

Faculté de philosophie, arts et lettres

**Sexuality and Gender Roles
in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*
and its cinematic adaptations
by Kenneth Branagh and Joss Whedon**

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Année académique 2018-2019

Master [120] en langues et lettres modernes, orientation générale, à
finalité approfondie

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Mémoire réalisé par

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List of Abbreviations

The references to Shakespeare's play *Much Ado About Nothing* are referred to with the abbreviation *Ado*, following the "Standard Abbreviations of Shakespearean Titles."¹ When mentioning the play itself, the reference is indicated by the acts, scene and line(s) of the quote (e.g. *Ado*, 1.3.4-6). When referring to the introduction of the play, written by Sheldon P. Zitner, the page number will be indicated (e.g. *Ado*, p.46).

Because both adaptations bear the same name as the original play, they will be identified by the initials of the directors. The screenplay of Kenneth Branagh's adaptation of *Much Ado* will be referred to with the abbreviation KB and followed by the page number in the screenplay (e.g. KB, p.46); and Joss Whedon's adaptation will be referred to with the abbreviation JW and followed by the page number in the screenplay (e.g. JW, p.12).

The other Shakespearian plays mentioned in this work will follow the same "Standard Abbreviation", e.g. the plays *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*.

Here is the list of the abbreviations used in this master's dissertation:

Much Ado or Ado: *Much Ado About Nothing*

Ham: *Hamlet*

JW: Joss Whedon's adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing*

KB: Kenneth Branagh's adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing*

Rom: *Romeo and Juliet*

¹ Modern Language Association. (2016). *Standard Abbreviations of Shakespearean Titles*. In Modern Language Association, MLA Handbook.

Abstracts

English

This master's dissertation compares Shakespeare's play *Much Ado About Nothing* and two of its film adaptations: the 1993 film directed by Kenneth Branagh and the 2012 adaptation by Joss Whedon. Although both adaptations used the original lines from the play, they are very different: Branagh's film is pseudo-historical, whereas Whedon's was modernized. The aim of this dissertation is to analyze whether the directors have modernized the play, and to what extent. In addition to analyzing the modernization of setting in the films, I have observed whether the directors modernized the two main themes of the play: gender roles and sexuality. The analysis of those themes in both films shows that Kenneth Branagh's movie, although filmed in period costumes, modernizes the main themes of the play by questioning the notions of masculinity and femininity, as well as presenting a film full of sensuality. Joss Whedon goes even further by changing the genre of a few male characters and by presenting a modern version of sexuality. To sum up, the evolution of gender role and sexuality in society has led to an evolution in its portrayal in the adaptations of Shakespeare's play.

Keywords: Literature – Shakespeare – Theatre – Cinema – Adaptation – Gender – Feminism – Sexuality – Homosexuality – *Much Ado About Nothing*

Français

Ce mémoire compare la pièce de Shakespeare *Much Ado About Nothing* avec deux de ses adaptations cinématographiques : le film de Kenneth Branagh réalisé en 1993 et celui de Joss Whedon réalisé en 2012. Bien que les deux adaptations aient conservées les lignes originales de la pièce, elles sont très différentes l'une de l'autre : le film de Branagh est pseudo-historique, celui de Whedon est actualisé. L'objectif de cette thèse est d'analyser si les réalisateurs ont modernisé la pièce, et dans quelle mesure. En plus d'analyser la modernisation du décor des films, j'ai cherché à découvrir si les réalisateurs avaient modernisé les deux thèmes principaux de la pièce : le genre et la sexualité. L'analyse de ces thèmes dans les deux films montre que le film de Kenneth Branagh, bien que tourné en costumes d'époque, modernise les thèmes principaux de la pièce en questionnant les notions de masculinité et de féminité, ainsi qu'en présentant un film plein de sensualité. Joss Whedon va encore plus loin en changeant le sexe de certains personnages masculins et en présentant une version moderne de la sexualité. En conclusion, l'évolution du genre et de la sexualité au sein de la société a mené à une évolution de leur représentation dans les adaptations de la pièce de Shakespeare.

Mots clefs : Littérature – Shakespeare – Théâtre – Cinéma – Adaptation – Genre – Féminisme – Sexualité – Homosexualité – *Much Ado About Nothing*

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Introduction:

The Adaptation and Modernization of Shakespeare's Work

Since the eighteenth century, Shakespeare's work has received a considerable attention from critics and public alike, as evidenced by the longevity of his plays. Because the Bard based his plays on universal themes such as love and family dynamics, they remain alluring to a modern audience and are interpreted differently according to the place and time they are played.² Hence the many reinterpretations of his works in various genres, including operas, series and movies, as well as in adaptations that either preserve the original lines – like the 1996 movie *Romeo + Juliet* – or are loosely based on the plays.³

The romantic comedy *Much Ado About Nothing*⁴ has known a great success since its presumed writing date in 1598. According to the director Kenneth Branagh, by 1600 “it had been ‘sundrie times publikely acted.’ The play was certainly a crowd pleaser and puller.”⁵ The events of the play are set in Italy, where noblemen Claudio, Benedick and Don Pedro return from the battlefield to engage on the field on courtship. The play broaches the themes of love, sexuality and honor. It focuses especially on two pairs of lovers: Hero and Claudio on one hand, and Beatrice and Benedick on the other.

Several adaptations of *Much Ado*⁶ exist, among which the BBC's televised version of Zeffirelli's take of the play, starring Maggie Smith and Robert Stephens in the roles of Beatrice and Benedick.⁷ Yet few directors have chosen to adapt it into a feature film. In 1913, Phillips Smaley directed a silent adaptation of the play. In 1964, the German director Martin Hellberg adapted it in German under the name *Viel Lärm um Nichts*, and in 1973 the Soviet *Mnogo Shuma iz Nichego* was directed by Samson Samsonov. It was only in 1993 that the first English

² The book *Shakespeare Survey: Volume 16, Shakespeare in the Modern World* showcases the reception Shakespeare's plays in various countries.

³ The 1996 Disney animated film *The Lion King*, for instance, is based on *Hamlet*.

⁴ Shakespeare, William (2008). *Much Ado About nothing: The Oxford Shakespeare* (Coll. “World Classics”). Great Britain: OUP Oxford.

⁵ Branagh, Kenneth (1993). *‘Much Ado About nothing’: screenplay, introduction, and notes on the making of the film by Kenneth Branagh*. London: Chatto and Windus.

⁶ Following both Kenneth Branagh's and Joss Whedon's example, I will refer to the play *Much Ado About Nothing* as *Much Ado* in the rest of this dissertation.

⁷ Other adaptations include several televised versions of stage adaptations: the 1973 adaptation directed by Joseph Papp and televised by CBS, or the 2011 BBC televised version of Robert Delamere's adaptation starring David Tennant and Catherine Tate as Benedick and Beatrice.

film adaptation was released by Kenneth Branagh.⁸ The next English adaptation was directed by Joss Whedon in 2012.⁹ Although another adaptation was released in 2015 by Owen Drake¹⁰, it is the adaptations by Branagh and Whedon that will be analyzed in this dissertation. The reason behind such a choice lies in the fact that they both used Shakespeare's original lines yet are so drastically different. Sarah Hatchuel, a specialist in Shakespearian adaptations, stated that a comparative analysis of both works would be interesting thanks to a difference of "tone, aesthetic and time."¹¹ She says in an interview:

[Le film de Joss Whedon] est une adaptation très réussie de Shakespeare [...]. On pense inévitablement à la version de Kenneth Branagh ; il serait très intéressant de comparer les deux. Il y a en effet dans les deux films un *ton*, une *esthétique* et un *choix d'époque* très différents. Branagh est clairement dans l'épique, avec des clins d'œil au western, au "musical". Il privilégie les paysages grandioses, les extérieurs, les couleurs, tandis que Whedon applique à la pièce un traitement beaucoup plus intime, en intérieurs, en noir et blanc. La grande villa en Toscane était un peu l'héroïne du film de Branagh, tandis que Whedon se recentre sur le couple Beatrice/Benedick.¹²

Furthermore, both directors' approach to the original work brings an interesting perspective on the main themes of the play, namely love, marriage, sexuality and gender roles. The author Samuel Cowl states in his book *The Films of Kenneth Branagh* that *Much Ado* is a "critique of love and courtship in a patriarchal society."¹³ Kenneth Branagh, in the introduction to his screenplay of the film, answered the question, "Why film *Much Ado About Nothing*?" by saying, "because it speaks [...] about love, one of humankind's permanent obsessions" (KB, p.XVI). Both directors have adapted those main themes into their films, although differently.

The process of adaptation is a very complex issue: specialists and critics alike have struggled to define its value. Is a good film adaptation one that is faithful to the original work, or one that is successful, i.e. profitable? Both directors have taken liberties in their adaptations, infusing their interpretation of the play into their films. Moreover, they have discovered the

⁸ Branagh, Kenneth; Evans, Stephen & Parfitt, David (Producers), Branagh, Kenneth (Director) (1993). *Much Ado About Nothing* [Motion Picture]. United Kingdom: BBC Films.

⁹ Cole, Kai & Whedon, Joss (Producers), Whedon, Joss (Director) (2012). *Much Ado About Nothing* [Motion Picture]. United States: Bellwether Pictures.

¹⁰ Adaptation that could be analyzed in a future dissertation on *Much Ado* by another student.

¹¹ This difference of "tone, aesthetic and time" (*translation mine*) will be the subject matter of Part 1 of this dissertation.

¹² Philippot, Vital (n.d.). "Toute la culture anglo-saxonne est imprégnée de deux textes fondamentaux : la Bible et Shakespeare" : Entretien Beaucoup de Bruit pour rien (Whedon). [Interview of Sarah Hatchuel and Ariane Hudelet]. In *Zéro de conduite*. Retrieved April 29, 2019, from www.zerodeconduite.net/ressources/3313 (*Italics in the quote is mine*).

¹³ Cowl, Samuel (2006). *The Films of Kenneth Branagh*. Connecticut, United States: Praeger. p.74.

work of Shakespeare in the twentieth century, and are adapting it for a twenty-first-century public, which is bound to change the way they approach the original work, made for an Elizabethan public. Therefore, in every adaptation, processes of change and modernization of its content occur – intentionally or not. Part 1 of this dissertation will focus on the inspiration and adaptation process, and present how both directors have chosen to modernize the play. My main research question is therefore “How did Kenneth Branagh and Joss Whedon choose to modernize the play for our modern-world society?”

This dissertation shall focus on the central themes of the play: love, marriage, gender roles and sexuality. The mechanics of courtship and marriage have indeed greatly evolved in today’s society, and the critique of the duties bound to both male and female characters of *Much Ado* is linked to Shakespeare’s era. How did both directors adapt this seemingly outdated love story into a film that appeals to a twenty-first-century audience? Parts 2 and 3 of this dissertation will be dedicated to the changes made by both directors regarding gender roles and marriage on one hand, and sexuality on the other. I expect both directors to have modernized the main themes and their representation in their films. Because Whedon’s adaptation is a modernized adaptation, I expect him to go further than Branagh in the modernization of gender roles and sexuality.

This dissertation is therefore divided of four separate sections. As a preliminary step of the analysis of modernization, I will start this dissertation with a broad presentation of Shakespeare’s play and of the two adaptations analyzed in this work. Then, Part 1 will tackle the adaptation and modernization of the original, and present among others the sources of inspirations behind each work. Next, Part 2 will consist in a gender analysis of the play and its adaptations. The different chapters constituting Part 2 will tackle the characterization of the main female and male characters, the concept of character gender switch, the relationships of the two main couples of the play and the topic of unfaithfulness. Lastly, Part 3 will cover the theme of sexuality and analyze the very different approach Shakespeare and the two directors have toward it. It will also include a chapter on the topic of homosexuality in *Much Ado*. The analysis of the different adaptations will be tackled in chronological order, considering that each writer or director had been inspired by the works that preceded them. First, I shall analyze the main themes as presented in the original play, then as adapted in Branagh’s 1993 film adaptation, and finally as interpreted by Whedon in his 2012 adaptation.

INTRODUCTION:
MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING AND ITS ADAPTATIONS

1. Shakespeare's Play

The plot takes place in the Italian town of Messina, where the Governor Leonato lives with his daughter Hero, his brother Antonio, his niece Beatrice and his servants. A group of soldiers, led by the nobleman Don Pedro from Aragon, comes back from the war. Among them is Don Pedro's bastard brother Don John, as well as the soldiers Claudio and Benedick. As soon as the soldiers arrive in Messina, the play's mechanics are set: Beatrice and Benedick, who seem to have "had a hurtful connection some time before"¹⁴, start to banter, in a competition of wit that will characterize most of their interaction in the play. Meanwhile, Claudio is immediately struck by Hero's beauty. Don Pedro offers to woo Hero for him under the cover of a mask, a ploy that Claudio accepts. Don John, having heard of the scheme and resentful of his place, decides to ruin his plans. As promised, Don Pedro woos Hero, and although Don John tries to cause discord between Claudio and the nobleman, Hero and Claudio are set to be married. Don Pedro, not satisfied with having played matchmaker once, decides to plan another scheme. He sets his mind on getting Beatrice and Benedick, both of whom are reluctant to have a lover and renounce to their bachelor status, back together. In order to make it work, Don Pedro tricks Benedick, while Hero tricks Beatrice. They both have loud conversations, 'overheard' by the two characters, in which they claim that Benedick loves Beatrice, and vice versa. Beatrice and Benedick are both easily fooled, and both decide to give a chance to their counterparts. Meanwhile, Don John is set on ruining Claudio's wedding. He decides to attack Claudio's honor by claiming that Hero is unfaithful, and 'proves' it by having his servant, Borachio, meet the servant Margaret at the window of Hero's bedroom. Claudio and Don Pedro are fooled by this scheme, and Claudio publicly rejects Hero at their wedding. Leonato, ashamed by his daughter's misbehavior, is devastated. Only the friar, Beatrice, and Benedick are left thinking Hero is innocent. The friar then suggests proving Hero's innocence by making everyone think she died of grief, and then waiting to see if the culprit confesses its responsibility. Borachio is overheard confessing his responsibility in the scheme by the watchmen, Messina's guards. In the end, Claudio apologizes for his mistakes and marries Hero. Benedick and Beatrice confess their love to each other, and Don John runs away.

¹⁴ Zitner, Sheldon P. (2008). "Introduction". In Shakespeare, William (2008). *Much Ado About Nothing: The Oxford Shakespeare* (Coll. "World Classics"). Great Britain: OUP Oxford.

2. Film Adaptations

2.1. Kenneth Branagh and his Vibrant 1993 Adaptation

Kenneth Branagh is an acclaimed Shakespeare director, known for directing and playing in his film adaptations of *Henry V* (1989), *Othello* (1995) and *Hamlet* (1996). He is also known for playing in many films, such as *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (2002) and Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk* (2017). He is a Shakespeare 'aficionado' and has founded his own theater company.¹⁵ His adaptations of Shakespeare have started a resurgence of interest from the public in Shakespeare's plays, which Cowl calls the "Kenneth Branagh era"¹⁶ and Rothwell the "Age of Kenneth Branagh."¹⁷ Branagh has helped bring the classical plays to the 'goût du jour', and his adaptations have been widely studied and analyzed.¹⁸

His adaptation of *Much Ado*, produced in 1993, is a vibrant and colorful movie, shot in Tuscany, Italy.¹⁹ The movie has a warm tone, and is enshrouded in an epic and grand atmosphere, fitting with its "breadth" Branagh mentioned in the introduction of his screenplay:

I believe a film of *Much Ado* allows us to see in unique focus the breadth of a play that goes much further than the celebration of one gloriously witty couple. Beatrice and Benedick are, after all, the subplot.

KB, p.VII

Branagh himself played the role of Benedick, while his then-wife Emma Thompson played the role of the witty Beatrice. The rest of the cast includes renowned actors such as Denzel Washington in the role of Don Pedro, Keanu Reeves as Don John, Kate Beckinsale as Hero and Michael Keaton as Dogberry. The casting is particularly important considering Branagh's wish to achieve a naturalistic film: he deliberately chose actors who did not have experience in Shakespearian drama, and would therefore be "free of actory mannerisms" and deliver their line without artifice.²⁰ His objective when directing his adaptation was to make the original play available to a broader public, including children.²¹

¹⁵ The company in question is called The Kenneth Branagh Theatre Company.

¹⁶ Cowl, Samuel (2003). *At the Shakespeare cineplex: the Kenneth Branagh Era*. Athens: Ohio University Press.

¹⁷ Rothwell, Kenneth S. (2000). *A history of Shakespeare on screen: a century of film and television*. Cambridge: Cambridge University press. p.234.

¹⁸ Cartelli, Thomas & Rowe, Katherine (2007). *New wave Shakespeare on screen*. Cambridge: Polity press.

¹⁹ Cowl, Samuel (2006). *Op. cit.* p.73

²⁰ Branagh, Kenneth (1993). *Op. cit.* p.IX.

²¹ *Ibid.* p.VIII.

2.2. Joss Whedon and his 2012 Black and White Adaptation

Joss Whedon is an American director known for his blockbuster movies *The Avengers* (2012) or *The Cabin in the Woods* (2012) as well as the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and *Firefly* (2002). His movies are usually full of action and explosions, which makes his indie version of Shakespeare's play stand out in his body of work. His take on *Much Ado* is a black and white movie, calm and intimist, set in twenty-first century California. It was shot in only twelve days in his mansion in Santa Monica, with a cast of actors he had previously worked with. Franz Kranz from *The Cabin in the Woods* played the role of Claudio, Nathan Fillion from *Firefly* portrayed Dogberry, and Clark Gregg from the *Avengers* movie played Leonato.

His love of Shakespeare developed when he was a child. He stated that "Shakespeare's plays have been a passion of [his] since [he] was old enough to have passions."²² To him, Shakespeare's appeal is that his stories are "indelible": he is speaking about everyone, he is "writing about us, duh. Even when it appears, he's writing about nothing." When Whedon was a child, his parents held readings at Thanksgiving every year. Later, he reinstated the family tradition with his cast of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, by holding Sunday readings and got used to directing Shakespeare drama. His project of filming *Much Ado* stemmed from these readings.

The idea of filming *Much Ado* had been in Whedon's mind for a long time, but the wording of the title had scared him: How could he adapt a play that was about 'nothing'? He had also felt like he did not have a vision or an interpretation to put into the film. Eventually, it clicked. He told Kyle Buchanan in an interview for *Vulture*: "This text is actually very important to me in terms of romantic love and how we treat each other."²³ He then started filming his own version of the play, distinct from Branagh's adaptation. Although Whedon stated his want to put his own spin into the play, it is certain that the adaptation of Branagh inspired him, considering his adaptations are so influential and renowned among lovers of 'The Bard of Avon'. The many influences of Branagh in Whedon's film will be highlighted throughout this dissertation, and sometimes illustrated by images from the films.

²² Whedon, Joss (2013). '*Much Ado About Nothing*', a film by Joss Whedon [Screenplay]. United States: Titan Books. p.9

²³ Buchanan, Kyle (September 5, 2012). "Joss Whedon on How *Much Ado About Nothing* Made Him a Better Filmmaker." In *Vulture*. Retrieved August 2, 2019, from www.vulture.com/2012/09/joss-whedon-much-ado-about-nothing-film.html



Figure 1. Beatrice (Emma Thompson) and Benedick (Kenneth Branagh) in Kenneth Branagh's 1993 film adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing*.²⁴



Figure 2. Benedick (Alexis Denisof) and Beatrice (Amy Acker) in Joss Whedon's 2012 film adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing*.

²⁴ With the exception of Figure 8, rightfully credited, all images present in this dissertation are screenshots I personally extracted from the movies.

