taken to the outside of the chapel.⁴ The significant exceptions are the sequences with the villain Don John at the center of the action, shot in the cellar and dark rooms and corridors of what looks like the basement of the villa. (When Don John first tells Claudio and the Prince that he has something to tell them about Hero, they are also indoors.)

Branagh clearly wishes to avoid "the troublesome doubts raised by the character and behavior of Shakespeare's Claudio" because they would "complicate and qualify the sunny ending of [his] film" (Barton, 11). In the play Claudio is "a young man who behaves abominably to a loving and generous woman, causes her great suffering, and then, after a perfunctory repentance, is dismissed with her into a happiness he scarcely seems to deserve" (Barton, 11). Branagh's film version of the play tries to soften Claudio's character in several ways. He casts as Claudio a young actor that became widely known in Peter Weir's *The Dead Poets' Society*. In that film he was a sensitive adolescent who fell in

² There are recent readings that find the play's atmosphere oppressive from the beginning. Carol Cook, for instance, speaks of the rigidity of the world of Messina: "Messina, the most sophisticated and urbane society in all Shakespeare's comedies, is also the most confined. No moonlit wood or forest of Arden offers escape from Messina's social tensions, and the characters' romantic and sexual roles are not relieved by opportunities for sexual disguise" (189).

³ In general this is a relevant issue for the endings of most Shakespearean comedies: "This contention between proponents of a festive view of the play and those who find irony, cynicism, darkness or some other version of problematic qualities in its resolution is not, of course, unique to discussions of *Much Ado About Nothing*. This is a common division of opinion over nearly all the comedies" (Jensen, 45).

⁴ In the strongly negative review of the film in the American magazine *The New Yorker* we are told that "the film glances [at the play's darker threads] but turns away to greet the sun; every frame is telling American audiences to book a trip to Italy" (quoted in Coursen, 10).

love with the theater after performing Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and who committed suicide when denied the opportunity to become an actor. In Branagh's film, Claudio is, in keeping with the spirit of Shakespeare's text, a young man barely past adolescence, his beardless face a reminder of his youth and inexperience. Significantly enough, at the masked ball in 2.1, while the other characters wear deformed and outrageous masks, his is a chubby baby face that looks like a curly-haired cherubin--the mask thus revealing what it hides.

Claudio only speaks freely when he is with men alone, and his silence in the presence of women as well as his tentativeness in stating his feelings for Hero can contribute to this image of a young man who is much more comfortable in war than in love. Branagh insists that he is mainly a soldier and that "the instantaneousness of Claudio's love for Hero, its intensity, is not unusual amongst men for whom death is an equal reality" (Branagh, xii). Claudio has an idealized vision of romantic love that can easily swing to its most cynical opposite due to his absolute inexperience.⁵ In the text of the play, the audience learns what Claudio has witnessed through Borachio's words:

I have tonight wooed Margaret, the Lady Hero's gentlewoman, by the name of Hero. She leans me out at her mistress' chamber window, bids me a thousand times good night [...] the Prince, Claudio and my master, planted and placed and possessed by my master Don John, saw afar off in the orchard this amiable encounter (3.3, 142-49).

In the film, instead of having Borachio use words to describe the scene at the window, we see it with Claudio and Don Pedro. It is an openly sexual encounter far more graphic than what is reported in the text of the play, and we see Claudio's reaction as a mixture of rage and sorrow. The screenplay says for this scene: "Claudio lets out a cry and makes to run at them but is held by Don Pedro and Don John [...] Close on Claudio's tears in angry eyes" (Branagh, 56). In the play, when Claudio is first told about Hero's unfaithfulness by Don John, before seeing it he says: "If I see anything tonight why I should not marry her, tomorrow, in the congregation where I should wed, there will I *shame* her", and Don Pedro joins in his plan: "And as I wood for thee to obtain her, I will join thee to *disgrace* her" (3.2, 117-21; emphasis mine). Branagh edits out these words which show their plan to disgrace Hero openly at the wedding ceremony the following day. In Borachio's telling of the episode to Conrad there is another reference to the meditated disgrace: "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).⁶ In the film, Borachio only says: "Away went Claudio, enraged", and the reference to Claudio's plan to shame her has again been cut. In the text of the play Claudio also sounds rather callous in 5.1, in his reaction to Benedick's challenge after the death of Hero. He takes it in jest, as if he made nothing of the reason behind it (Hero's death), and it takes some effort on Benedick's part to convince Claudio that he is in earnest, that it is no time for joking. Most of this conversation with Benedick has been cut in the film, and "Branagh's close-up of [Claudio's] face, crumbling into despair as he later learns of Hero's guiltlessness" (Moses, 39) is an attempt to mitigate his previous cruelty.

