

Men – deceivers ever:

Portrayals of the Sexes in the Film Version of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*

The Kenneth Branagh film interpretation of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* begins with a poem, the words displayed on a black screen to accompany the narration, backed by a soft guitar instrumental:

“Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more,
Men were deceivers ever,
One foot in sea, and one on shore,
To one thing constant never . . .” (2.3.62-75)¹

The song appears two other times in the film: in the garden, performed by Balthasar for Don Pedro, Claudio, and Leonato, and then at the conclusion of the play, after the happy nuptials of the two couples, while flower petals drift groundward and throngs of people stream into the garden to dance. In the opening scene described above, Beatrice recites the poem while her family and servants sit on the grass, enjoying a picnic, visibly amused at her performance (the line “the fraud of men was ever so” elicits a hearty chuckle from Antonio). Beatrice herself lounges in the branches of a leafy tree, popping grapes into her mouth. The subject matter of her address, according to Auden, is “the irresponsibility of men and the folly of women for taking them seriously.”² Ironically, the issue at the crux of the play is not male infidelity, but Hero's supposed promiscuousness (Claudio refuses to marry her, on the grounds that she “knows the heat of a luxurious bed”)

¹ Shakespeare, William. *Much Ado About Nothing*. Ed. David L. Stevenson. New York: Signet Classic, 1998.

² Auden, W.H. *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays*. New York: Random House, 1962.

(4.1.40). One would think the song's tone should convey feelings of heartbreak and disappointment, given its content, but its performances in the film are always joyous. Perhaps the characters are indirectly mocking Claudio and Don Pedro, who are quick to accuse Hero of impropriety; she in fact has a clean record, while Claudio will atone for wrongly accusing her and introducing so much strife into the lives of Messina's nobles. In this sense, the song accurately describes the play's characters – the men are fickle, the women victims to the deeds of the opposite sex. On this note, the way in which the film was produced highlights the fact that the immoral actions of the men create turmoil and distress, while the female characters, innocent, suffer substantially.

This idea is exhibited in the masks the male characters wear at the masquerade ball (2.1). Masks, a common symbol of mystery and deception, exhibit the qualities of the people behind them. Don John wears a dark, blood-red mask with a hooked beak, calling to mind a bird of prey; his accomplice Borachio wears the figure of a Cyclops, the monster who terrorized Odysseus and his men. Clearly, their masks suggest evil tendencies. But the masks of the more respectable men are quite revealing as well. Don Pedro is a black panther, out for a nighttime prowl, his mission to woo Hero in Claudio's name. The character of highest status, his dominance over the others is akin to the authority the panther commands over the other animals in the forest (the ball is indeed a jungle, with guests dressed as a variety of creatures, with uncertainty and danger lurking behind the masks of certain revelers). When the prince supports Claudio's accusation of Hero at the wedding ceremony, Don Pedro's influence is so great that even Leonato is convinced she is guilty, crying out "Do not live, Hero; do not open thine eyes . . ."

(4.1.122). Claudio's mask is a boyish face, lips slightly parted; Claudio is easily swayed,

much like a child by his parents, who in this analogy are the princes Pedro and John. Moreover, just as a boy is in love with the dream of growing up to be a pilot or fire fighter, Claudio is in love with his dream, the idea of Hero, and not Hero herself; he is quick to turn against her when Don John mentions her image is tainted, her chastity compromised. And how do the masks of the women compare to those of their dancing partners? Beatrice sports a feline mask like Don Pedro – hers is that of the domesticated cat, playful and crafty, though lacking the predatorial might symbolized in the prince's. Hero's mask is plain and feminine, attesting to her gentle innocence. The whiteness suggests purity, as well as unblemished slate upon which the men are free to scrawl. She neglects to fight to protect her good name; Lewis Carroll provides textual evidence that Hero did not sleep in her usual chamber the night prior to the wedding, thus providing her with the (squandered) opportunity to discredit Claudio's observations.³ Instead of speaking up for herself, she breaks down into sobbing and is shamed. So, by noting the masks the directors chose, one can see which male character is evil enough to cross his comrades and discredit Hero's integrity, which powerful enough to ruin a girl's reputation in the eyes of all the attendees of the marriage (including her father), and which impressionable enough to agree to violently disgrace his betrothed before the entire nuptial assembly. While the men's masks highlight their capability for such sin, the women's do not indicate that they possess the personalities, nor the abilities, to create similar havoc among the people of Messina; in fact, Hero passively neglects to oppose her accusers, effectively failing to fight against the chaos.

³ Carroll, Lewis. *A Letter to Ellen Terry*, from *The Story of My Life* by Ellen Terry. London: Hutchinson, n.d.