PART 1:
THE ADAPTATION AND MODERNIZATION OF
MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

1. Adaptation and Inspiration

Adaptation studies have long been marked by the “fidelity debates,”²⁵ i.e. the judgment of the value of an adaptation depending on its likeness to the original work. Although adaptations, by definition, require changes either to fit a new genre or a new interpretation, any change made to the original work has been the subject of criticism. Stenport and Traylor deplore in their article “The Eradication of Memory: Film Adaptations and Algorithms of the Digital” that adaptations, especially in the current “global mass-media entertainment context,” are commonly considered as a way to reach commercial success.²⁶ In a similar manner, Picon-Valin explores the disrepute of stage-to-screen adaptations, considered by some as a hybrid form or “cinéma bâtard.”²⁷

However, most specialists agree on the fact that an adaptation should not be judged by its fidelity. Ferreira de Oliveira sees the adaptation as “un tribut et acte essentiel à la vie des œuvres.”²⁸ Linda Hutcheon argues in *A Theory of Adaptation* that “to be second is not to be secondary or inferior; likewise, to be first is not to be originary or authoritative.”²⁹ Laroche, who shares their opinion, quotes Truffaut when he writes: “Il n'y a [...] ni bonne ni mauvaise adaptation.”³⁰ This Master’s dissertation will therefore not be a value judgment, but rather a critical and methodological analysis.

Moreover, it seems paradoxical to judge Shakespearian adaptations on their fidelity, considering the Bard’s plays were adaptations of “common literary properties”³¹ themselves. The Oxford World’s Classics’ edition of *Much Ado*, which lists the numerous inspirations of the play, is a perfect illustration of this trend.³² In like manner, the film adaptations do not

²⁵ Hutcheon, Linda (2013). *A theory of Adaptation*. United Kingdom: Routledge.

²⁶ Stenport, A.W. & Traylor, Garrett (Fall 2015). “The Eradication of Memory: Film Adaptations and Algorithms of the Digital”. In *Cinema Journal* 55, number 1. Pp. 74-94.

²⁷ Picon-Valin, Béatrice (2001). “Passages, Interférences, Hybridations : Le Film de Théâtre”. In *Theatre Research International*, vol. 26, No. 2. Pp. 190-198.

²⁸ Ferreira de Oliveira, Renaud (December 21, 2013). “L’adaptation littéraire au cinéma: une vie des œuvres”. In *Centre international d’études pédagogiques*. Retrieved May 12, 2017, from www.ciep.fr.

²⁹ Hutcheon, Linda (2013). *Op. Cit.* p.XV.

³⁰ Truffaut, François (1958). “L’adaptation littéraire au cinéma”. Quoted in Laroche, Daniel (February-March 2015). “Du livre au film : dossier Littérature & Cinéma”. *Le Carnet et les Instants* 185.

³¹ Zitner, Sheldon P. (2008). *Op. Cit.* p.6.

³² The elements mentioned in this chapter will be limited to those concerning the main themes of love, marriage and sexuality. For more information on the numerous antecedents of *Much Ado*, see Sheldon Zitner’s introduction of the play in the 2008 The Oxford Shakespeare edition.

exclusively adapt the original play on its own, but rather conduct a work of interpretation, incorporating several sources and references into the original text.

1.1. Shakespeare and his Antecedents

The “common literary property” Sheldon Zitner refers to in the Oxford Shakespeare edition of the play is the plot of “indictment and vindication of a chaste woman.”³³ This trope also exists in the plays *Othello* – in which Iago tricks the titular character into murdering the innocent Desdemona – and *Cymbeline* – in which the king’s daughter Imogen is thought unfaithful by her lover Posthumus. Zitner lists a few sources of inspiration that use this trope and would have likely been known by the playwright. These sources have probably inspired Shakespeare in his writing of *Much Ado*.³⁴

The first source mentioned by Zitner is Matteo Bandello’s *La Prima Parte de la Novelle*, published in 1554, and more precisely the twenty-second tale of the book, which tells a story similar to Hero and Claudio’s plot. In Bandello’s story, Timbreo, a companion of the King Piero of Aragon, falls in love with Fenicia, daughter of the nobleman Lionato. Timbreo and Fenicia, Shakespeare’s Claudio and Hero, are then set to be married. The jealous Gironde, Timbreo’s friend– Shakespeare’s Benedick – tries to break them up by giving his friend flimsy proofs of Fenicia’s unfaithfulness. Timbreo believes Gironde, rejects Fenicia and humiliated, the woman fakes her own death. Later, Gironde confesses his responsibility, Timbreo realizes his mistake and marries another lady, who reveals herself to be the very alive Fenicia.

The storyline is eerily similar to Shakespeare’s *Much Ado*. However, as Zitner rightly declares:

What is of more interest than the possibility of Shakespeare’s borrowing bits of the Hero-Claudio plot he could have easily invented is the direction of his alterations. His addition of Beatrice and Benedick, his characterizations of the protagonists, and the perspectives the play provides in by-the-by comment, especially by Beatrice, place to the fore the social issues that vindication plots ignored or obscured in happy ending.³⁵

³³ Zitner, Sheldon P. (2008). *Op. Cit.*

³⁴ It is interesting to note that Zitner refuses to refer to the mentioned “antecedents” as “sources”, considering that the term carries a lot of prejudice and “implications of derivativeness” (*Ado*, p.6). This concurs with the idea that an adaptation should not be valued based on its likeness to the original work.

³⁵ Zitner, Sheldon P. (2008). *Op. Cit.* pp.12.13.

A lot of modifications were brought to Bandello's original tale. The additions of Beatrice and Benedick provided a welcome 'mise en abyme' of the Hero and Claudio storyline, by commenting on their relationship as well as allowing a comparison of the couples' dynamic. Beatrice's rejection and critique of the tradition of courtship offer a stark alteration from Bandello's story.

In the original tale, Gironde, responsible for Fenicia's humiliation, is forgiven, and recovers his place next to his best friend. The lady's shame and honor seem to be of minor importance in the plot, which centers around the male friendship.³⁶ In Shakespeare's play, however, the man responsible for the loss of Hero's reputation is the evil Don John and his companions Borachio and Conrad, who are caught and will receive "brave punishment" (5.4.128) for their scheme. As for Benedick, he stays honorable, and is one of the only ones to stay by Hero's side after the wedding. He even swears to avenge her by killing his companion Claudio. Hero's fate takes much more importance and is legitimized by both Beatrice's lamentations and Benedick's support. Another change made by Shakespeare is the blurring of hierarchy and rank. Piero of Aragon was a king, whereas Don Pedro is a prince, and his social rank is further belittled by his falling into Don John's trap and supporting Claudio's fit at the wedding. He is further belittled by Benedick when he is told, "Prince, thou art sad. Get thee a wife" (5.4.122) in the play's last lines. In the rural area of Messina, there seems to be no strict social hierarchy. The change is deliberate, according to Zitner, who states "The raising of class issues here would have blurred the focus on gender issues that are evidently Shakespeare's primary concern" (*Ado*, p.10). Yet, rank seems to have some degree of importance for a few characters like Margaret and Don Jon. The question of gender and class issues will be developed extensively in Part 2 of this master's dissertation.

The Beatrice and Benedick subplot of *Much ado* was not totally innovative either. In Shakespeare's own work, Biron and Rosaline from *Love's Labour's Lost* present a previous trial of the witty couple. A probable source of inspiration was also Baldassare Castiglione's guide of chivalry and etiquette *Il Cortegiano*, in which a "woman who had no thought of doing so fell in love with a man merely because she overheard it said that they were in love" (*Ado*, p.13). This seems to describe Beatrice and Benedick's relationship, considering both claimed to despise each other's presence, and were tricked into thinking the other loved them and that

³⁶ *Ibid.* p.9.

they did not deserve the other's attention. However, it seems unlikely Beatrice and Benedick fell in love by hearing about the other's love, but rather already loved each other. Moreover, Beatrice and Benedick's refusal to date is motivated by deeper worries: Benedick is terrified of being a cuckold, and Beatrice exemplifies the adage "one bitten, twice shy" when she confesses of their past relationship:

DON PEDRO

Come, lady, come, you have lost the heart of Signor Benedick.

BEATRICE

Indeed, my lord, he lent it me awhile, and I gave him use for it, a double heart for his single one. Marry, once before he won it of me with false dice. Therefore your Grace may well say I have lost it.

Ado, 2.1.273-279

Both characters present a complex characterization and motivation, which drive them in the play and makes the viewers empathize with them and get involved in the storyline. This is maybe the reason most representations of the play have chosen to focus on this storyline rather than the main plot, in which the happy ending seems bittersweet in the light of gender issues.

Another antecedent named by Zitner is the epic poem *Orlando Furioso*, written in 1516 by Ludovico Ariosto, in which a servant, dressed into her mistress' clothes, fools a lover into believing his betrothed is unfaithful. This echoes the scheme of *Much Ado* involving Borachio and the servant Margaret. Zitner also mentions Spencer's *Faerie Queen*, in which a maid wears her mistress' clothing.

1.2. Movie Adaptations

Shakespeare's work has been compared to its antecedents by highlighting the "direction of his alterations,"³⁷ and it is in the same manner that I shall analyze Branagh's and Whedon's movie adaptations. Although the two film adaptations analyzed in this dissertation have chosen to use the original script, both directors had to make directorial changes to the original text. The two-hour-long play had to be adapted into a film: scenes were cut, soliloquies were shortened, and long sentences were simplified. Joss Whedon has admitted that a third³⁸ of the original screenplay had been removed for his adaptation.

³⁷ Zitner, Sheldon P. (2008). *Op. Cit.* pp.12.13.

³⁸ Whedon, J. (2013). *Op. Cit.* p.18.

The aim of this dissertation is not, however, to catalogue the changes made to the script in each scene and line, but rather to witness the changes made by the directors, either intentionally or subconsciously, and try to understand each director's intentions and interpretations that hide behind said directorial choices.

1.2.1. The Translation of a Written Play

Plays and films have similar characteristics: they each require the elaboration of set design, costume design, lighting, score and the selection of a cast. Nonetheless, adapting a play requires changes to fit the norms of cinematography: the scenes require coloring, and the director needs to decide how to shoot and frame each scene.

Whedon, when asked, "What [...] is the big difference [...] between filmed Shakespeare and staged Shakespeare?" answers:

Filmed Shakespeare [calls for] a different set of tools. Theater is something that is alive - you're watching living people. [...] But film has to capture the electricity that is created between these characters, without having the actual proximity [to live actors] and that makes it tough, but it has cinema. It has an enormous amount of visual language the ability to back the words up in a way that the theater doesn't, so part of it is about *translation*, it's about making sure that you're using the camera, you're using every cinematic trick you have to augment the emotionality of the thing, because you have lost the frisson of personal [live] involvement.³⁹

JW, p.14

Referring to the process of adaptation as a "translation" fitting: although theater and film have similar characteristics, each speaks a different language, with different norms. If a theater representation of Shakespeare's play constitutes an adaptation, a film adaptation is a translation of the original work into a new genre.

Branagh seems to agree with Whedon's statement. In the screenplay of *Much ado*, he mentions the need to create a "movie pace", "quite different from that of the theater." For instance, Benedick's and Beatrice's gulling scenes (Ado, 3.1 and 2.3) were combined into "one big scene of continuous action in the same garden. We wanted to lose any sense of the formal ending of one scene and beginning of another as in the play" (KB p.XV). This type of change corresponds to Whedon's idea of a "translation" of the play into film.

³⁹ Square brackets are the interviewers' modifications; italics are mine

The following chapters will analyze two examples of changes required to translate a play into a film: first the use of a distinctive visual language, next the adaptation of lighting and coloring. Finally, if the use of intertextuality is not required to translate a play into a film, it does contribute to the elaboration of a new, unique adaptation.

1.2.2. The Visual Language of Films

In his quote, Whedon mentions emotionality, which needs to be heightened by “every cinema trick you have.” Kenneth Branagh seems to have the same opinion and uses different techniques to give the characters a backstory and likability. Samuel Cowl, in *The films of Kenneth Branagh*, mentions close-ups⁴⁰ as the embodiment of the “power of the film image” that allowed Branagh to “make the Claudio-Hero relationship more vivid than it usually is in stage productions.”⁴¹ As a matter of fact, Branagh has said he wishes to refocus on their relationship rather than the one between Beatrice and Benedick – “[They] are, after all, the subplot” (KB p.VII). In stage adaptations, the focus was usually put on the pair formed by Beatrice and Benedick, who were therefore played by pairs of renowned actors such as Judy Dench and Donald Sinden or Maggie Smith and Brian Bedford. Crown mentions that he therefore “can’t name – or summon the image of – a single Claudio and Hero.”⁴² However, Branagh’s use of close-ups allows his vision of the couple to be “firmly imprinted in our imagination.”⁴³ The emotions shown to the public, whether they be love, happiness with a smile or a blush, or sadness and anger with tears and scowling, brings a great deal of empathy from the public.

Whedon uses the same method of close-ups in order to increase the emotionality of the play. He also gives a few characters additional backstory and substance by adding silent scenes that Hatchuel calls “interpolations”, i.e. the “addition of something different in the middle of a text, piece of music,”⁴⁴ meaning the addition of a scene that was not in the original play. For example, Nathan Fillion’s Dogberry is given a few silent scenes that add a comical effect to

⁴⁰ According to the Columbia Film Language Glossary, a close up is a “shot in which a person’s face fills most of the screen, although the term can also refer to any shot that appears to have been taken at close range”. Columbia University (2015). “Close-up” in *The Columbia Film Language Glossary*. Retrieved July 14th, 2019, from filmglossary.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/term/close-up/

⁴¹ Cowl, Samuel (2006). *Op. cit.* p.75

⁴² Cowl, Samuel (2006). *Op. cit.* p.80.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Cambridge University Press (2019). “Interpolation” in the *Cambridge Dictionary*. Retrieved July 15, 2019, from dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/interpolation

Shakespeare's clown, e.g. a scene in which he mistakenly tries to put the much leaner Verges' jacket on, agitated by having been called an ass (JW, p.163). Another example is the addition of a flashback scene showing the seduction of Margaret by Borachio, which strengthens the characterization and translates the director's interpretation of each character. For Whedon, Borachio's motivation to dress Margaret in Hero's clothes, in addition to following Don John's orders, is the fact that he is "obsessively in love with Hero" (JW, p.26), an interpretation that seems absent from both Shakespeare's play and Branagh's adaptation. As for Margaret, she is aware of Borachio's feeling and accepts to wear Hero's clothing. And when Borachio mouths Hero's name while they have sex, she is "looking lost and unhappy" (JW, p.125).

This scene is a perfect illustration of one of the big translations required for an adaptation from stage to screen: the visual language of films. Whedon's quote (see p.16) mentioned that "[film] has an enormous amount of visual language [and has] the ability to back the words up in a way that the theater doesn't" (JW p.14). Margaret's seduction scene, which is inserted as a flashback in the movie when the watchmen overhear Borachio talking to Conrade about the success of their scheme (3.3), is introduced in the screenplay by the phrase "As tells it, we see it" (JW p. 124). This implies that film directors who tackle play or book adaptations can use their visual medium in order to show what was only mentioned orally. As Sarah Hatchuel explains in an interview by Allociné for the DVD of Joss Whedon's adaptation, a play used to be listened to, but our modern, visual society requires more visual clues.⁴⁵

In Shakespeare's original play, the plan devised by Don John to trick Claudio into thinking his betrothed is unfaithful is only described and talked about, never acted out. Borachio, as the instigator of the scheme, is the first character to mention it: he explains his plan to Don John in the second act of the play:

⁴⁵ Allociné (n.d.). [Interviews of Joss Whedon and Sarah Hatchuel] [video clip] in Cole, Kai & Whedon, Joss (Producers), & Whedon, Joss (Director) (2012). *Beaucoup de bruit pour rien* [Motion Picture]. France : Jour2Fête.

BORACHIO

I think I told your lordship a year since, how much I am in the favour of Margaret, the waiting gentlewoman to Hero. [...] I can, at any unseasonable instant of the night, appoint her to look out at her lady's chamber window.

[...]

Go you to the prince your brother. Spare not to tell him that he hath wronged his honour in marrying the renowned Claudio – whose estimation do you mightily hold up – to a contaminated stale, such a one as Hero.

[...]

Go, then; find me a meet hour to draw Don Pedro and the Count Claudio alone. Tell them that you know that Hero loves me. [...] They will scarcely believe this without trial. Offer them instances, which shall bear no less likelihood than to see me at her chamber window, hear me call Margaret Hero, hear Margaret term me Claudio. And bring them to see this the very night before the intended wedding, for in the meantime I will so fashion the matter that Hero shall be absent, and there shall appear such seeming truth of Hero's disloyalty that jealousy shall be called assurance, and all the preparation overthrown.

Ado, 2.2.12-49

Later, the public hears the first part of the scheme take place, when Don John fulfills his part of the plan by telling his brother Don Pedro and Claudio that “the lady is disloyal” (3.2.98). He continues: “go but with me tonight, you shall see her chamber window entered, even the night before her wedding-day. If you love her then, tomorrow wed her. But it would better fit your honour to change your mind” (3.2.106-110). Don John and Claudio then exit the stage, and later that night see a woman they think is Hero letting another man enter her chambers. However, the scene in question happens offscreen, and is therefore not acted out in front of the audience. The next scene takes place after the plan has been carried out when Borachio and Conrad discuss what happened:

BORACHIO

[...] 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. – I tell this tale vilely. I should first tell thee how 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.

CONRAD

And thought they Margaret was Hero?

BORACHIO

Two of them did, the prince and Claudio.

Ado, 3.3.142-151

Later, Claudio talks about he saw the night before. At the wedding, he asks Hero: “What man was he talked with you yesternight | Out at your window betwixt twelve and one?” (4.1.83-84). When she answers she had talked “with no man at that hour” (4.1.86), he concludes that she has probably had sex with this man and is therefore “no maiden” (4.1.87).

The entire scheme seems like gossip to the public, as the scheme is talked about but never acted out in front of their eyes. But Whedon chose to film the scene, and showed Margaret and Borachio having sex, as well as the reaction of a stunned Claudio (see Figures 4 and 6). His choice might have been inspired by Kenneth Branagh’s adaptation, which also showed Claudio’s reaction (see Figures 1 and 5) with “tears in angry eyes” (KB, p.56). Kenneth Branagh indicated in his screenplay that he added this scene in order to add more depth to Claudio’s character:

In theatrical versions this character is often dismissed for his gullibility. Hero’s alleged infidelity (her ‘talking’ to a man at a window) is described as happening offstage. It seemed that if we saw this occur on screen, it would add a new dimension to our understanding of Claudio.

KB, p.XV



Figures 3 and 4. Margaret and Borachio having sex at Hero’s window.
Left: In Kenneth Branagh’s adaptation. Right: In Joss Whedon’s adaptation.



Figures 5 and 6. Claudio’s reaction to seeing a girl he thinks is Hero being unfaithful.
Left: In Kenneth Branagh’s adaptation. Right: In Joss Whedon’s adaptation.

1.2.3. Lighting and Coloring

Moving aside from the visual language of film, another element that needed to be adapted to the genre was lighting and coloring. The original text does not mention any lighting effect, which leaves the choice to the theater director. *Much Ado* leaves a great flexibility to the director, by not setting a strong sense of place, and leaving the dialogue to “a watchman” without mentioning how many men form the watch. These choices are testaments to Shakespeare’s “professional concern for easy transfer to different venues”⁴⁶ and for distribution of lines among unexperienced actors.⁴⁷ The lighting would have been an element left to the theater directors to change with their own venues in mind. The adaptations of his play in the eighteenth century would have been lit by natural daylight, considering most plays staged in public playhouses took place in the afternoon – in private theaters, however, candles and lanterns were often used.⁴⁸ However, later theatrical adaptations were performed in the evening, and would have used artificial lighting such as spotlights as a result.