We also get in the film an impressive spectacle of his penance at the tomb of Hero after he is told the truth. This scene (5.3) is one of the few that have been often cut radically in performance due to the difficulties of staging it. As Stanley 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. The screenplay describes the sequence in the following terms:

⁵ Some critics suggest that his easy shift is due to an undercurrent of anxiety about sexual matters in Messina: "The repeated 'cuckold' jokes in *Much Ado About Nothing* point to an underlying anxiety in the society of the play about the relations between men and women, one which is brought to the surface by the developing events in the play" (Mangan, 182).

⁶ As Janice Hays indicates, "in a patriarchal value system that views woman and her sexuality as a man's exclusive possession, this infidelity is the ultimate betrayal, a fundamental wound to male self-esteem" (87).

Point of view from the Villa of a wide shot of a cloaked, torched procession towards HERO's tomb. Beautiful and sombre, a snake of lights against the hillside. We pull back to reveal ANTONIO and HERO in the foreground. We move closer to the procession and see DON PEDRO, CLAUDIO, and a choir of mourners sing as Claudio weeps before the tomb (Branagh, 76).

One critic refers to this sequence as one of the three BMS's (Big Memorable Sequences) that Branagh includes in *Much Ado*, the other two being the opening and the closing of the film. For him, this BMS "on the eve of the final wedding ceremony, with Claudio mourning by Hero's tomb, accompanied by a choir of mourners of Mormon Tabernacle proportions" (Skovmand, 9) is less motivated than the other two. In my opinion, Branagh's motivation in this case is strong and clear: he is devoting one long memorable sequence to the contrition and repentance of Claudio obviously to make him more sympathetic to viewers that will be asked to accept his marriage to Hero as a satisfactory happy solution. Branagh is aware that "Hero's funeral is dramatically necessary as Claudio's ritual of expiation" (Cook, 198). In fact, his emphasis on Claudio's repentance tries to show us that there is "a change in Claudio sufficient to warrant his good fortune in the next scene, where Hero is restored to him" (Cook, 198).

Branagh devotes an extremely long final sequence to a dance that gives shape to Benedick's final words in the text, "Strike up, pipers".⁷ Some critics of the film have in fact objected to its very length, suggesting that by abbreviating it "he might have found room for more of Shakespeare's text" (Barton, 12), and they have also objected to its implications that the unsolved issues at the end of the play "are swept aside in the euphoria of a celebration which at times threatens to assume the proportions of a presidential ticker-tape parade, complete with triumphant band music" (Barr, 26). This celebratory dance only leaves Don Pedro out after Benedick's injunction "Get thee a wife" (Antonio dances with Ursula and Leonato with Margaret), but otherwise brings in even Margaret, a character that the text marginalizes somewhat for her unwilling participation in the deception of Claudio.⁸ Clearly the long whirling around of happy characters as the camera moves away to a bird's-eye view of the villa reveals Branagh's reading of the text: this all-embracing celebratory dance that involves all the characters in Messina is the film's way of suggesting all-embracing happiness, and it is therefore the final move on the director's part to dissolve any dark, unpleasant strains that may remain at the end of the story:

All the couples dance and sing merrily in front of us, and we see one joyous image of each one of them [...] We carry on from the Chapel Yard, in through the house [...] and then quickly, high into the air where we leave the people and the dancing to rise above the house, catch the late afternoon sun, the sound of happiness flouting on the air, and a breathtaking view of fairy tale countryside (Branagh, 83).

Branagh's purpose in the film has been to make "Shakespeare's comedy alive on the screen rich with romance and humor in order to appeal to a wide international audience" (Crowl, 39). The success of the film at the box office and its reviews in the popular press show that Branagh has succeeded in creating a wider audience for a Shakespearean comedy than ever before, and despite the objections of purists to its simplification of the problematic areas in the play, on the whole we can say that in his *Much Ado About Nothing* Branagh can "convert all our potential critical sounds of woe 'Into Hey nonny, nonny'" (Crowl, 40). As Anne Barton anticipated in her early review, the film was a great success and made "many people--especially the young--understand that Shakespeare can be vital, interesting, moving and fun" (13).

⁷ Ending a comedy in a marriage dance is common in Shakespeare, although in *Much Ado* there is one "nuptial irregularity: the dancing begins even before the weddings are celebrated" (Neely, 56).

⁸ "The ambiguity of Margaret's role in Borachio's plot has caused some consternation among critics" (Cook, 199) since Leonato's words in the final scene of the play suggest "that Margaret is made to bear Claudio's and Don Pedro's guilt" (Cook, 199). In the text of the play she shows no sign of concern about her complicity when we see her after the disrupted wedding ceremony in 5.2 having a witty exchange with Benedick. In the play this speech has been cut, and in general her problematic role "can be negotiated more deftly in the cinema (with some cutting and the placing of reaction shots) than is usual on stage" (Jackson, 117).

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