The portrayal of Margaret in the film compared to that in the play is an excellent example of how the movie emphasizes the innocence of women and the criminal actions of men. In Shakespeare's text, Margaret is a seemingly willing accomplice in Borachio's venture to make Hero appear unchaste. "I have tonight wooed Margaret," Borachio recounts to Conrade, "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." (3.3.145-49) Earlier, when hatching the plan with Don John, he tells the bastard prince to bring Claudio and Don Pedro to the arranged spot "the very night before the intended wedding . . . to see me at her chamber window, hear me call Margaret Hero, hear Margaret term me Claudio . . . and there shall appear such seeming truth of Hero's disloyalty." (2.3.42-48) It is evident that Margaret knew how she would help execute Borachio's plan, how she would respond to the name Hero and speak lustful words to the man below the balcony. The Margaret in the play is crucial in deceiving Claudio and wrecking his nuptial. One may interpret this in two ways: first, she is malicious, like Borachio and Don John, in that she is willing to sabotage the marriage of the woman she is entrusted to serve. Occurrences of servants harboring animosity towards their superiors are not at all rare, and such malevolent feelings may be a motivation for Margaret's participation in Borachio's deed. Otherwise, the chambermaid is simple-minded and subservient to her lover, unaware of the ramifications of her actions but sure to agree to follow Borachio's commands precisely; this latter alternative is much more unlikely. In the Branagh film, the balcony scene plays out quite differently – Borachio and Margaret have sex at the windowsill, her back to the men observing down below. First of all, the directors chose to include this scene in the film; in Shakespeare's text we

do not witness it, but hear about it from those involved. We notice the conversation beforehand, when Don John informs Don Pedro and Claudio that Hero is disloyal, promising “If you will follow me, I will show you enough” to prove her sin (3.2.116-7). We hear of the event afterwards, in Borachio’s conversation with Conrade, after which the watch takes the pair into custody. Adding the window scene to the movie makes it possible to include the sex that is practically ubiquitous in the film industry, upping the excitement for viewers. But this also has more important implications – in the film, it is clear that Margaret had no prior knowledge of how intercourse with Borachio on that night, at that specific time, would be interpreted as proof of Hero’s infidelity. At the wedding ceremony, Claudio demands of Hero “What man was . . . with you yesternight, out at your window betwixt twelve and one?” (4.1.82-3) Margaret, standing nearby, reacts with an incredulous look, realizing that it is she and Borachio, mistaken for Hero and a man other than Claudio, at the root of the troubles. Frightened, Margaret rushes out of the courtyard along with the three accusers and the trailing crowd. Shakespeare’s Margaret strives to destroy Hero; the film’s Margaret is innocent, unknowingly led into the traitorous act by her lover, and is accordingly horrified by the result.

Further evidence for the idea that the men are cruel, the females victims, is evident in the film when Claudio disgraces Hero at their marriage ceremony (4.1). Shakespeare’s text includes sparse stage directions; all he delineates is the entry and exit of the characters. The filmmakers used this liberty to make the nuptial a violent inquisition of Hero where male characters lash out. Claudio throws Hero backwards over a bench, sending her into the grass and knocking over the seat, crying “There, Leonato, take her back again!” (4.1.30) Claudio then strides down the aisle, shouting, throwing

down the poles decked with flowers and lace, which in turn topples the pews like a row of dominoes. During his tirade, Hero is kneeling on the grass, huddled with Beatrice and Ursula. After Claudio and Don Pedro depart, Leonato, who had previously been standing by and observing, turns on his daughter, shocked at this new knowledge. He grabs Hero by the hair and drags her across the paved pathway to the other side of the courtyard. The Friar and Antonio step in to hold him physically and restrain his rage; even thus, he manages to reach out and strike Hero's face. "Would the two princes lie, and Claudio lie? Let her die," he pronounces (4.1.151-3). The scene is full of violence directed at Hero, all of which is by the director's prerogative. The viewer knows she is innocent, and witnesses the brutality brought upon her by men in the wrong.

Similar to the liberty the filmmakers exercised when depicting the broken marriage scene, the way Dogberry is portrayed in the film is not derived from the text. In reading, one might think that Dogberry is a simple man who tries desperately to act like a noble, the pompous language he employs getting the best of him to the point where he looks utterly foolish. The costume and make-up choices in the film make him a disgusting creature: greasy hair, yellowed teeth, dusty clothes, dirty fingernails. What is more, he is downright abusive to Verges, most notably during his "tedious" conversation with Leonato, in which Dogberry informs the governor that the watch "ha' ta'en a couple of arrant knaves as any in Messina" (3.5.30-1). Dogberry, his arm over Verges' shoulder, takes two digits and inserts them under the lenses of his partner's glasses, pressing his fingers into Verges' eyes. Soon after, he crudely strikes Verges; whether the target is the stomach or the groin, it is unclear, but Verges does respond with a gagging sound. Shakespeare's Dogberry is loveable, a person for whom the reader can't help but feel

fond; the film's embodiment, however, is revolting and vicious. The filmmakers' decision to transform Dogberry makes him another male character full of vice.

Shakespeare himself had a special aversion to slander; Stauffer writes: "[Shakespeare] loathed particularly those evil elements that base their hostile actions on unfounded suspicion or on nothing whatever . . . the slanderers, almost alone among Shakespeare's sinners, are nearly unforgivable."⁴ While Shakespeare considered defamation of another's reputation out of jealousy or spite a grievous sin, the film makes this sentiment even clearer in exhibiting the wrongs of the male characters and victimizing the females. The costumes at the masquerade, the brutality directed against Hero at the marriage ceremony, and the use of Margaret to ruin Hero's image (unbeknownst to the maid) underscore the evil actions of the male characters while painting the females as innocents and oftentimes as undeserving victims of cruelty. The frequent use of the song *Sigh No More*, to remind of the wayward tendencies of men, and the vile portrayal of Dogberry complete the list of how the film was produced in a way to make clear the contrast in the moral behavior of each sex.

⁴ Stauffer, Donald A. *Shakespeare's World of Images*. London: Oxford University Press, 1949.