Branagh’s adaptation chose a very bright setting, and shot his film in Tuscany’s sun, in order to set an ambiance Whedon describes as a “general air of joy and kind of sunny good time” (JW, p.21). This choice of lighting and coloring did not fit Whedon’s own interpretation of the play and “the emotion that [he] was trying to evoke” (JW, p.21). His interpretation was that *Much Ado* was a noir comedy, and he therefore chose to film a black and white movie, “separating it [from the Branagh version] [...] I didn’t want to try to make what Branagh has already made” (JW, p.24). The aesthetic choice of a black and white movie required therefore a different use of color in the set design and costuming, since only contrastive colors would have shown well on screen.⁴⁹

1.2.4. Antecedents and Intertextuality

Finally, antecedents contribute greatly to the feel and look of an adaptation. As a matter of fact, a film adaptation never restricts itself to a pure rendition of the original written text. Shakespeare’s text has been adapted countless times on theater stages, each time with

⁴⁶ Zitner, Sheldon (2008). *Op. cit.* p.18.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p.19.

⁴⁸ Graves, R.B. (1999). *Lighting the Shakespearean Stage, 1567-1642*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press. Pp.1-9.

⁴⁹ Malkiewicz, J. K. (1989). *Cinematography: a guide for film makers and film teachers*. 1st Fireside ed. 1992. New York: Simon & Schuster.

directorial changes. Undoubtedly, Kenneth Branagh and Joss Whedon have both watched some of these performances, which have shaped their vision of the play. A proof of this influence can be found in the first page of Branagh's introduction to his screenplay, where he cited the different influent actors who have played in staged adaptations of *Much Ado* throughout the years (KB, p.VII). In addition to the original text and the theatrical adaptation, a film director shooting Shakespeare will likely find himself inspired by previous film adaptations of the same play.⁵⁰ Branagh refers to the different film adaptations that came before him, and Whedon in his turn refers to Branagh's own adaptation. But these antecedents do not end there. Films are complex blends of references and influences, and the intertextuality takes an important place in cinema. Although the references are countless, I shall cite a few noticeable references and 'clin d'œil' – now called 'Easter eggs' in popular culture – present in Branagh's and Whedon's adaptations.

Linda E. Boose and Richard Burt write in their article, "Totally Clueless? Shakespeare goes Hollywood in the 1990s" that Shakespeare adaptations in the 1990s used a lot of contemporary references in order to modernize the play for their public. They write : "Even films which adapts the Shakespeare script as faithfully as does Branagh's *Much Ado* speak within a metacinematic discourse of self-reference in which, through film quotations, they situate themselves in reference as much to other films as to a Shakespeare's tradition."⁵¹ One of the references they mention is *The Magnificent Seven*: John Sturges' 1960 popular Western film, and a remake of the film *The Seven Samurai* by Akira Kurosawa. Branagh writes that the film has been the primary influence for the title sequence of his film: "Heat haze and dust, grapes and horseflesh, and a nod to *The magnificent seven*." In his opening sequence (see Figure 7), seven soldiers – Don Pedro, Don John, Claudio, Benedick, Conrad, Borachio and a seventh, unnamed, character – come to Leonato's villa by horse, "riding through a mist of dust and heat haze" describes the screenplay (KB, p. 10). They ride in a scene filmed in slow motion, with close-ups on the horses' flesh and hooves, looking both fierce and sensual – the movements involved in riding a horse are rather sexual. A similar scene occurs in *The magnificent seven*, where the seven cowboys ride in a straight line toward the camera (see Figure 8). *Much Ado*'s

⁵⁰ As it was the case for Shakespeare himself, getting inspiration from literature and other plays. Jim Jarmusch writes in *MovieMaker Magazine* #53 (Winter 2014): "Nothing is original. Steal from anywhere that resonates with inspiration or fuels your imagination."

⁵¹ Boose, Lynda E. & Burt, Richard (1997). "Totally Clueless? Shakespeare goes Hollywood in the 1990s". In Boose, Lynda E. & Burt, Richard (Eds.) (1999). *Shakespeare the movie: popularizing the plays on film, tv, and video*. London: Routledge. P.11.

title scene, according to Branagh, was also inspired by the movie *Laurence of Arabia* (KB, p.10), which features horses charging in the desert's heat.

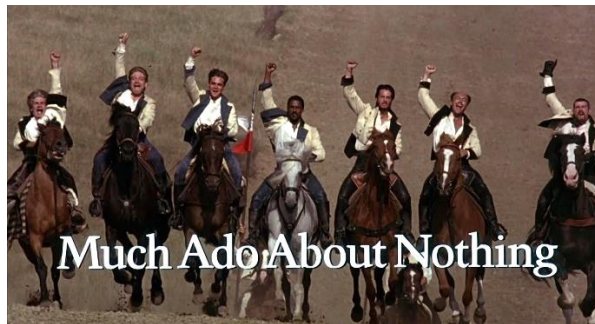


Figure 7. Title sequence of *Much Ado About Nothing*, by Kenneth Branagh (1993).



Figure 8. Scene from John Sturges' *The Magnificent Seven* (1960). Image property of United Artists Corporation with The Mirisch Company and Alpha Productions.

Branagh's adaptation was also inspired by the musical genre and romantic movies such as the 1959 movie *Some Like It Hot*, starring Marilyn Monroe. The former inspired Branagh's portrayal of Benedick in one scene in particular: after 'overhearing' a discussion on himself and Beatrice in the orchard (Ado, 2.3) Benedick prepares himself for Beatrice's arrival by the fountain. He then tries out different positions to look his best, yet to look casual and uninterested. This portrayal was inspired by Tony Curtis' role in the movie, in which his character Joe pretends to be a millionaire to woo Marilyn Monroe's Sugar Kane.⁵² Right after Beatrice leaves, Benedick is overwhelmed by happiness and love and jumps in the fountain to dance. This dance is inspired by Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly's musical *Singin' in the Rain*, in which the main character dances in the rain, happy and in love.⁵³

Finally, if the comedic weight of Dogberry's verbal malapropisms – i.e. the “mistaken use of a word in place of a similar-sounding one, often with unintentionally amusing effect”⁵⁴ – has, according to Branagh, lost its effectiveness on a modern public, Michael Keaton's portrayal of the Shakespearian clown brings a different kind of comedy. Branagh has chosen to transform his verbal malapropisms into physical malapropisms, making Dogberry look like a sweaty, disgusting man who gives an “eye popping, head swiveling, word eating

⁵² Crawl, Samuel (2006). *Op. cit.* p.82.

⁵³ *Ibid.* p.83.

⁵⁴ Oxford University Press (2019). “Malaprop, also Malapropism” in the “*Lexico*” *Oxford Dictionaries*. Retrieved July 25, 2019, from www.lexico.com/en/definition/malaprop.

performance.”⁵⁵ His interpretation of the character constitutes a “daring reprise, with variations, of his *Beetlejuice* character,”⁵⁶ which Keaton played in the 1988 Tim Burton movie of the same name. Branagh also gives a nod to the movie *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*: Dogberry and Verges arrive riding an imaginary horse, just like Arthur rode one while his servant knocked coconuts against each other to mimic the sound of hooves.

Joss Whedon has also used intertextuality to add depth to his adaptation. One of his sources of inspiration was the crime genre based on the mafia, with antecedents such as Martin Scorsese’s movie *Goodfellas*, or Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather*. Whedon wished to transform Leonato into a politician, or a member of a rich and powerful family like the Kennedys, with a “mob boss feel.”⁵⁷

Another play on intertextuality is Whedon’s habit of recasting actors he has previously worked with, effectively creating what his fans call the ‘Whedonverse’, i.e. the imaginary world that connects all the different universes of his different television shows and movies.⁵⁸ Sociologist Jeffrey Bussolini defines this casting choice as “the often intentional crossover of actors and actresses between and among different shows, and the way in which bringing along recognizable faces and styles serves to cross-pollinate televisual texts and create a larger televisual intertext.”⁵⁹

The genre of police procedurals is also hinted at in Whedon’s adaptation. Nathan Fillion, known for his role as a crime novel writer assisting the police in their crime investigations in the television show *Castle*, was cast in the role of Dogberry. Dogberry’s role changes drastically from the *Beetlejuice* mannerism of Branagh’s adaptation, and rather parodies crime shows such as *CSI: Miami*. Nathan Fillion chooses to conduct the trial of Bocaccio and Verges like he was in an interrogation room trying to get his suspect to confess for their crime. As Sarah Hatchuel formulates it, Dogberry’s and Verges’ scenes are put to good use to pastiche

⁵⁵ Crowl, Samuel (2006). *Op. cit.* p.84.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Allociné (n.d.). *Op. cit.*

⁵⁸ Wardell, K. Brenna (2016). “Actors Assemble!: The Intertextual Pleasures of the Joss Whedon Ensemble.” In Lavery, David and Wilcox, Rhonda V. (Summer 2016). *Slayage: The Journal of Whedon Studies*, Volume 14.2. The Whedon Studies Association.

⁵⁹ Bussolini, Jeffrey (2013). “Television Intertextuality After Buffy”, paragraph 3. In Lavery, David and Wilcox, Rhonda V. (Winter 2013). *Slayage: The Journal of Whedon Studies*, Volume 10.1. The Whedon Studies Association.

the clichés of the police procedural (CCTV, guns, desk punching).”⁶⁰ The watch also wears black glasses, which could be a reference to the crime show *CSI*, or to the Marvel comics and movies *The Men in Black*. Another *CSI* reference is the fact that the role of the sexton was distributed to the actress Romy Rosemont, who played a fingerprint lab technician in the series.

To sum up, movie adaptations of plays are never pure renditions of the original text but rather a translation from one genre to another. This translation entails changes such as the change of lighting, or the transcription of oral clues into visual ones. This help of visual language also allows the transmission of the directors’ interpretations and feelings to the public. The negative or positive depiction of a character, for instance, can be expressed exclusively through visual clues. Another element that differentiates a film adaptation from its source material is the use of movie references. Branagh and Whedon, both seasoned film directors, use a wide array of these techniques to create a film that is uniquely theirs, yet digs in the rich history of both theater and cinema. One last thing that could differentiate a film from Shakespeare’s play is its transposition to a contemporary setting rather than the classical eighteenth-century period. The next chapter will analyze whether Branagh’s and Whedon’s film modernize their setting.

⁶⁰ Mayer, Sophie (February 14, 2014). “Film of the week: *Much Ado About Nothing*: Love makes Joss Whedon’s rep company do the Shakespearean wacky”. Retrieved May 20, 2019, from gwenckatz.com/2013/09/14/which-much-ado-is-better/.

2. The Modernization of the Play

Joss Whedon and Kenneth Branagh agree on the fact that *Much Ado* is a modern play, although they both bring different arguments. Branagh, as quoted earlier (see p.2), mentioned that the theme of love is still a current topic, and that the play “presents a whole series of emotional and spiritual challenges that we – young, old, male, female – continue to face when we love” (KB, p.XVI). To him, the play is still relatable, and that is what makes it modern, and interesting to film for a contemporary audience. Joss Whedon agrees with this point of view: “One of the reasons why I thought it would be [...] a good film [...] is that it’s so relatable and it’s so modern” (JW, p.17). Whedon suggests the biggest element of modernity is the rhythm of the play, almost exclusively in prose, which “makes it much easier to present to a modern audience” (JW, p.17).

After establishing that the play itself was a modern one, I shall now focus on my research question: “How did Kenneth Branagh and Joss Whedon choose to modernize the play for our modern-world society?” The most visible representations of modernization in a movie are the setting and costuming; hence it will be the first focus of this chapter. The difference of historical setting between both movies is the biggest, and more visible difference between both adaptations. Kenneth Branagh’s film is pseudo-historical, whereas Whedon’s is resolutely modernized.

I am referring Branagh’s adaptation as ‘pseudo-historical’ because the costuming is not historically accurate, or at least does not pertain to the sixteenth or seventeenth century, during which the play was first written and performed. Instead, the play is timeless, with costumes that the audience is unable to date to a precise period – although Samuel Crowl date them as “late nineteenth century costuming.”⁶¹ Branagh motivates this choice in his screenplay:

We made sure that the costumes and period setting did everything they could to release the audience’s imagination. We consciously avoided setting this version in a specific time but instead went for a look that worked within itself, where clothes, props, architecture, all belonged to the same world. This imaginary world could have existed almost anytime between 1700 and 1900. It [allowed] a certain fairy tale quality to emerge.

KB, pp. XIII-XIV

⁶¹ Crowl, Samuel (2006). *Op. cit.* p. 80.

Branagh's play is therefore set between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The actors' costumes are set in this time : the women of the film wear long flowy dresses and bodices; the men wear boots, linen or leather pants and shirts. The set and props also correspond to the setting: Leonato's Villa is lit by torches and candles; the drinks are poured in metal glasses, and the soldiers wear a sword at their belts (see Figure 9 below).

The choice was therefore a conscious effort to create a movie without a specific period in mind and create a "fairy tale" atmosphere. What was, however, the intention behind it? One possibility is that a fairy tale ambiance could appeal to the young audience he wishes to attract. Branagh's film almost seem like a Disney movie, with its fairy tale setting, its humor, its music and songs, and its happy end. Another possibility is that it could fit the public's expectations of a Shakespearian adaptation, considering a vast majority of theater representations are played in period costumes. Finally, one last reason could be Branagh's own nostalgic feelings toward his playing Benedick on stage, and therefore willingness to shoot a movie that forms a bridge between theater and films.

However, one of the effects this choice of setting could have on the audience is a mental detachment from the events of the play. By creating a fairy tale setting in a past era, the public could be unable to associate the setting of the play with their own reality. They could think the microcosm of characters presented, with its old patriarchal society and arranged marriages, does not fit into their world. The transposition of the critique of love and courtship would therefore be inefficient. Whedon, perhaps for this reason, chose to modernize the play into twenty-first-century America. By setting the gender issue of the play into a world similar to the audience's, Whedon could imply that the plot of the play is still actual and could possibly happen in today's society. Another possibility is that his choice to modernize is less symbolic, and just a way to be more watchable for a modern public, used to a certain kind of setting and costuming.

This choice of actualizing the play is not innovative. The popular film *Romeo + Juliet* directed by Baz Luhrmann had already proven the success that a modernized Shakespearian

film with the play's original lines could have. Joe Papp had also televised a modernized adaptation of *Much Ado* in 1973, "setting the action in pre-World War I America."⁶²

The horses from Branagh's title sequence are replaced with black cars in Whedon's film. The soldiers' uniform, complete with swords, become black suits and holsters for guns (see Figures 9 and 10). This leads to an interesting transfer when Claudio asks Benedick, "Wilt thou use thy wit?" (5.1.123). Benedick, ready to challenge Claudio in Hero's name, answers, "It is in my scabbard: shall I draw it?" If the line was absent from Branagh's adaptation, Whedon chose to keep the line and make Benedick show his gun instead. The word scabbard can refer to both a sheath for a sword and a gun holster, which allowed a smooth transition.



Figure 9. From left to right: Benedick, Claudio, Don Pedro, Don John, Borachio and Conrad arrive at Messina. In Kenneth Branagh's adaptation.



Figure 10. Benedick shows his firearm to Claudio in Joss Whedon's adaptation.

In a more awkward transposition, Leonato's line "I learned in this letter that Don Pedro of Aragon comes this night to Messina" (1.1.1) is uttered while holding a smartphone. Although the transfer is clever, replacing a messenger with modern technologies, one can wonder what "letter" he talks about; perhaps a text message, or email. Technology also appears later when Leonato's aide announces: "You brother Don John is ta'en in flight, and brought with armed men back to Messina" (5.5.125-126). He then shows Leonato a video on his phone, showing

⁶² Turan, Kenneth (June 6, 2013). "Movie review: *Much Ado About Nothing* a tasty snack for Bard lovers". Retrieved May 10, 2017, from <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/moviesnow/la-et-mn-much-ado-review-20130607-story.html>.

Dogberry and Verges putting handcuffs around Don John's wrists. Sarah Hatchuel comments this scene in an interview with Vital Philippot:

Enfin, il nous montre la scène de l'arrestation de Don Juan (qui reste hors champ dans la pièce), mais via une vidéo de type YouTube, visionnée sur un téléphone portable. Il s'agit là d'une actualisation pertinente de la thématique du voyeurisme contenue dans le double-sens du titre shakespearien, à l'heure où les nouvelles technologies permettent de surveiller tout le monde tout le temps.⁶³

For Hatchuel, the use of modern technologies would be a reminder of the voyeuristic thematic of the play, of people observing others, overhearing conversations, and judging from what they think they saw happen. Other modern allusions to this topic are the earpieces the watchmen are wearing, as well as the microphones attached to their wrists. The mansion also has many surveillance cameras, controlled by the watchmen. The audience gets a glance at the old televisions used to control them when the watch appears for the first time, in the scene during which Dogberry teaches the watchmen what their duties are. Another element of voyeurism is the presence, throughout the film, of a "court photographer", taking pictures of the arrival of Don Pedro, the party and the wedding. Finally, the voyeuristic element of the play is present in the way the movie is shot:

Joss Whedon a très bien exploité cette dimension en encadrant souvent ses personnages à travers des fenêtres, des portes, des vitres, en les capturant dans le reflet d'un miroir ou d'une fenêtre, ou bien en choisissant des angles frappants (en surplomb par exemple), qui donnent le sentiment d'un regard un peu voyeur.⁶⁴

As I mentioned earlier, the men of Whedon's adaptation wear modern two-piece suits. The women all wear dresses: Hero and Beatrice wear summer dresses during most of the play, and the female guests wear evening dresses during the masquerade party. The court photographer is the only female wearing pants in the play. If it seems odd that the women exclusively wear shirts and dresses, it could be explained by a dress code at the party, or a personal preference from the women. Servants, however, are dressed differently, and wear a uniform. The watch's apparel consists in a suit, the cook wears a white uniform and an apron, and the waiting-gentlewomen wear a stereotypical French maid uniform consisting in a black dress with a white collar, a white apron and a headpiece. This last choice seems peculiar, knowing few maids

⁶³ Philippot, Vidal (n.d.). *Op. cit.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

must wear a uniform nowadays. However, it could once again be linked to a dress code⁶⁵, or to the fact that the household seems to come from a rich family, either coming from the aristocracy, politics or business. It could also be a way to remind us of the difference of status between the different characters of the play, although it seems that the difference of costuming is greater between the women than between the men (more on that subject in Part 2, chapter 1). Finally, the choice of costuming could be linked to the fact that the film was shot in black and white, which requires a lot of contrasts in the lighting and coloring of the set.

The choice made by Whedon of an extreme modernization of the play seems to be in direct contradiction with the choice of shooting it in black and white. Black and white film was the ancestor of current color movies and is not typically used today. Whedon has stated that black and white has a sort of “timeless elegance” (JW, p.24). He implies that the color scheme of the house also encouraged him to shoot in black and white, as well as the outside of the houses: “we’ve got a lot of sun out here, and rolling green hills and mountains, and again, I didn’t want to try to make what Branagh has already made” (JW, p.24). But perhaps another reason why he shot in black and white was to balance the modernization of the setting. Maybe if Whedon could not link his play to the Shakespearian tradition, with its costuming and line chanting, he could at least try to link it to the rich history of cinema. Whedon’s adaptation is resolutely a film rather than a play, and the director displays it proudly, whereas Branagh, theater actors as well as director, creates a hybrid genre between theater and cinema.

