

Much ado about nothing in script and film



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Kenneth Branagh's 1993 adaptation of Shakespeare's "Much Ado About Nothing" remains mostly faithful to the play. Where it differs, the quality of the film suffers, as in the expanded role for the character "Dogberry" and in some of the casting choices, particularly Keanu Reeves as "the bastard" John, which fell far short of my internal conception of the character. For the most part, the film "Much Ado About Nothing" does an excellent job of "visualizing" Shakespeare's -comedy. Although the play, in Branagh's hands, becomes very whimsical at times, Branagh succeeds, overall, in capturing the essential tension of the original play.

The central tension in the original play is generated via the interplay between gender specific world-visions and aspirations, specifically, the male and female interplay in romantic and nuptial settings. As the play opens, a battle has recently ended and the fighting troops are retiring to Don Pedro's estate. Typically, the transference of soldiers to a domestic setting provides ample enough opportunity for drama and conflict; the genius of "Much Ado About Nothing" resides in Shakespeare's elegant treatment of this serious dramatic theme: what happens to battle-hardened soldiers when they enter the world of domestic intrigue and ambiguity?

The opening montage of the film conveys the unfolding of this theme by way of images and music. While a merry-sounding score plays over the images of the members of Don Pedro's estate joyously bathing and dressing for the arrival of the battle-hardened soldiers who, also, bathe and change their clothes; the scene emerges as a ritual before the opening of the action, and the theme of gender-intrigue and opposition is signaled immediately.

In the original play, the relationship between Benedict and Beatrice is described by Leonato as a “merry war” in the play’s first scene. What ensues throughout the following Acts is the complication of male “logic” and soldierly “ethics” by the contact with mysterious and ambiguous femininity. Claudio reveals in his first spoken lines about Hero “Can the world buy such a jewel?” signaling his obvious unfamiliarity with ways of women, or marriage, and – one assumes – amorous occupations within this formal sphere.

Benedick’s reply: “Yea, and a case to put it into” reveals his slightly more experienced, but equally chauvinistic appraisal of women. Later, in Benedick’s monologue in Act II Scene 3, (one of Branagh’s finest scenes in the film) he reveals his own essential bewilderment at the ways of romance, love, and marriage: “man is a fool when he dedicates his behaviors to love” and also recalls when his friend Claudio knew “no music but the drum and the fife; and now he would rather hear the tabor and the pipe. The filming of this scene brought to light the essential conflict in the character and showed Benedick’s depth of thought. The film continues to explore the ambiguous and mysterious nature of the domestic worlds of love and romance during the visually dynamic masquerade scene. Here, donning masks and beginning to engage in the “war” of love and marriage, the plot’s complications are set spinning.

Interestingly, these complications involve not only the “match-making” intrigues of the party-goers, but the darker complications brought upon by Don John, which furthers the play’s themes of domesticity and marriage, in effect, proffering the bastard John as a villain and in so doing, enhancing the

theme from Shakespeare's play that "balance" of the male and female psyches is the goal of marriage:

In order for balance and harmony to be achieved; in effect, for the bastard John's villainous plans to be undone, truth must be ferreted out of the ensuing "masquerade" where everything appears to be something it isn't. Hero is first believed to be immoral and then believed to be dead. Benedick and Beatrice appear to be bitter enemies but are, in fact, deeply in love. Claudio and Don Pedro appear to be fighting for morality and righteousness, but are, in fact, persecuting an innocent girl.

That Beatrice reaches for a masculine solution to the slandering of Hero marks an interesting point in dramatic and thematic development during the movie. She remarks "God that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the market-place!" After which, she succeeds in making Benedick her proxy in challenging Claudio to a duel. IN the film, the scene is played almost like a lover's quarrel, while in the original play-script, the scene seemed to play more as an intimate encounter between like-minded friends, who both cared for Beatrice.

Either way, in both the film and the original script, this scene marks the struggle toward truth; the struggle out of the previous plot complications based in ambiguity, masquerade, and the masculine world being turned upside down. However, it is not martial strength, or soldierly vengeance that ultimately restores the harmony and order to the characters lives; instead, it is due to the intervention Dogberry and his minions, who ultimately reveal

John's plans. The extended role for Dogberry seemed to weigh down the action of the plot. In this way, among others, Branagh's film stumbles a bit.

The original play moves at a brisk, urgent pace, as though the communion (and ultimate consummation) between men and women is a hurried affair, something rushed headlong into. Branagh's film sacrifices this sense of urgency for a sense of whimsy and revelry which I feel is sustained far too long throughout the film. Dogberry, in the original play, is intended to bring comic relief; however, in the film "Much Ado About Nothing" there isn't as much of a need for comic relief given the breezy, beautiful visual element of Branagh's direction of the movie.

So, the attempt to broaden the role of comic relief in the play actually only stifles the sense of forward momentum which is necessary for Shakespeare's plot to attain its full measure of suspense and thematic resonance. The film version of "Much Ado About Nothing" is visually stunning and engages with Shakespeare's play enthusiastically. There is not real effort made on behalf of Branagh to represent an historically authentic setting or even an historically authentic cast.

The departures from Shakespeare's original play seemed to have been made with the idea of creating a sustained "escapist" and romantic quality for the movie. Whereas Shakespeare's play seems nearly allegorical, with the marriage of "opposites" intimating a deeper, psychic allusion, as in the marriage of the human soul, Branagh's film tends to stay at the surface level -- it is a story about people caught up in intrigue and romance, but there is

very little that feels allegorical or even moralistic about the film, in contrast to the original play, which feels and reads very much like a cautionary tale.

The climax shown by the film and included in the original play is not extraction of vengeance against the bastard John or even the righteous defeat by arms of Claudio by Benedick. Instead, “ words of truth triumph over dirty deeds and deceitful tongues” which is to infer that the domestic/conjugal “ war” between man and woman is to be best won by a communion of minds and intellect, of emotions and “ soul. ” In this way, the “ truth” of love emerges as both the goal and product of the romantic and amorous rituals, but also as evidence of the harmonious balance between the soldierly and domestic spheres of life.