In conclusion, both adaptations’ setting and costuming are very different: Branagh barely modernized the play, by setting his film in eighteenth or nineteenth century Italy. Whedon, on the other hand, transferred the events of the play in the United States in the twenty-first century. However, the modernization of a play does not exclusively base itself on setting. Other aspects of a play could be modernized, in a more hidden manner. The pedagogical organization ‘Réseau Canopé’ stated in the article *Interroger l’acte de l’adaptation cinématographique*⁶⁶:

L’époque influe tout autant sur l’œuvre littéraire que sur l’œuvre cinématographique. « Adapter », c’est d’abord s’adapter : à son époque, à son public. Chaque adaptation est donc le fruit d’un contexte historique, d’un

⁶⁵ Many hotel maids in the United States still wear such a uniform.

⁶⁶ Réseau Canopé - Le réseau d’accompagnement et de création pédagogiques (n.d). “Interroger l’acte de l’adaptation cinématographique” in *Madame Bovary au cinéma: adaptation, réécriture*. Retrieved June 25th, 2019, from <https://www.reseau-canope.fr/cndpfileadmin/mag-film/themes/madame-bovary-au-cinema-adaptation-reecriture/pistes-pour-letude/interroger-lacte-de-ladaptation-cinematographique/>

courant esthétique, et d'un individu. Elle passe obligatoirement par un transfert historico-culturel.

This idea corresponds to our explanation, in the previous chapter, of the nature of film adaptations: they do not consist in pure literal transcription of the script, but rather in a translation, with some changes and modifications. But it also adds one element more: that each adaptation goes through a “transfert historico-culturel”, therefore every adaptation is the product of a specific place and era. Each adaptation had been read by the directors at a certain time, from the vantage point of their own culture – either British or American – and has been adapted in the twenty-first century for a specific public. It is therefore likely that the main themes of the play have been adapted by both directors. Parts 2 and 3 of this dissertation will therefore analyze how both directors have modernized – or not - the two main themes of the play: gender roles and sexuality, and how their cultural and historical vantage point has influenced their adaptation.

PART 2:
THE ADAPTATION OF GENDER ROLES

The modernization of an adaptation does not exclusively affect the material aspects such as setting, costume design and props, but also influences the main themes of the play. Adapting a movie for a modern audience requires a lot of changes from the directors, considering the public is not Elizabethan but that of the twenty-first century. Furthermore, if a movie is a piece of art and should be made with the director's artistic vision in mind, the reception of the movie, meaning whether the public and critics alike enjoyed the movie, is an important factor to consider when studying the adaptation.

The question of gender roles is an ongoing debate with the “#MeToo” movement and the Alabama abortion ban,⁶⁷ 2019 has had its fair share of controversies regarding women's rights. Feminist issues such as independence in a relationship or sexual freedom are burning topics.⁶⁸ Society and women's rights are always changing, and the role of women in today's world has changed drastically compared to its counterpart in the seventeenth century. Considering this evolution, but knowing both directors have chosen to use the original play and lines, how did they adapt the question of gender and sexuality into their modernized take on the classical play?

In this chapter, I will analyze to which extent each director's modernization of the play has also modernized Shakespeare's portrayal of women and the man-woman interactions and relationships. I shall also analyze whether Joss Whedon has taken his inspiration from Branagh's modernization or has gone in his own direction. First, I will study the expectation and duties laid onto both women and men in the play, and the tensions that arise from these duties. The chosen approach will focus on the elements that diverge between the original play, Branagh's interpretation and Whedon's adaptation. Next, I will explain Whedon's to switch the gender of a few characters from the original play. I shall then study the significance of marriage in Shakespeare's play compared to both directors' adaptations, as well as the changes brought to the two main couples' relationship. Finally, the last chapter will broach the subject of unfaithfulness, and the difference made between male and female fickleness in the play.

⁶⁷ For more information on the #MeToo movement, which spread virally in 2017, consult Chuck, Elizabeth (October 16, 2017). “#MeToo: Alyssa Milano promotes hashtag that becomes anti-harassment rallying cry”. In *NBC News*. Retrieved July 16, 2019, from www.nbcnews.com/storyline/sexual-misconduct/metoo-hashtag-becomes-anti-sexual-harassment-assault-rallying-cry-n810986.

For more information on the Alabama abortion ban, consult Lai, K. K. Rebecca (May 15, 2019). “Abortion Bans: 9 States Have Passed Bills to Limit the Procedure This Year”. In *The New York Times*. Retrieved August 24, 2019, from www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/us/abortion-laws-states.html.

⁶⁸ Analyzing both adaptations according to their specific historical context, and the important events of the feminist movement in 1993 and 2012 could be interesting, and deserve to be analyzed in more details, maybe by another student in another dissertation.

1. Women of *Much Ado About Nothing*: Expectations and Duties

From the image of the “angel in the house,”⁶⁹ to today’s independence, the status of women has changed extensively. According to Coventry Patmore’s depiction, women were once expected to be pure and virginal, graceful and submissive, devoted and pious. Women remained chaste until marriage and discovered their sexuality on the day of the wedding. Their duty was, then, to stay at home and to take care of the children, while learning skills such as “painting, singing and fine needlework.”⁷⁰

Shakespeare’s play is a resolute “critique of love and courtship in a patriarchal society,”⁷¹ and therefore questions the status of women in society. In order to do this, Shakespeare created three important female characters, each with a very different characterization and behavior toward this patriarchal society: Hero, Beatrice and Margaret. Branagh’s and Whedon’s portrayal of these characters shows an evolution in the vision of women in a modern society.

Shakespeare’s treatment of these three women characters is very different. Hero is a very proper heiress, who is submissive to the male authority and will respectfully fill the duties of marrying the man her father chooses for her. Beatrice, who does not have the same weight on her shoulder, has more liberties and therefore chooses to remain a bachelor. She is resolutely independent and speaks her mind when she wants to. Finally, Margaret is a servant who wishes to marry above stairs.⁷² “To have no man come over me! why, shall I always keep below stairs?” (5.2.8). She does not have the same status and duties than the two noble women, yet she is also free of the social constraints that Hero and Beatrice must follow, such as correctness of language. In this chapter, I will analyze in detail the three characters, as well as the treatment that both Branagh and Whedon give them.

1.1. Hero, the Passive Heiress

Hero is a noble woman, heiress of Leonato, submissive and mostly silent in the play. According to Sheldon Zitner⁷³, she is a passive woman, obedient, prudish and conventional. Her name itself is a label: she is the ‘hero’ of the story, the woman wrongfully accused and that

⁶⁹ The phrase was popularized by Coventry Patmore in his poem of the same name, first published in 1854.

⁷⁰ Khül, Sarah (2016). *The Angel in the House and Fallen Women: Assigning Women their Places in Victorian Society*. Retrieved July 24, 2019, from open.conted.ox.ac.uk/

⁷¹ Crowl, Samuel (2006), *Op. cit.* p.74.

⁷² Zitner, Sheldon P. (2008). *Op. cit.* p.42.

⁷³ *Ibid.* p.19.

eventually gets a happy ending by marrying her suitor. Her emotions, character and feelings are usually expressed by other characters. For example, during the wedding in which Hero is accused of being unfaithful, Claudio first describes her blushing – her blush is guiltiness, not modesty” (4.1.42) – then the friar says she pales – “Whiteness beats away those blushes, and in her eyes there hath appeared a fire” (4.1.161-162).

Hero is very mindful of her status and seems to follow what the men in her life tell her to do. Being Leonato’s only heir, she will have to marry to pass her father’s title and riches. Her choice of a suitor is not her own, but rather that of the men’s negotiation. At the beginning of the masquerade ball, when Leonato, Hero and Beatrice talk about marriage, her father tells her “Daughter, remember what I told you: if the prince do solicit you in that kind, you know your answer” (2.1.65). Leonato is not giving her any choice, rather obliging her to accept Don Pedro’s proposal if he ever asked for her hand. She does not answer, therefore seeming to accept this order, even though Beatrice had just told her she should refuse would she not like the husband her father chooses for her:

BEATRICE

Yes, faith; it is my cousin's duty to make curtsy and say 'Father, as it please you.' But yet for all that, cousin, let him be a handsome fellow, or else make another curtsy and say 'Father, as it please me.'

Ado, 2.1.51-55

Her “duty” is to "make curtsy" says Beatrice. And it seems she does when Don Pedro woos her in Claudio’s name. If she was previously ready to accept a betrothal with Don Pedro, she seems quick to accept marrying Claudio in his stead.⁷⁴ This quick acceptance could be explained by a “long prepared dedication to [her] social role,” hinted at in a dialogue she has with Ursula: the waiting gentlewoman asks her, “When are you married, madam?” to which Hero answers “Why, every day, tomorrow” (3.1.101).

Hero is also considered pure by the rest of the community. She is an untouchable ideal, and everyone believes in her. She is the very representation of the angel in the house, pure and perfect. When Benedick is tricked into thinking Beatrice love him, he says, “This can be no trick [...] They have the truth of this from Hero” (2.3.218-220). Her word is believed to be true, and she is believed. Her fall and the destruction of her reputation in the eyes of the entire community seem therefore very abrupt. The belief that she is no longer a virgin, asserted by

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* p.20.

two gentlemen of impeccable reputation – the Prince Don John and count Claudio – have sufficed to tarnish her honor and shame her in the eyes of her family – most notably her father. Leonato believes Don Pedro, Don John and Claudio, stating, “Would the two princes lie, and Claudio lie?” (4.1.152). The friar, Beatrice and Benedick are the only ones believing in her innocence.

The woman’s virginity played a big part in her reputation and honor. Her duty was therefore to stay a virgin, so that when she married and had children, there would be no possible doubt on who the father was. Paternity, as I shall discuss in Part 2 chapter 5, is of importance for a matter of heritage and rights. William Carroll, in the article “The Virgin Not: Language and Sexuality in Shakespeare” published in the *Shakespeare Quarterly* 46 : “The virgin body was believed to be perfectly sealed up, ‘seamless, unbroken’ ”, and that this ‘wholeness’ was linked to a ‘holiness’ and a form of purity and perfection.⁷⁵ The virgin body of the woman reminded of the Virgin Mary, the most ideal woman. Carroll adds that this belief, in addition to being a religious belief, was also based on “inaccurate medical knowledge,” i.e. the belief that the hymen completely sealed the womb, which for the population symbolized a “barrier both physical and spiritual, a sign from God marking the second Eve.”⁷⁶

However, according to Carroll the “cult of the virgin was under attack” in Reformation England – i.e. in the sixteenth century, and the question of religious and psychological value awarded to virginity was questioned.⁷⁷ It is in this context that Shakespeare writes his plays. Therefore, it seems that his plot of *Much Ado* questions the value of virginity, and the commotion and controversy that one’s lost virginity can cause. However, the end of the play sees the rumor of her promiscuousness proven to be just a rumor, effectively confirming to the people that she is still a virgin. She is proven to be the pure and perfect angel that she was previously thought to be, and therefore marries her betrothed. The happy ending is based on the fact that she is actually still a virgin. The question of honor is a key element here, for both men (see Part 2, chapter 2) and women. Hero’s honor, so easily wronged by Claudio, requires a marriage with him to make her honorable again. It could seem odd she marries the man who

⁷⁵ Carroll, William C. (1994). “The Virgin Not: Language and Sexuality in Shakespeare.” In Wells, Stanley (Editor) (1994). *Shakespeare Survey 46: Shakespeare and Sexuality*. p.110.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

left her at the altar, destroyed her reputation and practically left her for dead, but it seems duty, honor or love makes her marry Claudio anyway.

At first glance, the character of Hero could seem relatively dull. Zitner writes that the character would only require a “second-best boy actor”, and that Shakespeare effectively “subordinat[es] his main plot” by transforming the character of Beatrice into a stronger character.⁷⁸ She could seem like a stereotype of the submissive woman, only present in order to create a contrastive emphasis on her cousin. Yet both directors have decided to break this characterization, at least a little, and make her a stronger, memorable character, effectively breaking the stereotype of the weak submissive woman. Both directors show a Hero that is clearly in love with Claudio already. When Claudio is first mentioned, both Heroes⁷⁹ show a combination of smiles, glances and behavior that shows the public that the young Hero knows this “young Florentine called Claudio,” and has some affection toward him. In Whedon’s screenplay, Jillian Morgese is directed to “blush, pleased and awkward simultaneously” (JW, p.52). At the same line announcing Claudio’s arrival, Branagh writes, “There is much wicked ‘oooing’ at this from Hero, Margaret and Ursula [...] as they exchange laughs, looks and leers” (KB, p.7). The acting of both actresses, their smiles and mannerisms portray a Hero that is helplessly in love with Claudio. Later, her betrayal is that much stronger, and her tears and expression of despair seem that much poignant. Hero’s love for Claudio implies that she is not following blindly her father’s wish, but rather accepting the man she has already picked for herself. It seems that, had it been Don Pedro who has asked for her hand, she would have answered, “Father, as it please me.”

Whedon declares in his screenplay that he had wished to show a Hero different from Shakespeare’s portrayal, that he characterizes in his own words as a “pathetic little wilted flower” (JW, p.19). The usual directing of her role consists in telling the actress “Okay, be pretty – and now be sad – don’t talk too much” (JW, p.19), which bothered the director. On the contrary, Whedon considers her to be a strong character, the only character that “never believes something that’s not true” (JW, p.19). Beatrice and Benedick are both fooled into thinking the other has confessed their love for each other and Claudio and Don Pedro are tricked by Don John; Hero remains true to herself and is not fooled by her cousin when she says no man is fit

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* pp.19-20.

⁷⁹ Actresses Kate Beckinsale and Jillian Morgese, the former playing in Branagh’s adaptation, and the latter in Whedon’s adaptation.

for her. Another element he changed was that he had Hero watch her own funeral procession from afar (see Figure 11). To Whedon, “In order for her to forgive Claudio, I wanted her to see that he was showing true remorse” (JW, p.19). This added scene give even more power to Hero: she does not accept Claudio back without cause, but rather because she believes he showed remorse for his past mistakes, and that he apologized for it. This allows Hero to forgive him and marry him despite his betrayal. Whedon therefore seem to modernize the figure of the feeble woman into a stronger woman that makes her own choice.



Figures 11 and 12. Hero watches her own funeral procession.
Left: In Joss Whedon’s adaptation. Right: In Kenneth Branagh’s adaptation.

Branagh, in his adaptation, shows the same scene of Hero watching the procession from afar (see Figure 12). But rather than showing a strong, proud Hero standing tall like Whedon chose to do, he gave the fair Hero a lot of vulnerability. While she watches the procession, she seems to hold back her tears and is comforted by Antonio. According to Samuel Crowl, the film invites us to sympathize with Hero, and be “indicted in [her] victimization.”⁸⁰ In order to do this, Branagh added a scene of Hero sleeping blissfully, pure and innocent, right after the one showing Claudio watching Borachio and Margaret at Hero’s window. The director also shot the wedding scene as a show of fury against Hero. Claudio pushes her violently as she falls to the ground, and her own father pulls her by the hair and attempts to hit her while his brother holds him back. This demonstration of anger on a character the audience knows is undoubtedly innocent, gives them compassion for the young Hero. This portrayal of Hero seems to correspond to Shakespeare’s characterization of a meeker woman, more sensitive.

Both movies show a Hero in love, rather than as a noblewoman that marries a man her father has chosen for her. This shows that Hero has more power, and would have possibly said

⁸⁰ Crowl, Samuel (2006). *Op. cit.* p.85.

“father, as it please me” (2.1.54) had she not been in love with her suitor. Her forgiving Claudio is also explained and made believable by the fact that she is in love with him and saw his repentance during the funeral procession. However, neither of the movies are subversive, and neither changes the plot: she marries Claudio at the end, despite his betrayal. It seems her duties from the play, that of marrying a nobleman in order to pass his father riches to another man, still holds true. Maybe a future, even more modernized adaptation of the play, will show Hero refuse to marry him and rather have a ‘happy ending’ marrying another,⁸¹ or even staying single.

1.2. Beatrice, the Independent Noblewoman

Hero’s cousin, Beatrice, is the other main female character of the play. She’s a strong, independent woman, she’s outspoken and shamefully claims she will never get married. She claims that no man is fit for her: “He that hath a beard is more than a youth, and he that hath no beard is less than a man: and he that is more than a youth is not for me, and he that is less than a man, I am not for him” (2.1.35-38). And when she will reach heaven, “[Saint Peter] shows me where the bachelors sit, and there live we as merry as the day is long” (2.1.47-48). Unlike her cousin, Beatrice is not an heiress, and therefore does not have the same pressure to marry. Older, she is thought to have already reached the “unmarriageable age.”⁸² She is witty, and has a “merry war” (1.1.59) with Benedick, whom she apparently dated in the past:

He lent [his heart] me awhile, and I gave him use for it, a double heart for his single one. Marry, once before he won it of me with false dice. Therefore your Grace may well say I have lost it.

Ado, 2.1.275-279

She seems to have a bitter view on love and relationships, as she expresses to Hero during the masquerade ball:

For, hear me, Hero: wooing, wedding, and repenting, is as a Scotch jig, a measure, and a cinque pace: the first suit is hot and hasty, like a Scotch jig, and full as fantastical; the wedding, mannerly-modest, as a measure, full of state and ancientry; and then comes repentance and, with his bad legs, falls into the cinque pace faster and faster, till he sink into his grave.

Ado, 2.1.270-77

⁸¹ Maybe marrying a woman ? See part 3, chapter 5.

⁸² Zitner, Sheldon (2008). *Op. cit.* p.20.

Beatrice is resolutely independent. During the masquerade ball, she says she must “follow the leaders,” yet “if they lead to any ill I will leave them at the next turning” (2.1.151-154). She also teaches her cousin that she should not accept any husband that she did not like:

Yes, faith; it is my cousin's duty to make curtsy and say 'Father, as it please you.' But yet for all that, cousin, let him be a handsome fellow, or else make another curtsy and say 'Father, as it please me.'

Ado, 2.1.51-55

In Branagh's adaptation, Beatrice is played by his own wife, Emma Thompson. Her acting is lively and full of emotions, from unadulterated joy when she learns Benedick is in love with her, and therefore rides gleefully on a swing, crying and laughing (JW, p.51), to fury when she screams against Claudio “I would eat his heart in the market-place” (4.1.307). According to Cowl, “The economy with which she allows us to understand her previous romantic relationship with Benedick [...] is film acting worthy of association with Katharine Hepburn, Claudette Colbert, and Irene Dunne, the self-confident, fast-talking, sassy heroines of the great screwball comedies.”⁸³ Her love for Benedick is therefore obvious, just as Hero's love for Claudio was made evident in the adaptations, thanks to looks and facial expressions. In the first act, she sorrowfully declares to Benedick “I know you of old” (1.1.140).

Whedon's portrayal of Beatrice is less dramatic, muted, just like the rest of the actor's performances. But her facial expressions are still present and show her the same vision of the character that both Shakespeare and Branagh had: a strong, beautiful woman, that refuses to get married, yet will easily fall in Don Pedro's trap and fall in love with Benedick once more.

1.3. Margaret, the Outspoken Waiting Gentlewoman

As both Hero's and Beatrice portrayal show, the difference of social status makes a huge difference in the duties associated to each woman. If Hero seems ruled by her duties of marrying a lord and bearing children, Beatrice is free to say what she pleases and to stay unmarried. Margaret's rank gives her even more freedom of speech and movement. Her language is unabashedly blunt, and it appears she meets Borachio at night without any problem. I shall discuss Margaret language and encounter with Borachio in greater detail in Part 3 of this dissertation.

⁸³ Cowl, Samuel (2006). *Op. cit.* p.83.

The notion of rank is greatly linked to the sense of setting established in both movies. According to Crowl, Shakespeare's original play was an urban, rather than a rural play. Although it theoretically took place in Messina, the play was likely played in towns and cities. The play's themes of "fashion, social conventions, class consciousness, social hierarchy" further strengthen the link of the plot with a city dynamic between the characters.⁸⁴ Branagh broke this social hierarchy by setting the play in a deliberately pastoral setting of the Tuscany countryside. This creates a more festive and "democratic atmosphere", in which "lovers unite over class and family boundaries."⁸⁵ The workers, watchmen, servants and waiting gentlewomen such as Margaret and Ursula all dine and party alongside the higher ranked characters, e.g. Don Pedro or Leonato. And although the servants are seen working in the fields or in the garden, they are integrated into the group, eating with them and laughing alongside them. Margaret and Ursula are never seen in their roles of servants, rather keeping the ladies' company.

The costuming reflects this loose hierarchy, as there is not a strong difference of clothing between Hero and Margaret. In Crowl's words: "The women all wear similar sheer cotton camisoles under mock corsets and the men are dressed either in identical military uniforms or in white linen vests worn over white shirts with open collars. The only note of dress that distinguishes Don Pedro's social preeminence is that his leather pants are black whereas Benedick and Claudio's are blue."⁸⁶ According to the author, this approach "stresses the democratic tendencies in Shakespeare's comic art, where we see [...] the holiday spirit that tests social limits by flirting with transgressions."⁸⁷ It also justifies Claudio's confusion of Hero with Margaret, both brown haired girls dressed in the same attire.

Whedon reestablishes the social ranking and urban setting of the original play. The film takes place in a suburban villa, where the characters are seemingly rich politicians dressed in black suits. The events of the play are relocated in a more urban setting and group. The social ranks are also reestablished, as the characters wear different clothes depending on their social status. Most notably, the women's costuming is very indicative of their rank. Hero and Beatrice wear summer dresses, while Ursula and Margaret both wear stereotypical maid's costumes. Her uniform could seem odd, as belonging in the past; yet it could still be in use in some rich

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* p.79.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* p.80.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

American families, or more probably fit the trope of the American television series, in which maids wear uniforms. Whedon also reminds the audience of her status and duties by showing her cleaning the house and serving the guests during the masquerade ball. It is, however, important to note that Hero and Beatrice also participate in the daily chores of the house, accomplishing what seems to be womanly duties. The first scene shows them cooking for their future guests, and Beatrice is later seen carrying a laundry basket. This modernizes the vision of the noble lady not having to do anything in the house; yet at the same time strengthen the idea that the household chores are performed by women – as Leonato is never seen helping the house personnel.

The issue of credibility of Claudio confusing Margaret for Hero – especially since Margaret is a blonde and Hero a brunette – could not be countered by a similar attire like it was in Branagh's film. Whedon solve this problem by having Borachio make Margaret wear one of Hero's dress. This also changes the significance of the scene during which Margaret and Hero discuss which dress she should wear at the wedding:

MARGARET

Troth, I think your other rabato were better.

HERO

No, pray thee, good Meg. [...] Thou art a fool, I'll wear none but this.

MARGARET

By my troth, 's not so good; and I warrant your cousin will say so. [...] I like the new tire within excellently, if the hair were a thought browner; and your gown's a most rare fashion, i' faith. I saw the Duchess of Milan's gown that they praise so. [...] By my troth, 's but a night-gown in respect of yours: cloth o' gold, and cuts, and laced with silver, set with pearls, down sleeves, side sleeves, and skirts, round underborne with a bluish tinsel: but for a fine, quaint, graceful and excellent fashion, yours is worth ten on 't.

Ado, 3.4.6-22

This scene, as written by Shakespeare, presented Margaret as a superficial woman talking with envy about rich dresses and fashion, the likes of which she would like to wear if she could marry a rich husband.⁸⁸ Branagh chose to delete this scene from his adaptation. Whedon's adaptation brought a new subtext to the scene. Hero wishes to wear a white dress for her wedding, the same Margaret wore the previous night when she had had sex with Borachio. Her telling her mistress she should wear another dress shows her worry over having potentially

⁸⁸ Zitner, Sheldon (2008). *Op. cit.* p.43.

soiled it. The screenplay makes this subtext explicit, as the directions indicate, “Hero has pulled out the dress that Margaret wore last night. Margaret looks nervous as Hero examines it. [...] Margaret lays [the dress] aside, pulling out a veil, gloves, various distractions” (JW, p.127). The movie also allows the public to empathize with Margaret, therefore not making her seem like a villain in the story. Her affection for Borachio seems genuine, as she waves at him when he arrives to Leonato’s villa, and she later observe him wistfully as he dances with another. When she puts Hero’s dress on, she seems hesitant; and when Borachio mouths Hero’s name, she looks “lost and unhappy” (JW, p.125). Whedon has added complexity to Borachio’s and Margaret’s relationship, with the backstory of a love triangle: Borachio is in love with Hero, and Margaret in love with Borachio, two unrequited love. Whedon, who wrote the score of the movie as well, stated “We have to put [an] oboe [solo] over her on [the lovemaking scene], because she is breaking my heart” (JW, p.27). Whedon has empathized with the character, an intelligent woman who simply fell in love with the wrong men. Margaret is not present at the wedding: once again, it seems the social ranking does not allow the servants to be a part of this celebration, catering and serving rather than assisting to the wedding. In Branagh’s adaptation, Margaret was present, and when learning that Claudio saw Hero at her window, the camera shows “the stunned face of Margaret. She realizes everything in a second” (KB, p.61). In both movies, however, the woman is not held accountable. Leonato mentions Margaret’s responsibility in Don John’s scheme:

THE FRIAR
 Did I not tell you she was innocent?

LEONATO
 So are the prince and Claudio, who accused her
 Upon the error that you heard debated.
 But Margaret was in some fault for this,
 Although against her will, as it appears
 in the true course of all the question.

Ado, 3.4.6-22

However, Branagh’s adaptation shows the line pronounced while Leonato kisses Margaret, forgiving her. Whedon film Hero holding her in her arms supporting her against her father’s words, and later in the film Leonato and Margaret share a dance, which proves she has been forgiven and is back to forming a part of the household. She has even taken her uniform off and wears a dress, which symbolizes the end of her being defined by her profession.

The character of Margaret has therefore a very different rank and status in the different works. The original play presented an ambitious waiting gentlewoman, who wished to marry above her rank. She is blunt in her words, unapologetic, and expresses herself bluntly.⁸⁹ Branagh established a character that was as blunt in her words, and as willing to marry above stairs, but that was also very close to her mistresses, with a lesser social rank separating them. In Whedon's movie, Margaret seems sadder, and she keeps making dirty jokes because in Whedon's words, "[She's] the girl who does this, this is what's expected of [her]" (JW, p.27). The public empathizes with her.

In conclusion, a gender analysis of the play is intricately linked to a class analysis. Each female character has a different set of duties and expectations weighting over them, in concordance with their rank in the social ladder. Hero is the heiress and must marry a nobleman, which she seemingly does not love in the play. Beatrice is the rebellious, witty, independent character of the play and both movies, and she refuses to get married. Yet she will fall for Benedick, her ex-lover, easily. She has fewer social obligations, and therefore can pick her husband as she pleases. Margaret is a gentlewoman who would like to marry a rich husband. The film adaptations bring a different depth to their characters and seems to give them more freedom and emotions. If Beatrice's storyline and destiny doesn't seem to change a lot, her characterization does: Emma Thompson's Beatrice is a fiery woman, while Amy Acker's is more subdued and melancholic, although still strong and independent. Kenneth Branagh's Margaret may seem a little forgettable when compared to Joss Whedon's: Ashley Johnson's performance provides the audience with a complete backstory, and her acting fosters the audience's compassion. As for Hero, both films show her having the same obligation to marry than in the play, yet the match seems to fit her will, as she seems to be in love with Claudio. She is also portrayed as a strong and respectable woman by Joss Whedon; while Kenneth Branagh falls back to the stereotypical sensitive portrayal of Hero.

⁸⁹ Part 3 of this dissertation will analyze Margaret's language and bluntness in more details.

2. Men of *Much Ado About Nothing*: Benedick and Claudio's Portrayal

After having analyzed the duties that fall to the women of the play, I shall now address those that fall to the male character. Does being a man entails the same social pressure than Hero was subjected to, of finding a husband and having an heir? And have the film directors modernized or modified the implications of these duties? *Much Ado* has a strong focus on male sexual anxiety, as both Benedick and Claudio, the plays' two lovers, are worried to be cheated on. This worry pushes Benedick to refuse any relationship with women and "remain a bachelor," while Claudio publicly humiliates his betrothed after having been led to think she was being unfaithful.

Michael Hattaway, author of the article "Fleshing his will in the spoil of her Honour: Desire, Misogyny and the Perils of Chivalry", writes that the foundation of misogyny in Shakespeare's play is chivalry.⁹⁰ By chivalry, the author refers to the genre of chivalry epics, with its moral codes and set of values. And although the values of chivalry originally concerned war, they have progressively been adopted in courtship and relationships: "As part of a set of residual myths, it imports a set of rituals or metaphors into personal relationships."⁹¹ He then goes on to explain that a transposition has occurred from war achievements to a boy's growth: the growth from youth to adulthood was achieved through rites of passages, conquests and battles, as men were required to show their worth. Their "physiological process measured by sexual development [is] figured around patterns of war." Hattaway presents a strong view on the matter, as he adds that residual chivalry "affected male sexuality disastrously. [...] [It] turns the consorting of men and women to a hunt for prizes and maidenheads. Chivalry constructs women as passive, as ornaments, and imposes chastity (something that can be owned or taken by a man) as a mean of legitimating male power."⁹² This representation of the behavior of men toward women resembles the behavior of Claudio toward Hero, at least in the original play.

⁹⁰ Hattaway, Michael (1994). "Fleshing his will in the spoil of her Honour: Desire, Misogyny and the Perils of Chivalry." In Wells, Stanley (Editor) (1994). *Shakespeare Survey 46: Shakespeare and Sexuality*. P. 133

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

2.1. Claudio, the Aristocratic Suitor

Claudio is a young count who just returned from the war, having “been bestowed much honour” by Don Pedro (1.1.10). He proved his worth in combat “beyond the promise oh his age” (1.1.14). He “hath an uncle here in Messina,” and knew Hero before going to war:

CLAUDIO

Hath Leonato any son, my lord?

DON PEDRO

No child but Hero; she's his only heir.

Dost thou affect her, Claudio?

CLAUDIO

O, my lord,

When you went onward on this ended action,

I look'd upon her with a soldier's eye,

That liked, but had a rougher task in hand

Than to drive liking to the name of love:

But now I am return'd and that war thoughts

Have left their places vacant, in their rooms

Come thronging soft and delicate desires,

All prompting me how fair young Hero is,

Saying, I liked her ere I went to wars.

Ado, 1.1.283-294

Claudio says he had previously “look’d upon her with a soldier’s eye,” unable to focus on love rather than on war, the battles to come and his own survival. But, now that he has won the war, he seems to be looking for another kind of war, another conquest, in the form of Hero. Sheldon Zitner refuses to consider his declaration an actual demonstration of love, rather qualifying them of “formulaic echoes” of love that should not be confused with romantic love.⁹³ Sheldon refuses to call Claudio a young love, but rather an aristocratic suitor, who consults his elders and lets Don Pedro woo Hero in his stake. His declaration of affection quoted above seems like a “report to a superior” rather than a declaration of love.⁹⁴ It is also one of the few lines spoken in verse in the play, which renders his declaration that much more formulaic and formal, rather than an unbridled declaration of his affection for the woman he loves.

Claudio also refers to his love for Hero as a financial exchange. His concern to know whether Hero has any brother seems to spark from a concern to know whether she is the sole heir of Leonato’s fortune before confessing he likes her. Earlier, when Benedick asks her,

⁹³ Zitner, Sheldon (2008). *Op. cit.* p.2.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* p.25.

“Would you buy her, that you inquire after her?” Claudio answers, “Can the world buy such a jewel?” (1.1.176). Once more, the concept of money takes a great place in his language: Samuel Crowl qualifies his declarations as spoken in a “language of commercial values.”⁹⁵ Claudio does not seduce Hero himself, but rather lets Don Pedro do so for him:

DON PEDRO

Here, Claudio, I have wooed in thy name, and fair Hero is won. I have broke with her father, and his good will obtained. [...]

LEONATO

Count, take of me my daughter, and with her my fortunes. His grace hath made the match, and all grace say Amen to it.

BEATRICE

Speak, count, 'tis your cue.

CLAUDIO

Silence is the perfectest herald of joy. I were but little happy, if I could say how much. Lady, as you are mine, I am yours: I give away myself for you and dote upon the exchange.

Ado, 2.1.295-300

When Don Pedro tells Claudio he has “broke” with her father, he means he has spoken to him⁹⁶, yet the term “broker” already signified a “commercial agent, small trader”⁹⁷ in the seventeenth century. It is possible that the terminology used is another reference to the economical nature of the “exchange” that takes place between Leonato and Claudio. Hero becomes nothing more than a currency in the negotiation between men, and marrying her entails receiving “her fortunes.” Claudio’s answer then confirms this dynamic: he chooses to say he “dotes upon the exchange” rather than doting upon the lady herself.⁹⁸ One could wonder if the word “dotted” could refer to the dot⁹⁹, an archaic word for the dowry, i.e. “an amount of property or money brought by a bride to her husband on their marriage.”¹⁰⁰ Zitner also point out that he says, “as you are mine, I am yours,” and wonders, “why posit what sounds like a condition?”¹⁰¹

⁹⁵ Crowl, Samuel (2006). *Op. cit.* p.81.

⁹⁶ See footnote: “296-7 broke ... obtained: spoken to her father and got his permission” in Shakespeare, William (2008). *Op. cit.* p.124.

⁹⁷ Douglas Harper (2001-2019). “Broker (n.)” in the *Online Etymology dictionary*. Retrieved July 24, 2019, from www.etymonline.com/word/broker#etymonline_v_17150.

⁹⁸ Zitner, Sheldon (2008). *Op. cit.* p.24.

⁹⁹ Oxford University Press (2019). “Dot” in the “*Lexico*” *Oxford Dictionaries*. Retrieved August 10, 2019, from www.lexico.com/en/definition/dot.

¹⁰⁰ Oxford University Press (2019). “Dowry” in the “*Lexico*” *Oxford Dictionaries*. Retrieved August 10, 2019, from www.lexico.com/en/definition/dowry.

¹⁰¹ Zitner, Sheldon (2008). *Op. cit.*

In Zitner's words, "Claudio exemplifies the social style of Honour." "Propriety, plausibility, laconic speech and cliché, absence of intimate feelings, a touching concern for (male) opinion" all help paint an "unpleasant portrayal of Hero's accuser."¹⁰² He is also extremely suspicious of Hero: first when he believes Don Pedro is wooing Hero for himself, and later when he sees a man talk to a woman at Hero's window. Yet he never blames the men for their responsibilities, rather basing himself on interiorized "misogynist absurdities" and blaming Hero: "If Don Pedro has betrayed him it is not because Don Pedro is disloyal but because [...] 'beauty is a witch against whose charms faith melteth into blood' " (2.1.180-1).¹⁰³ Later, he chooses to wait for the wedding ceremony, during which they would exchange their vows, to denounce Hero's unfaithfulness in front of the whole community. Zitner says "that [the public denunciation] has as its primary aim the advertisement of Claudio's own still spotless honour only makes it worse."¹⁰⁴

Leonato's relationship with Hero, as well as his reaction to the denunciation follows the same misogynistic principles that rule Claudio. Leonato "treat[s] her as an appendage, he has little sense of Hero as a person."¹⁰⁵ He commands her to marry Don Pedro if he were to approach her, yet he quickly changes his mind and accepts a betrothal with Claudio instead. He does not seem to care for his daughter's wellbeing, rather minding his inheritance and possessions. He believes Claudio's and Don Pedro's allegation on the ground that "princes and counts are men of honour and women sexually unreliable," writes Zitner.¹⁰⁶ During the wedding, Leonato cries, "Would the two princes lie, and Claudio lie, who loved her so, that, speaking of her foulness, wash'd it with tears? Hence from her, let her die" (4.1.152-154). The men's words are stronger and more reliable than his own daughter's, and his own honor more important than her daughter's life. The last quote also alludes to the fact that Claudio cries at the wedding, which could either signifies sadness over losing Hero, or sadness over ruining his own honor, depending on which interpretation of Claudio's character you choose to follow.

Joss Whedon seems to follow Zitner's interpretation of Claudio, considering him a cold suitor, in love with the image of Hero rather than with Hero herself. In his screenplay, Whedon characterized him as a "temperamental jock" (JW, p.26). He adds, "this is a decorated soldier.

¹⁰² *Ibid.* p.26.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* p.41

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

He's a tough guy. [...] He believes everything he hears, and he gets really angry about it, he's got a temper, he's not so bright maybe *-laughs-* but what is *isn't* is a wimp" (JW, p.22). Whedon decided to play him as a strong and temperamental character, far from the "wet" and sad character he has seen been played in other adaptations – including, it seems, Branagh's. Whedon declares Fran Kranz, the actor playing Claudio, was constantly wondering, "Can I dig less deep? Can I be maybe more of a dick?" (JW, p.22) when considering the backstory of his character and the way to play it on screen. One of the possible proofs of Whedon's poor opinion of Claudio is the lines he chose to leave in the script:

Whedon maintient deux répliques de Claudio que les productions modernes coupent généralement. Tout d'abord, lorsqu'il a le projet d'épouser Hero, Claudio demande si son père Leonato a un fils ("*Has Leonato any son my lord*"), ce qui peut laisser penser qu'il est quelqu'un d'intéressé, qui se préoccupe de l'héritage. Ensuite, après la fausse mort de Hero, au moment où Leonato demande à Claudio de s'engager à épouser sa cousine, Claudio réplique : "*I'll hold on my mind, were she an Ethiop*" ("*Je tiendrai parole même si elle était éthiopienne*"). C'est une phrase qui pouvait passer à l'époque élisabéthaine, mais qui est aujourd'hui ressentie comme raciste. Mais Whedon choisit de la conserver telle quelle. On voit donc que Whedon [...] laisse à Claudio ses répliques les plus "douteuses".

Sarah Hatchuel interviewed by Philippot, Vital (n.d.).¹⁰⁷

Whedon's choice of leaving this racist line seems to be in order to "make the other guests (and us) wince and reveal Claudio as a racist and unworthy of Hero's hand."¹⁰⁸ The directions written in the screenplay reveal this to be true: "Benedick looks at him, slightly stupefied" (JW, p.178), as well as the movie itself, in which Benedick sighs and closes his eyes, and Don Pedro looks at him as if he could not believe what he had heard. Whedon says in his screenplay he intended this scene to be a gag similar to those seen in the television series *The Office*, in which the characters directly look at the camera with an exasperated look on their face when someone else has made a dumb joke or a blunder. He says "that's sort of the culmination of his idiocy" (JW, p.29), especially considering he says the line while there is an African American woman – the actress Malika Williams – in the audience, reacting to him. "I'm just taking [this line] into a modern context and poking fun at it" (JW, p.29). The choice of portraying Claudio in a negative light seems to me a way of translating his own interpretation of the character into the

¹⁰⁷ Philippot, Vidal (n.d.). *Op. cit.*

¹⁰⁸ French, Philip (June 16, 2013). "*Much Ado About Nothing*, review". Retrieved April 10, 2019, from www.theguardian.com/film/2013/jun/16/much-ado-about-nothing-review.

film, but also a way of modernizing the play. Claudio's behavior seems out of line in a modern context of revendication of both women's rights and racial equality.

Branagh's portrayal of Claudio, on the other hand, goes in the opposite direction. As a glaring example, the line in which he mentions the Ethiop is removed from his film, and instead, "Claudio nods" (KB, p.80). Branagh's interpretation of Claudio's character is much more sympathetic than Whedon's. In Samuel Crowl's words:

Largely through the impact of close-up, [...] Robert Sean Leonard's Claudio [is] firmly imprinted on our imaginations, [...] embarrassed and confused. The camera repeatedly captures him responding to both good news and bad with the flush of a cheek or a tear gathering in the eye. Leonard's Claudio is lost in a sea of inchoate emotions and uncertain conventions. When he turns to his friend, Branagh's Benedick, as immature males have done for centuries seeking confirmation of their taste in women, he is comically abused rather than stoutly supported. [...] Mocked by his friend and confused in his affections, it is little wonder that Claudio so readily accepts Don Pedro's offer to do his wooing for him.¹⁰⁹

The actor's performance shows an emotive Claudio: Branagh filmed the smile on his face when he first sees Hero, the tears in his eyes when he believes Don John has wooed for himself (see Figure 13), the rage on his face when he witnesses Borachio having sex with a woman he thinks is Hero, and coldness in his face when at the wedding he asks Hero if she knows of any "inward impediment why [they] should not be conjoined" (4.1.12-15). When Benedick tells him the lady is innocent, his eyes show doubt and discomfort, and when he learns of Hero's death, he cries (see Figure 14) and falls on his knees in front of Leonato, begging for forgiveness and physically submitting himself to his authority and punishment. The point of view of the camera accentuate the position of power Leonato possesses in the scene, as it is shot from the older man's vantage point, in a high-angle shot of the kneeling Claudio. Branagh's interpretation of the play is more tolerant toward Claudio than Zitner's analysis was, or what Whedon's adaptation showed. Even his love toward Hero seems genuine, and he explains the swiftness of his love as follows: "Those men are soldiers for whom time spent away from war is precious. Love is *seized*. The instantaneousness of Claudio's love for Hero, its intensity, is not unusual among men from whom death is an equal reality" (KB, p.XII). The public also empathize with him because the scene of love between Borachio and Margaret is shot through his vantage

¹⁰⁹ Crowl, Samuel (2006). *Op. cit.* p. 81.

point, letting the audience empathize with his mistaking Margaret for Hero, and therefore his rage and sadness.



Figure 13: Claudio believes Don John is betraying him. In Branagh's adaptation.



Figure 14: Claudio learns about Hero's death. In Branagh's adaptation.

Branagh does not, however, transform Claudio into an irreproachable lover. The wide array of emotions Claudio showed also show negative emotions. His rage turns physical when he throws Hero to the ground, and storms in the wedding aisle, kicking benches and wedding decorations. According to Crawl, the wedding scene was shot in exterior precisely to “g[i]ve ample space to Claudio's immature, petulant tantrum.”¹¹⁰ The author adds:

[Claudio] nestl[es] in next to Denzel Washington's elegant Don Pedro to reestablish what he smugly believes to be the primacy of the patriarchy. [...] He deliberately chooses to attack her at the most vulnerable moment: the public ritual where we pledge our most private commitments to one another. Don Pedro lends the support of the male social order to Claudio's rude behavior.¹¹¹

It seems both directors show through the character of Claudio a critique of the patriarchy and the male chauvinism, although they use different techniques to do so. Joss Whedon directs a version of Claudio that is very similar to the original play's characterization. Fran Franz plays an aristocratic suitor that seems to consider Hero as merchandise, and Joss Whedon's disapproval of his behavior is made evident by the negative depiction he makes of him. Whedon seems to criticize Claudio's macho conduct. On the other hand, Claudio makes us empathize with the character of Claudio, thanks to Robert Sean Leonard's emotional portrayal. Claudio seems vulnerable and lost, bound by his social rank and mocked by Benedick. Branagh presents

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.* p.85.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.* p.85.

a critique of the stereotypical vision of masculinity and nobility by presenting a weaker character. Claudio appears at loss as to what his place in this society is, and when pushed by his elders – Don Pedro and Benedick – he follows their example without realizing it.

2.2. Benedick, the Bachelor

Benedick's character sits in sharp contrast to Claudio. A lord and a soldier as well, he fought the same war. His character is resolutely misogynic: he criticizes women and declares himself a "professed tyrant to their sex" (1.1.164). When asked by Claudio what he thinks of Hero, who seems to be perfect in the eyes of the whole community, and regularly called "fair" by the other characters, he answers:

Why, i' faith, methinks she's too low for a high praise, too brown for a fair praise and too little for a great praise. only this commendation I can afford her, that were she other than she is, she were unhandsome; and being no other but as she is, I do not like her.

Ado, 1.1.166-171

When Claudio responds, "In mine eye she is the sweetest lady that ever I looked on," he says: "I can see yet without spectacles and I see no such matter. [...] But I hope you have no intent to turn husband, have you?" (1.1.184-188). This remark translates Benedick's fear of commitment and marriage. According to him, a husband is nothing more than a "man (who) will wear his cap with suspicion" (1.1.192) of hiding cuckold's horns.¹¹² Cuckoldry is the one thing that worries him, and that prevents him from getting married. In his words:

That a woman conceived me, I thank her. That she brought me up, I likewise give her most humble thanks. But that I will have a recheat winded in my forehead, or hang my bugle in an invisible baldrick, all women shall pardon me. Because I will not do them the wrong to mistrust any, I will do myself the right to trust none. And the fine is – for the which I may go the finer – I will live a bachelor.

Ado, 1.1.230-237

Benedick seems to wish to convey an image of masculinity that is very misogynic, considering all women to be unfaithful. He also sees love as a sort of submission and feminization. Celestino Deleyto, in the article "Men in Leather: Kenneth Branagh's 'Much Ado about Nothing' and Romantic Comedy" writes:

¹¹² Walthall, Bill (October 5, 2014). "Much Ado About... the 'sexual-worst' (at least at first)". Retrieved July 2, 2019, from thebillshakespeareproject.com/2014/10/much-ado-about-the-sexual-worst-at-least-at-first/.

It is precisely through him that the play articulates the patriarchal view that falling in love affects manliness and turns men into effeminate posers. [...] Among other things, his friend Claudio is blamed for changing his preferences from military to festive music, from armor to fashionable clothes, from plain discourse to rhetorical embellishment.¹¹³

His fear of vulnerability seems to be later confirmed by Claudio, whose love blinds him and makes him believe a woman he saw at Hero's window is the same Hero being unfaithful.¹¹⁴

However, Benedick's behavior changes during the play, and his character operates a true transformation, from the "tyrant" to a man in love telling Don Pedro "Get thee a wife" (5.4.122). He is manipulated by Don Pedro, "overhearing" a deliberately loud conversation between Claudio, Leonato and the Prince, during which they say they learned from Hero that Beatrice was in love with Benedick. Benedick is convinced it is the truth, and his vehement critic of Beatrice earlier is transformed into an ode to her many qualities. Compare the two following quotes:

She speaks poniards, and every word stabs: if her breath were as terrible as her terminations, there were no living near her; she would infect to the north star. I would not marry her, though she were endowed with all that Adam had left him before he transgressed: she would have made Hercules have turned spit, yea, and have cleft his club to make the fire too. Come, talk not of her. [...] All disquiet, horror and perturbation follows her. [...] I will go on the slightest errand now to the Antipodes [...] rather than hold three words' conference with this harpy. [...] I cannot endure my Lady Tongue.

Ado, 2.1.246-272

Love me! why, it must be requited. [...] They say the lady is fair; 'tis a truth, I can bear them witness; and virtuous; 'tis so, I cannot reprove it; and wise, but for loving me; by my troth, it is no addition to her wit, nor no great argument of her folly, for I will be horribly in love with her. [...] When I said I would die a bachelor, I did not think I should live till I were married. Here comes Beatrice. By this day! she's a fair lady: I do spy some marks of love in her.

Ado, 2.3.221-243

In the second quote, Benedick mentions his fear of dying young, and therefore a bachelor. It seems that, in the same way Claudio had ignored his feelings for Hero before coming back from war, Benedick fears dying in battle. It seems that hearing Beatrice was in love with him

¹¹³ Deleyto, Celestino (Spring, 1997). "Men in Leather: Kenneth Branagh's 'Much Ado about Nothing' and Romantic Comedy" in *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Spring, 1997). p.93.

¹¹⁴ Pierce, R.B. (1994). "Shakespeare and the Ten Modes of Scepticism." In Wells, Stanley (Editor) (1994). *Shakespeare Survey 46: Shakespeare and Sexuality*. P.151.

calmed his worries and let him open to an amorous relationship. He will then confess his love toward Beatrice to his friends, and declare he is a changed man – “Gallants, I am not as I have been” (3.2.15). At Hero and Claudio’s wedding, he shows his change of perception of women when rather than supporting Claudio and Don Pedro in the slander of Hero, he stays silent, and is the first to suggest that the men have been manipulated by Don John. It seems he never doubts Hero’s word that she is innocent.

Don Pedro’s manipulation of Benedick into falling in love with Beatrice does not seem to be the only manipulation he is subjected to, as Beatrice does so as well. After the failed waiting, Beatrice and Benedick confess their love for each other. Crowl writes: “As the socially conventional romance between Claudio and Hero collapses, Beatrice and Benedick’s unconventional wooing relationship rises from its ashes.”¹¹⁵ The scene is the romantic climax of the play. Happy and in love, Benedick says “Come, bid me do anything for thee,” prompting Beatrice’s answer: “Kill Claudio” (4.1.289). At first he refuses, not wanting to kill his friend. Yet, to restore Hero’s honor, he eventually accepts, and therefore goes to confront Claudio and challenge him to fight. It seems Benedick’s conception of honor has changed, and he seems to consider Hero and Beatrice as deserving his protection, and Claudio and Don Pedro deserving to be challenged and called villains. However, it seems this reversal of point of view comes only when Beatrice tells him she loves her, and one could wonder whether he would have defended Hero had she not been Beatrice’s cousin.

Although the character of Benedick is not perfect, both directors have chosen to portray him in a favorable light. After learning Beatrice loves him, Benedick says “If I do not love her, I am a Jew” (2.3.260). The line is offensive and racist, at least to a modern public, and it has therefore been changed by both directors. Branagh chose to erase the line from his screenplay, whereas Whedon changed it into “if I do not love her, I am a fool” (JW, p. 108). On the subject, Sarah Hatchuel comments:

[Whedon] modifie une réplique de Benedick qui [...] ne passe plus aujourd'hui, car teintée d'antisémitisme. [...] On voit donc que Whedon n'a pas la même politique d'adaptation scénaristique suivant les personnages. Il rend Benedick sympathique, dans l'idée qu'il est le héros du film, mais laisse au contraire à Claudio ses répliques les plus ‘douteuses’.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Crowl, Samuel (2006). *Op. cit.* p.85.

¹¹⁶ Philippot, Vidal (n.d.). *Op. cit.*

Branagh has chosen to play the role of benedick himself, having been used to playing him on stage. If the character had usually played with a lot of confidence and coolness on stage. His adaptation breaks away from this portrayal, as Branagh plays him as a “goofy” man, with “broadly comic features.”¹¹⁷ For example, during the overhearing scene, Benedick struggles to unfold a garden chair and falls down. Then, when he inadvertently lets out a cry, he camouflages it behind a fake crow’s caw. And later, when Beatrice is sent to fetch him for dinner, Benedick tries out different position to look at his best when she would arrive (see Figure 15). This scene was an obvious inspiration for Whedon, who almost reproduced this comical scene by having the actor, Alexis Denisof, improvise the “entire madman calisthenics that he does when he’s decided Beatrice loves him” (JW, p.30). The scene is unscripted, and therefore is not described in the screenplay of the film. But the scene shows Benedick stretching, doing a few pushups, then taking an unnatural pose as if he was showing up his body (see Figure 16).



Figures 15 and 16: Benedick prepares himself for Beatrice’s arrival in the garden.
Left: In Kenneth Branagh’s adaptation. Right: In Joss Whedon’s adaptation.

Both director’s portrayal, if showing him in a positive light, does not erase his flaws. If Benedick ends up being a good man, who defends Hero’s honor, he also starts as an immature misogynistic man just as he did in the original play. Both overhearing scenes show a fumbling man, childishly listening at the door. Branagh shows the men of the play playing in the water as if they were children in a swimming pool, fighting. Whedon goes further by having Claudio and Benedick be placed in a children’s room. Both men pause when entering the room, discovering the setting, complete with butterflies on the walls, frilly beddings, a dollhouse and a ladder full of plush toys against the wall. They even end up mock-fighting on one of the beds,

¹¹⁷ Crawl, Samuel (2006). *Op. cit.* p.82.

before Don John interrupts the fight and they seem to be reminded they are supposed to be grown adults. Benedick's behavior, rejecting women, could be partly due to a sort of Peter Pan syndrome, as he does not wish to grow up and face life.

Benedick is the double of Claudio, in the play as in both movies, present to create a contrast. Benedick is an older character who eventually learns of his mistakes and learns to understand women; to which point he transforms from a misogynistic child into a grown man. This constitutes a representation of the change from a patriarchal society into a more egalitarian one, in which the man is not always right and the woman should not stay silent and obedient.

2.3. Social Hierarchy among Men

The previous analyzed the link between social hierarchy and the duties laying on women. Do the same social constructs rule the men of the play? It seems they do not, or at least not as categorically as it did the women's lives. Noblemen, soldiers and servants do not seem to have a very different behavior toward life, or toward women. For example, if Margaret's life was mainly ruled by her desire to climb up the social ladder, Borachio's attempt to ruin Claudio's life is not driven by the same motivations. His only desire is seemingly to help Don John and make him feel better. This difference could come from the fact that Borachio, as a male and as a soldier, already occupies a position of power, superior to Margaret's position. It is also unlikely he will ever raise class, contrarily to Margaret who could possibly marry above her rank.

The fate of Don Pedro, who is the most powerful character of the play, seems to question the established social ladder. The prince falls into his brother's manipulation and takes part in Hero's slander. Leonato is mostly convinced of his daughter's betrayal by the fact the prince himself assures it is true and that he has witnessed it himself. The words of a man are worth more than a woman's, especially if that man rules over you. At the end of the play, Leonato and the rest of the characters are quick to forgive both Don Pedro and Claudio: "So are [innocent] the prince and Claudio, who accused her upon the error that you heard debated" (5.4.2-3). But it seems he is not completely forgiven by Shakespeare and the directors. Benedick's last quip is to tell the prince "Get thee a wife" (5.4.122). The remark seems condescending, as if Benedick was telling him that Don Pedro should stop trying to match couples together before he is himself married: as a single man he is in no position of

manipulating others to fall in love. Whedon writes that Don Pedro and his brother Don John are very alike, as they both enjoy scheming and manipulating others: “There is a sort of callousness with which he decides to manipulate the lives of the people around him and assumes that he has the right to do that” (JW, p.28). This seemingly sheds a darker light on Don Pedro than the position he was in at the beginning of the play, and he stays mostly silent after the reveal that Hero was innocent. Branagh emphasize his fall by having Denzel Washington stay stranded at the chapel while the other characters rejoice and join the farandole taking place in the garden.

3. Character Gender Switches

As stated in this chapter's introduction, Whedon's adaptation includes a few character changes. If it is common for an adaptation to include role changes such as the removal of a character – Antonio and Balthazar, for example, are both absent from Whedon's adaptation – or the addition of a few – both Whedon and Branagh's films include a great deal of extras, and Whedon chose to create the character of Balthus, Leonato's aide, to say the lines of the various messengers and Balthazar. It is unusual, however, to change the gender of a character, as it seems to characterize their personality and their role in the play. Changing it could therefore seem too extreme.

Nevertheless, Whedon chose to do so: he transformed Conrad into the womanly Conrade and cast a woman in the role of the sexton. The character of Balthazar disappears from his adaptation, his lines are pronounced by Leonato's aide, and the song 'Sigh no more' is sung by an Asian woman (see Part 2, chapter 5.1). The screenplay's dramatis personae also includes the photo of Elsa Guillet-Chapuis, credited as "the court photographer" (JW, p.47) although she does not have any line.

Shakespeare's original play already had thoroughly developed female characters, as exemplified by Beatrice's complex psychology. An adaptation based on the Bard's text alone could arguably have passed the "Bechdel test."¹¹⁸ Developed by Allison Bechdel, the test is used to analyze the depiction of women in films, and to verify whether they include sufficiently developed female characters. In order to pass the Bechdel test, a film must fill three conditions: First, it must include two named female characters. Next, those named characters must talk to each other. And lastly, they need to talk about something besides a man. Although the first two conditions are easily fulfilled by *Much Ado*, most of the women's conversations are about Benedick, Claudio, or marriage in general. However, a few scenes and lines seem to imply it passes the test, e.g. the conversation between Hero and Margaret on what the former should wear at her wedding (Ado, 3.4) – a scene cut from Branagh's adaptation and left in Whedon's.

Whedon, however, chose to add more female characters. Although it does not influence the movie's performance in the Bechdel test – Conrade has conversations with Don John and

¹¹⁸ Agarwal, A. et al. (2015). "Key female characters in film have more to talk about besides men: Automating the Bechdel test." in *Proceedings of the 2015 Conference of the North American Chapter of the Association for Computational Linguistics: Human Language Technologies*. Pp. 830-840.

Borachio but not with other women, and the sexton also talks to the watch exclusively – it does bring more depth to the depiction of the role of women. The two female characters have a special place in the play, place which empowers women and seems to fit the more modern vision of society that Whedon wished to convey. When asked why he chose to transform the character of Conrad into a woman, he answers: “Well [...] get more women in the play – nothing wrong with that. Anywhere where gender specificity is not actually an issue in the play, there is no reason not to” (JW, p.27). If Whedon considers that those roles do not have a gender specificity, it changes, however, the overall importance of women in the play, and adds several roles that do not seem to fit their traditional role in the Elizabethan period, therefore modernizing the play.

The role of Conrad is small: he is Don John’s companion and ally, yet he does not have many lines. In contrast with Borachio, who plays a major role in the scheme by suggesting the idea and then being an active agent of its realization, Conrad is more of a quiet figure who assists Don John. He is on the evil side and is later judged by the watchmen and the sexton, and imprisoned. He does not show any remorse for his crimes, and even calls Dogberry a coxcomb and an ass, which infuriates him.

It appears that all the women in *Much Ado* are innocent. Although Margaret plays a role in Borachio’s manipulation of Claudio, she is likely unaware of his scheme, and therefore not guilty. Hero and Beatrice seem to be paragons of virtue, each with a different character, yet both inherently good. Only the male characters seem to be evil – Don John and his two companions – or to be easily fooled into believing Hero is guilty – Claudio, Don Pedro and Leonato all fall into Don John’s trap and insult her. The switch of Conrad into a feminine Conrade role seems to imply that women can be evil too. Moving away from the immaculate angel in the house’s ideal, Conrade is a resolutely strong female character with ominous intents. Sarah Hatchuel characterizes her as a blond “femme fatale” (see Figure 17) and highlights her importance in a play that offers a “jeu avec le genre.”^{119 120}

Conrade is the villain’s companion, but she is also her lover, a Harley Quinn character to Don John’s Joker.¹²¹ Whedon comments: “In a play that’s all about relationships, why not play

¹¹⁹ Philippot, Vital (n.d.). *Op. cit.*

¹²⁰ NB: the French word “genre” has both the meaning of the English word “genre” and that of “gender”. Here, Hatchuel talks about gender.

¹²¹ The Joker and Harley Quinn are characters from the Batman universe, propriety of DC Comic.

Don John and Conrade as having one? It's a way to make another sly little comment on all of these romances, and it's a way to have more sex" (JW, p.27). If the reference to sex will be tackled in the Part 3 of this dissertation, Whedon mentions his choice to switch gender is a "sly little comment" on romance. Indeed, if the play centers on two love stories, the relationships between Hero and Claudio on one hand, and between Beatrice and Benedick on the other, the other characters' partners are not mentioned. Leonato's wife, although originally present in the script – "Enter Innogen his wife" (Ado, 1.1) – does not have any lines, and is therefore usually edited out of the play¹²², including in the Oxford World's classic. Antonio's wife is never mentioned, although a mysterious son is supposedly present: "How now, brother, where is my cousin, your son? Hath he provided this music?" (1.2.1-2). The secondary characters' relationship status seems to be of little importance to their role and allows a greater focus on the two main relationships. Whedon, however, changes things by giving the villain a female partner. If it seems that finding a partner, falling in love and planning a marriage only rewards the good characters such as Hero and Beatrice, Whedon breaks this configuration and seemingly rewards Don John with a girlfriend.



Figure 17. Leonato (Clark Gregg) welcomes Don John (Sean Maher) and Conrade (Riki Lindhome). In Joss Whedon's adaptation.



Figure 18. The sexton (Romy Rosemont) in Joss Whedon's adaptation.

The second character who is subjected to a gender switch is the character of the sexton. If Branagh chose the actor Edward Jewesbury to portray him as a seemingly respectable elder, Whedon cast the young Romy Rosemont (see Figure 18) in the role. This choice seems to be resolutely feminist and modern, considering it would not have been fathomable in Shakespeare's time, yet seems normal to Whedon's audience. But a female lawyer would not

¹²² Watts, Cedric (October 5, 2017). "Cedric Watts restores a lost character to Shakespeare's most often performed comedy". Retrieved July 28, 2019, from wordsworth-editions.com/blog/much-ado-about-nothing.

have been imaginable to an Elizabethan public, considering the first woman with a law degree in the United Kingdom graduated in the last decade of the nineteenth century.¹²³ Once more, Whedon chose to give more power to the female characters by giving them the right to a profession once reserved to men.

In like manner, Whedon also gave women the role of “court photographer”, as well as singer and entertainer during the masquerade ball, in addition to the original roles of servants and gentlewomen. In conclusion, if the women of *Much Ado* were either noblewomen or servants, Whedon brings a touch of modernity by bringing variety to their roles and rank: an evil partner to the story’s main villain, a sexton, a photographer and a singer.

¹²³ “Women here and there” (July 14, 1892). In *The Aspen Daily Times*. Archives retrieved July 25, 2019, from www.coloradohistoricnewspapers.org

4. Relationships and Marriage

4.1. The Relationship and Marriage of Hero and Claudio

As explained earlier, the relationship between Hero and Claudio seems somewhat unnatural. Hero seems to accept the first man her father approves of, and Claudio talks about her in economic terms that shows little care toward her. The happy ending, which shows Hero forgiving Claudio and marrying her, could seem odd to a modern public. However, according to Zitner, this formal relationship, and conception of arranged marriage would have seemed odd to an Elizabethan audience as well.¹²⁴

Both directors show a very different approach to their relationship. Branagh's objective is to bring the attention of the public back to its main plot, and to the Hero-Claudio relationship, rather than the usual focus on Beatrice and Benedick. Branagh writes in the introduction to his screenplay: "The challenge [...] is not to resist Beatrice and Benedick's dominance but, through the choices made by the camera, to bring to vivid life all the other characters. [...] There is room in a movie to give a different kind of space to the Claudio/Hero plot" (KB, p.VII). Samuel Cowl adds: "For several centuries *Much Ado* was seen essentially as a "merry war of words" between Beatrice and Benedick. The bittersweet subplot involving Hero and Claudio was downplayed in favor of the Beatrice and Benedick comedy. [The use of close-ups] allow[s] him to make the Claudio-hero relationship more vivid than it usually is in stage production."¹²⁵ In Cowl's opinion, Branagh restores a balance between the comedy of Beatrice and Benedick's relationship and the tragedy of Hero and Claudio's. In doing so, Branagh allows the public to have a memorable impression of Kate Beckinsale's Hero and Robert Sean Leonard's Claudio. Cowl claims that in other performances of the play, he could always remember who played the character of Beatrice and Benedick, especially because they were usually played by renowned actors such as Dame Judi Dench or Maggie Smith. He could also recall a few Dogberries, and in some performances the character of Don John. But according to him, the actors cast as Hero and Claudio were always forgotten, because they were seen as secondary.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Zitner, Sheldon P. (2008). *Op. cit.* pp.21-23.

¹²⁵ Cowl, Samuel (2006). *Op. cit.* p.75.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* p.80.

Whedon's view on their relationship is more negative, as he seems to cast Claudio in a dark light. Another element he adds to the play regard the believability of the plot. The director does not seem to believe Claudio could fall as easily into Don John's trap, believing first that Don Pedro has betrayed him and seduced Hero for himself, and then that Hero is disloyal and has slept with another. The entire plot seems unbelievable: Branagh writes, "the speed of the plot allows people to abandon rationality in the face of often incredible events. [...] A strong suspension of disbelief is necessary when it comes to the plot of *Much ado*" (KB, p.XII). Branagh also quotes Lewis Carroll, who shared his opinion and wrote in a letter to Ellen Terry, an actress known for her performance in the role of Beatrice: "My difficulty is this: Why in the world did not Hero (or at any rate Beatrice [...]) prove an 'alibi' in answer to the charge? [...] granting that Hero slept in some other room that night, why didn't she say so?" (KB, p.XII). If the irrationality of the play could be explained, according to Branagh, by the "speed" with which the events take place, Whedon seems to refuse this theory. He therefore adds another element to his adaptation, which in his mind makes the play more believable: alcohol. Rob Hunter paraphrases Joss Whedon's commentaries over the movie:

[Whedon] notes how much of the cast is drinking constantly throughout the film and acknowledges half the fun was deciding what exactly they should be drinking. For the villains, it was decided that they should be drinking something exotic. "Ooh, we have a sake set!"¹²⁷

Sarah Hatchuel shares his opinion, in an interview she gave to Allociné:

Whedon va tenter d'être vraisemblable, et va même réussir le pari de la vraisemblance avec le vin. [...] À cette fête tout le monde est plus ou moins éméché, tout le monde a un verre à la main, et quand on est un petit peu saoul [...] les choses peuvent prendre des proportions énormes. [...] Les gens perdent la véritable perspective sur les choses.¹²⁸

The journalist Philip French writes in his review of the film: "Why do these people behave so oddly and believe anything they're told? Because much of the time they're half-sloshed."¹²⁹ Alcohol is present throughout the play. A few conversations, like the one taking place right before the masquerade party starts between Leonato, Hero and Beatrice, are pronounced in slurred voices and with wine glasses in their hands (see Figure 19). During the masquerade

¹²⁷ Hunter, Rob (October 10, 2013). "23 Things We Learned from Joss Whedon's *Much Ado About Nothing* Commentary" in *Film School Rejects*. Retrieved August 3, 2019, from filmschoolrejects.com/23-things-we-learned-from-joss-whedons-much-ado-about-nothing-commentary-45ecf5e01278/.

¹²⁸ Allociné (n.d.). *Op.cit.*

¹²⁹ French, Philip (June 16, 2013). *Op. cit.*

party, many drinks are served, and the main characters are seldom seen without a drink in their hands. A man, who seems to try to seduce Beatrice, is only referred to in the screenplay as “Drunk Guy” (JW, p.78), as if it were his title. Hero needs to wake Leonato, who drunkenly fell asleep on the kitchen island, for him to declare he allows Claudio to marry his daughter. Even the flashback scene revealing Beatrice and Benedick’s night together shows them drinking profusely.

During the masquerade party, Claudio is seen drinking a lot, as he is “surrounded by young men urging him to down a drink, frat-boy style” i.e. by repeatedly urging him to ‘chug’ his drink. Claudio seems to be drinking in order to forget his worry over Don Pedro seducing Hero. By the end of the party, at dawn, he ends up alone, seemingly drunk, in the swimming pool with a Martini glass, a tuba and a mask (see Figure 20). The whole image is absurd, as if coming out of a surrealist painting, and increased by the apparition of Don John, Conrade and Borachio from under the water. When asked why he decided to shoot this scene, Joss Whedon jokingly says, “For the love of God, if you have a pool overlooking beautiful mountains and trees and you are doing a party scene in a modern-day Shakespeare, and you don’t have someone in a snorkel and martini, then you should be fired.”¹³⁰ More seriously, he says the scene “encapsulates so much of the spirit of the [play]: ridiculousness with just a hit [sic] of darkness. [...] There’s that feeling of decadence that’s about to go from charming to damaging in that image.” It is the moment in which Don John’s scheme starts to unfold, and his first manipulation: Don John tells Claudio that the prince woos for himself, and Claudio, drunk, believes him. It is the beginning of the end for Claudio, at least in the audience’s mind, as his character fail to distinguish the right from the wrong. And yet, in true romantic comedy fashion, the scene is humorous, with a ridiculed Claudio breathing through his tuba, Borachio with his hair completely covering his eyes, and Conrade swimming like a “Pekingese.”¹³¹

¹³⁰ Rome, Emily (June 30, 2013). “*Much Ado About Nothing*: Joss Whedon’s choices in his interpretation” in *Entertainment Weekly*. Retrieved August 3, 2019, from ew.com/article/2013/06/30/much-ado-about-nothing-joss-whedon-shakespeare-interpretations/.

¹³¹ Hunter, Rob (October 10, 2013). *Op. cit.*



Figure 19. Beatrice, Leonato and Hero share a drink before the masquerade ball.
In Joss Whedon's adaptation.



Figure 20. Don John, Conrad and Borachio approach a drunk Claudio.
In Joss Whedon's adaptation.

4.2. The Relationship of Beatrice and Benedick

The relationship between Beatrice and Benedick seems to constitute the main plot to the play, and many analyses of the play focus on the witty couple rather than on the actual main couple of Hero and Claudio. It is certain, the couple is remarkable, and contrarily to Hero's relative silence of Claudio's sadness and anger, their witty banter seems to give the audience the desire to listen to more of it.

Beatrice and Benedick knew each other before the events of the play unfold. However, it seems their relationship has ended badly, and they both seem reluctant to trust someone and fall in love again. They are then both manipulated, in a scheme instigated by Don Pedro, into falling in love with each other. However, both lovers are tricked in different ways. Benedick overhears Claudio, Don Pedro and Leonato talk in the orchard, as the men claim Beatrice is madly in love with Benedick and is almost making herself sick from it.

CLAUDIO

Then down upon her knees she falls, weeps, sobs, beats her heart, tears her hair, prays, curses; 'O sweet Benedick! God give me patience!'

LEONATO

She doth indeed; my daughter says so. And the ecstasy hath so much overborne her that my daughter is sometime afeared she will do a desperate outrage to herself.

Ado, 2.3.150-156

They also list her many qualities: "She's an excellent sweet lady; and, out of all suspicion, she is virtuous. [...] And she is exceeding wise. In everything but in loving Benedick" (2.3.162-165). Finally, Don Pedro, in an attempt to make Benedick jealous, adds: "I would she had

bestowed this dotage on me: I would have [...] made her half myself” (2.3.170-172). On the women’s side, Hero and Ursula are responsible for tricking Beatrice, and to do so they use a very different technique: they criticize Beatrice.

HERO

No, truly, Ursula, she is too disdainful. I know her spirits are as coy and wild
As haggards of the rock.

HERO

[...] Nature never framed a woman's heart of prouder stuff than that of
Beatrice. Disdain and scorn ride sparkling in her eyes, misprising what they
look on, and her wit values itself so highly that to her all matter else seems
weak. She cannot love, nor take no shape nor project of affection,
She is so self-endear'd.

Ado, 3.1.34-56

Both manipulations bear their fruits, as they both immediately believe what they have heard, and find themselves in love with each other again. This scheme can only be believable if we consider they never fell out of love during that time, but rather hid their feelings behind a shell of disdain and wit. This interpretation seems to also be accepted by both Branagh and Whedon, as they both hint at a past relationship between the two characters and seem to have directed the actor to indicate they are still in love. Kenneth Branagh writes in the introduction of his screenplay:

Emma Thompson and I both wanted to suggest former lovers who had been genuinely hurt by their first encounter, which perhaps occurred at the tender age of Claudio and Hero in the play. (For our purposes we deliberately made the younger lover around twenty years of age and Beatrice and Benedick a significant ten years or so older.) In our version, both characters are at that point where they might well develop into confirmed spinster and bachelor. Both are staunchly anti-marriage and very resistant to the way in which that institution mutes the personalities of such as themselves. But the foundation of the performance was the idea of two people who had broken each other’s hearts and who had developed personalities that attempted to prevent the same thing from happening again. Their wit, irony, and apparent lack of feeling cover only superficially two of the most romantic, generous, and emotional of Shakespeare’s character.

KB p.XI

Branagh said in the introduction to his screenplay that he thought too much attention was given to the two main characters, Benedick and Beatrice. Instead, he chose to work with 120 extras, and to focus on the group dynamic at the palace rather than exclusively on the main characters:

The challenge [...] is not to resist Beatrice and Benedick's dominance but, through the choices made by the camera, to bring to vivid life all the other characters. [...] There is room in a movie to give a different kind of space to the Claudio/Hero plot.

KB p.VII

Whedon, on the contrary, brings the focus back on Beatrice and Benedick. He has inserted the movie between two scenes focused exclusively on Beatrice and Benedick, effectively transforming them into the main characters of the stories, or at least the characters the audience wants to know more about. The first scene is the scene showing Beatrice and Benedick's past relationship (see Figure 21). The last one shows the two lovers, in focus in the foreground, during the final party of the play (see Figure 22). They seem isolated, as if they did not realize a party was going on around them but were rather alone. Sarah Hatchuel says:

Joss Whedon annonce ainsi que le film va se concentrer sur l'histoire de Beatrice et Benedick. Il termine d'ailleurs le film en isolant le couple Beatrice-Benedick au milieu des autres danseurs, alors que chez Branagh, dont la version mettait plutôt en avant l'environnement global et l'énergie collective de la troupe, la caméra s'élevait pour un plan d'ensemble.¹³²



Figure 21. Beatrice feigns to be asleep while Benedick leaves her bedroom. In Joss Whedon's adaptation.



Figure 22. Benedick and Beatrice gaze into each other's eyes, while the others party. In Joss Whedon's adaptation.

Both couples are very different and constitutes a point of comparison for the other. Yet, at the end of the play, they both end up in the same situation, marrying their lover. In the case of Hero, her marrying Claudio constitutes a reestablishment of the order, as well as her honor. She seems to me as a battered woman who comes back to her husband even though he has hurt her. This seems like a bittersweet end. In Beatrice and Benedick's case, Beatrice's storyline

¹³² Philippot, Vidal (n.d.). *Op. cit.*

resembles *The Taming of the Shrew*. Coppélia Kahn, in an article on marriage, writes about the character of Katherina, the ‘shrew’:

In the first three acts, before the taming begins in earnest, she is portrayed in terms of her resistance to male efforts to dispose of her in marriage. Our strongest impression of her is that she fights back. But though she declares she’ll see Petruchio hanged before she marries him, marry him she does, and though she flatly refuses to obey his first command to her as a wife, she exists mutely with him at the end of Act III.¹³³

In like manner, it seems Beatrice, after having fought for her independence, is tamed into marrying Benedick, and the witty woman is silenced in the process. Beatrice’s last line of the play is followed by Benedick’s “Peace! I will stop your mouth” (5.4.97). He kisses her, seemingly a kiss confirming their union, and stopping her words. She will not talk again, as the last lines are reserved to the males of the play: Benedick, Don Pedro, Claudio and Leonato discuss Don Pedro’s love life. And it seems even the Messenger has a last right to speak, while Beatrice smiles alongside her lover and says nothing.

Shakespeare’s plays are a “critique of love and courtship in a patriarchal society,”¹³⁴ yet the happy ending these women get could seem strikingly patriarchal: it seems both Beatrice and Hero need to marry to be happy. This ending could originate from the fact that *Much Ado* is a comedy, not a tragedy, and therefore the end of the play must entail a traditional happy ending in which they ‘lived happily ever after,’ and the order of things is reestablished. Shakespeare seems to break the conventions and the order of the patriarchy in this play and in others, or at least wishes to question them. Yet he is also a captive of the genre of theater and its norms, locking himself and his characters into a confining place. Branagh and Whedon, by choosing to adapt the end of the play as it is, seem to follow in his footsteps.

¹³³ Kahn, Coppélia (1975). “The *Taming of the Shrew*: Shakespeare’s Mirror of Marriage” in *Modern Language Studies* Vol. 5, No. 1 (Spring, 1975). Pp. 88-102.

¹³⁴ Crowl, Samuel (2006). *Op. cit.* p.74.

5. Unfaithfulness, Cuckoldry and Illegitimacy

Most events occurring in *Much Ado* spark from a worry over being made a cuckold. Benedick stays a bachelor because he doesn't wish to become one, and Claudio believes Hero has been unfaithful. At the source of it all is Don John, a resentful man who wishes to avenge himself from his brother, and whose hatred seems to originate from his status as the bastard. The bastardy itself is a consequence of his father being unfaithful. How has this conception of unfaithfulness been adapted by Joss Whedon and Kenneth Branagh? In this chapter, I shall analyze whether the depiction of infidelity by both directors has evolved, and whether it is linked with the modernization of the theme of marriage and sexuality.

5.1. 'Sigh no more' and the Unfaithfulness of Men

The modifications made by Branagh to the original text are apparent in the first moments of the film. Branagh chose to use the song "*Sigh no more*", sung by Balthasar in the orchard in the second act, as the first lines of his film. The song is read aloud by Beatrice, in a "wise, compassionate, knowing" voice: "the reading seems personal, read to herself. As if we were merely overhearing it" (KB, p.5). The song states:

Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more.
Men were deceivers ever,
One foot in sea, and one on shore,
To one thing constant never.
Then sigh not so, but let them go,
And be you blithe and bonny,
Converting all your sounds of woe
Into hey nonny, nonny.

Sing no more ditties, sing no more
Of dumps so dull and heavy.
The fraud of men was ever so
Since summer first was leafy.
Then sigh not so, but let them go,
And be you blithe and bonny,
Converting all your sounds of woe
Into hey, nonny, nonny.

Ado 2.3.63-78

Not only does the song introduces the play, but it also appears a second time at its original place in the play, sung by Balthazar – played by Patrick Doyle, the movie's composer – during Benedick's gulling scene (KB, p.41), as well as in the final scene, in which the whole cast

dances together on a “final reprise of ‘Sigh no more’” (KB, p.83). According to Samuel Crowl, Branagh “uses it to *verbally frame* the film, in addition to appearing at its center.”¹³⁵ This verbal framing corresponds to a visual framing of the film: in the first image of the film, we see a watercolor painting of Leonato’s villa, before panning out to see the Villa itself in the background, and in the foreground a group of people listening to Beatrice reading the song aloud. Branagh seems to show us his desire of pulling the classic Shakespearian play from its shelf and turning its motionlessness into the lively movie he chose to direct.

The emphasis Branagh chose to put on the song demonstrates the significance of said song in the play’s main themes. The song is indeed a clear reference to the fickle nature of men, being “deceivers.” It refers to men’s unfaithfulness, “to one woman constant never.” The song also mentions that “the fraud of men” has always been that way, “since summer first was leafy.” The unfaithfulness of men was therefore considered normal, something to be expected by women. And as such, women should “sigh not so”: they should not cry about it, but rather, “be blithe and bonny.”

Two interpretations of this song exist. The first considers its lines as critiques of men, their unfaithfulness, and their “idle nature” – which wounds women. The second is saying those lines justify men’s behavior by considering it is their nature, and that woman should accept it, not rebel against it.¹³⁶ In Shakespeare’s play, the song is sung by Balthazar to a male audience. It therefore seems to support the second interpretation, of a group of men telling themselves it is in their nature to play women. This explains why Borachio seems to shamelessly manipulate Margaret. It also corresponds to Benedick’s “fiddle nature,” considering he “lent [Beatrice his heart] awhile” (2.1.275), then took it back, and changes companion regularly, as witnessed by Beatrice that he “hath every month a new sworn brother” (1.1.68-69).

Branagh and Whedon, however, chose to allow women to own this narrative by changing the male voice of Balthazar into a female voice. In Branagh’s adaptation, Beatrice reads the song aloud to a mixed audience, and may be aiming her words to the women of the group exclusively. Her reading of the song gives her more power over the words, makes her reclaim the man’s song, and seems to lean toward the first interpretation of the song. Her words seem to serve as a “warming for the audience (as well as for the women in the play) to be skeptical

¹³⁵ *Ibid.* p.75.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

of the film's driving romantic energy."¹³⁷ In Whedon's adaptation, the character of Balthazar was cut, and the song removed from its original place in Benedick's gulling scene. Instead, the song appears as a score in the masquerade ball scene (JW, pp.73-81). The song's performer briefly appears as an unnamed asian woman, singing by the piano (JW, p.75).

The proof of the unfaithfulness of men is visible in the play with the character of "Don John the bastard" as Shakespeare names him. A bastard, also called an illegitimate child, is a person that is "born of parents not married to each other."¹³⁸ Don John's bastardy seems to be "discussed simply in the matter-of-fact terms of his limited rights, obligations and social standing,"¹³⁹ as well as a type of characterization. It seems it is his resentment over his status, which is lower than his brother, that leads him to becoming a villain. It is explained at the beginning of the play that the two brothers used to be in conflict but have recently made peace (Ado, 1.1). Could the war that Don Pedro, Claudio and Benedick have fought be a conflict against Don John? It is likely that Don Pedro and Don Jon shared the same noble father, and thus may have been in competition for the throne. Shakespeare's public could even draw parallels with the story of Don John of Austria, the bastard son of Charles V, and his legitimate half-brother King Philip II of Spain.¹⁴⁰

Don John and Conrad discuss Don John's stance toward his brother in the first act of the play:

CONRAD

You have of late stood out against your brother, and he hath ta'en you newly into his grace. [...]

DON JOHN

I had rather be a canker in a hedge than a rose in his grace, and it better fits my blood to be disdained of all than to fashion a carriage to rob love from any: in this, though I cannot be said to be a flattering honest man, it must not be denied but I am a plain-dealing villain. I am trusted with a muzzle and enfranchised with a clog; therefore I have decreed not to sing in my cage. If I had my mouth, I would bite; if I had my liberty, I would do my liking: in the meantime let me be that I am and seek not to alter me.

Ado, 1.3.19-35

¹³⁷ *Ibid.* p.76.

¹³⁸ Cambridge University Press (2019). "Bastard" and "Illegitimate" in the Cambridge Dictionary. Retrieved July 25, 2019, from dictionary.cambridge.org.

¹³⁹ Colman, E.A.M. (1974). *The dramatic use of Bawdy in Shakespeare*. London: Longman. p.4.

¹⁴⁰ British Library (n.d.). "Don John of Austria, bastard son of Charles V". Retrieved June 28, 2019, from www.bl.uk/collection-items/don-john-of-austria-bastard-son-of-charles-v.

These lines show Don John's resentment toward his brother for keeping him near him like a dog on a leash and explains why he wishes to discredit Don Pedro by plotting to ruin the marriage of his right-hand Claudio.

Branagh and Whedon's portrayals of Don John seem to correspond to Shakespeare's villain, yet they differ greatly from one film to another. Keanu Reeves' portrayal of Don John is one of a sullen, dramatic character. His performance has been harshly criticized by the press¹⁴¹ for being stone-faced and shallow. Sean Maher plays the role of Don John as a charismatic and suave villain.

Furthermore, Branagh chose to cast Denzel Washington, an African American, in the role of Don Pedro, brother of the white Keanu Reeves. This causes the audience to visualize their relationship: they obviously do not share the same mother. The bastard is therefore visually different from his legitimate brother. However, reversing the casting, and having the villain Don John been played by an African American could have been considered racist. Another reason for this casting is to draw a parallel between Don Pedro and the character of Othello, the Moor who is fooled into thinking his wife has been unfaithful. Considering Don Pedro is a Spanish prince from Aragon, and that the Moors had occupied this territory, it is likely there were mixed children at the time of the play.¹⁴²

5.2. Cuckoldry and the Unfaithfulness of Women

If "Sigh no more" refers to the unfaithfulness of men, which seems to be an acceptable behavior, the unfaithfulness of women, however, seems to be prohibited, and is severely punished. The alleged promiscuousness of Hero, after all, is what starts the plot of the play, and "much" is done about "nothing". Claudio does not "sigh not so but let them go," electing instead to publicly humiliate Hero and cause a scandal.

Cuckoldry seems to be one of the worst attacks on a man's honor. Benedick, scared of wearing the horns of a bull, chooses to stay a bachelor rather than risking it. Claudio is betrayed by it, and at the flimsiest proof of Hero's betrayal, goes from idolizing her to calling her names. Pedro falls into the same trap, and claims he is "dishonoured [...] to [have linked his] dear

¹⁴¹ Zacharek, Stephanie (June 21, 2019). "Why It Took Keanu Reeves 30 Years to Become an Overnight Sensation" in the *Time* magazine. New York, Time Inc.

¹⁴² [Getlostindisneyland] (February 28, 2011). "The Socially Sensitive Shakespeare" in *Transmedial Shakespeare*. Retrieved June 30, 2019, from transmedialshakespeare.wordpress.com/2011/02/28/the-socially-sensitive-shakespeare/.

friend to a common stale” (4.1.65). Only a few words from Don John suffice to sow the seeds of doubt in the two noblemen’s minds:

DON PEDRO
Why, what’s the matter?

DON JOHN
I came hither to tell you; and, circumstances shortened, for she has been too long a-talking of - the lady is disloyal.

CLAUDIO
Who, Hero?

DON JOHN
Even she: Leonato’s Hero, your Hero, every man’s Hero.

CLAUDIO
Disloyal? [...] May this be so? [...] If I see anything tonight why I should not marry her, tomorrow, in the congregation where I should wed, there will I shame her.

Ado, 3.2.95-102

However, the weight of Hero’s alleged crime seems to have evolved from the seventeenth century to the twenty-first, and the film adaptations therefore show a different interpretation of the offense. According to E.A.M. Colman in his book *The Dramatic Use of Bawdy in Shakespeare*¹⁴³, the conception of sexual indecency has changed throughout the years, and if there was a preference for the Elizabethan public to make allusion to cuckoldry; today the topic has lost its popularity. Colman states:

We do [...] still have adultery, and this makes it interesting that cuckoldry has lost much of the mirth-provoking force which it clearly possessed four centuries ago. Its decline may perhaps be attributable to the loosening of patriarchal ties in a society that has, in general, grown less concerned than it used to be with questions of inheritance.¹⁴⁴

Branagh’s adaptation, being an historical rendition of the play, seems to follow Shakespeare’s depiction of Hero’s loss of virginity as being a despicable crime. If he depicts a few scenes of promiscuousness and a general atmosphere of sexual exaltation (see Part 2, chapter 3), the noblewomen Beatrice and Hero seem to preserve themselves for marriage. Whedon, however, chose to show a more modern view on sexuality, in which the ladies are not

¹⁴³ Colman, E.A.M. (1974). *Op. cit.* p.12

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p.5.

necessarily virgins. This is confirmed in the first scene of the films, a silent scene in which Beatrice and Benedick's past relationship is filmed in the form of what seems to be a 'one-night stand' i.e. "a sexual relationship that lasts for only one night."¹⁴⁵ If Beatrice lies on the bed, feigning to be asleep, Benedick gets dressed and leaves. The sexual encounter is explicit and seems to be accepted by Beatrice who later mentions this past relationship to Don Pedro. If Beatrice does not have the obligation of staying a virgin, then we can safely assume that Hero does not either. Why, then, does Claudio have such a harsh reaction to Hero's supposed betrayal? Whedon addresses this issue in his screenplay, stating;

There are a lot of complaints [...] about the conflict hinging on whether or not Hero is a virgin, and that she has given up her maidenhead. And to me, the story here [...] isn't that Claudio thinks she's not a virgin, it's that he thinks she's cheating on him. It's jealousy, which is universal and very modern. It's not about propriety. When Claudio turns on her at the wedding, it's because he thinks she's making a fool of him, he thinks she's sleeping with somebody else the night before her wedding. That's *never* okay

JW, p.18

¹⁴⁵ Cambridge University Press (2019). "One-night stand" in the Cambridge Dictionary. Retrieved July 25, 2019, from dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/one-night-stand.

PART 3:
THE ADAPTATION OF SEXUALITY

According to Kenneth Branagh, sexuality is a central element of *Much Ado*. For him, the play talks about love and “the power of lust, our obsession with sex and the flesh” (KB p.XVI). The main plot, i.e. Don John’s manipulation of Claudio, is indeed driven by the woman’s unfaithfulness, and the question whether Hero is a virgin. The play is a romantic comedy centered around a coitus and as such, includes many sexual allusions made by the characters. Eric Partridge, in his book *Shakespeare’s Bawdy*, qualifies *Much Ado* as “the sexual-worst of the Comedies, although *The Merry Wives of Windsor* runs it close.”¹⁴⁶

The following pages delve into the play’s sexual aspects and how they were adapted by Kenneth Branagh and Joss Whedon. Sexuality pervades *Much Ado*, as its title itself is a sexual pun that will be broken down in the upcoming chapter. I shall then examine the very different approaches to the theme of sexuality by the Bard and the two directors. Shakespeare put many sexual allusions in the mouth of his characters, which Branagh and Whedon therefore used in their adaptations by maintaining the original lines of the play. But both directors also chose to visually add elements of sexuality, like naked bodies and sexual intercourse. The addition of explicit elements of sexuality by Branagh and Whedon are a testament of the modernization of the play by both directors, as well as the evolution of the representation of sexuality since Shakespeare’s time. According to Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*¹⁴⁷, sexuality is a “historical construct”, as it evolves with time. He adds that the history of sexuality was shaped by two ruptures: a first repression of sexuality during the time of great prohibitions during the seventeenth century, during which occurred a “promotion of adult marital sexuality, the imperatives of decency, the obligatory concealment of the body,”¹⁴⁸ then a second rupture, less abrupt, in the twentieth century, in which “mechanisms of repression were seen as beginning to loosen their grip; one passed from insistent sexual taboos to a relative tolerance with regard to prenuptial or extramarital relations.” And as sexuality evolves over time, so does Shakespeare’s work, through the adaptations. Both film directors are adapting Shakespeare’s public to a new audience, with new norms and expectations concerning sexuality on screen. Eventually, this dissertation will sketch a more detailed analysis of their strikingly different approach to sexuality.

¹⁴⁶ Partridge, Eric (2008). *Shakespeare’s Bawdy*. New York: Routledge. p.57.

¹⁴⁷ Foucault, Michel (1976). *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1. Translated by Robert Hurley (1990). England: Penguin. Pp. 105-6 and p.115. Quoted by Thompson, Ann (1993). *Op. cit.* p.1.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

1. *Much Ado About Nothing*: A Sexual Pun

Almost every book and article mentioning sexuality in the play *Much Ado* chooses to first mention the title, which is a sexual pun in itself. This dissertation will be no different. Shakespeare is notorious for layering different meanings onto one word, thereby creating puns.

Shakespeare's love for plays on words and puns is personified by the character of Dogberry. The comedic effect brought by Dogberry comes from his verbal malapropisms. Shakespeare, and therefore the audience, mocks him for not being able to find the right terms to express himself. This stresses the importance of the choice of word in the play, but also implies that words can have several meanings at once. It becomes the role of the audience to decipher Dogberry's language and try to guess what he means, but it also leads to them trying to decipher the other characters' lines, hearing more double entendres in their words. Dogberry's malapropisms, for example, include the sentence "Our watch, sir, have indeed comprehended two auspicious persons" (3.5.43-44) with 'comprehended' and 'auspicious' for 'apprehended' and 'suspicious' respectively. Yet the Oxford World's Classics edition of the play says that Dogberry's words may have been chosen well: "but Dogberry did *understand* what Borachio and Conrad were up to, and they *were* auspicious for the outcome of the play" (Ado, p.160). The choice of words is therefore essential to the understanding of the play.

In the title '*Much Ado About Nothing*', the first meaning of the words is that much – talk, conflict, drama – was made about nothing – a rumor, something that never occurred, an illusion. Yet "Nothing" can be interpreted as a sexual pun.¹⁴⁹ Sarah Hatchuel states: "À l'époque élisabéthaine le mot "*nothing*" pouvait aussi désigner le sexe féminin, que l'on définissait en creux, par opposition au sexe masculin (*no-thing*: qui est dénué de quelque chose)." ¹⁵⁰ "Thing" is therefore the penis, and "nothing" is the vagina. This implies that the title means that much was done about a woman, about a vagina.

¹⁴⁹ The theory is shared by several authors, e.g. Eric Partridge, E.A.M Colman, Sheldon Zitner, as well as Joss Whedon and Kenneth Branagh themselves. Other nonsexual interpretations of the word exist. Hatchuel, for example, mentions the following interpretation: "Mais *nothing* pouvait aussi se prononcer, à l'époque élisabéthaine, comme *noting*, remarquer : cela donnerait donc ici 'beaucoup de bruit pour la vision, l'observation' ou pour la 'surveillance'." This is a typical example of Shakespeare's affection for layered pun, where one interpretation does not necessarily exclude the other.

¹⁵⁰ Philippot, Vital (n.d.). *Op. cit.*

This pun is confirmed by the other uses of “nothing” in Shakespearian plays. In *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, Juliet’s nurse tells Romeo, “Why should you fall into so deep an O?” (Rom, 3.3.91). An o, or “an-O-thing”, is another way to refer to the female genitals.¹⁵¹ Another example comes from *Hamlet*, in which Hamlet says to Ophelia:

HAMLET
That’s a fair thought to lie between maid’s legs.

OPHELIA
What is, my lord?

HAMLET
Nothing.

Ham, 3.2.112

Naught, a synonym of nothing, was also used by Shakespeare to express a sexual pun. In *Hamlet*, Ophelia responds to a sexual comment from the titular character by telling him “You are naught” (Ham, 3.2.135), in the sense naughty, obscene. *Much Ado About Nothing* could therefore have been called *Much Ado About Naught*, in a play in which much was done about an alleged sexual intercourse.

¹⁵¹ Carroll, William C. (1994). *Op. cit.* P.110.

2. Sexual Wit in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*

This intertwining of plays on words, as well as the role of the audience to decipher the meaning of the Bard's words constitutes a great deal of the power of his plays, as well as their longevity. It adds a playful element to his plays, which makes them even more enjoyable. References to sexuality bring a humorous tone to the play and make Shakespeare's words amusing in addition to its being entertaining. This may be the reason why Branagh and Whedon have chosen to keep the original script of the play instead of paraphrasing it, as a way to keep the magic and humor of the Bard's words.

In his book *The Dramatic Use of Bawdy in Shakespeare*, E.A.M. Colman starts with a chapter entitled "What is indecency", in which he compares the Elizabethan conception of indecency with that of the twentieth century.¹⁵² What the people have considered indecent has changed throughout the years, and therefore the nature and presence of indecency in literature have evolved as well. Colman notes that if non-sexual impropriety – such as references to flatulence and stools – has not lost its power on the audience between the seventeenth century and today, sexual impropriety has. Sexual references in Shakespeare's play show a "preference for jokes about cuckoldry, castration and itinerant friars as opposed to, say, birth control, homosexuality or seductive typists."¹⁵³ As mentioned in the third part of this work, cuckoldry has lost its "mirth provoking force"¹⁵⁴, due to the weakening of the patriarchal structure in our societies. Castration seems to be an outdated concept, and itinerant friars are non-existent. On the other hand, birth control and typists did not exist in the seventeenth century, least of all the current trope of the 'sexy secretary'.

Some themes, however, have not changed much in four centuries. According to Colman, lewd references to sexual promiscuity, to adultery and prostitution, to the male and female reproductive organs, or to sexy articles of clothing – such as tight-laced bodices – are still understood by a modern audience. The public's role to understand the references and double entendres put into the characters' lines by the playwright is therefore still accessible to today's audience.

¹⁵² Colman, E.A.M. (1974). *Op. cit. Ibid.* p 1-22.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.* p.5.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Much Ado, considering its subject matter of the “battle of the sexes,”¹⁵⁵ contains numerous sexual references and innuendoes. Some are explicit and crude, while others are more discreet. The bluntness of the references usually depends on the character who pronounces them and their social rank. For example, Don Pedro’s and Benedick’s references to sexuality are different. Don Pedro, a prince and therefore higher in the hierarchy, needs to be more proper and less blunt. Therefore, in the first scene of the play, Benedick rudely mentions a whorehouse: in his speech to Don Pedro saying he “will die a Bachelor” (1.1.237), he says if he were to “look pale with love” (1.1.238), then “pick out [his] eyes with a ballad-maker’s pen and hang [him] up at the door of a brothel house for the sign of blind Cupid” (1.1.242-243). To which Don Pedro answers with an obscure, yet lewd remark: “Nay, if Cupid have not spent all his quiver in Venice, thou wilt quake for this shortly. [...] You will temporize with the hours” (1.1.257-260). At first glance, this sentence seems to be romantic and innocent – Venice being the city in which the romantic Romeo and Juliet fell in love, Benedick will likely be swayed and fall in love, with time. However, Don Pedro’s answer is more salacious than it seems: Venice was famous for its sexual freedom and its prostitutes, and the word ‘hour’ was a homophone of ‘whore’ during the Elizabethan era.¹⁵⁶ Don Pedro tells Benedick he will give up his want to be a bachelor, if only to have sex and get together with prostitutes.

The women of the play also follow this rule, and their language depends on their social rank. E.A.M. Colman says:

Shakespeare’s females vary widely on their attitude to verbal impropriety, but the variations are based on a recognizable Elizabethan norm. [...] In *Much Ado*, the stock convention is simultaneously acknowledged and disrupted. It rules Hero, but not her lively cousin Beatrice of the blunter Margaret.¹⁵⁷

Hero, in the play, respects the Elizabethan norm and stays proper by avoiding any sexual pun. Her cousin Beatrice does not respect the same norms, and therefore relies heavily upon wit and pun in her language. As for Margaret, whose social place does not require her to be proper, she is more blunt in her words and makes frequent explicit sexual references. Wit and sexual allusions are a way for the women of the play to regain their independence in a patriarchal

¹⁵⁵ Crawl, Samuel (2006). *Op. cit.* p.76.

¹⁵⁶ Walthall, Bill (October 5, 2014). *Op. cit.*

¹⁵⁷ Colman, E.A.M. (1974). *Op. cit.* pp.19-20.

society: George Orwell qualifies the ‘feminine bawdy’ shown by both Beatrice and Margaret as a “harmless rebellion against virtue.”¹⁵⁸ As an example of the three women’s relation to sexuality, Colman decomposes the discussion the three women have just before Hero’s wedding is to take place, which is rich in lewd comments on both Beatrice and Hero’s relationships. First Margaret makes a lewd remark to Hero about her wedding night:

HERO
God give me joy to wear it, for my heart is exceeding heavy.
MARGARET
’Twill be heavier soon by the weight of a man.
HERO
Fie upon thee, art not ashamed?
MARGARET
Of what, lady? of speaking honourably?

Ado, 3.4.23-28

Margaret’s reference that Hero’s heart will soon be heavier refers to the fact that Claudio will soon be on top of her, as in during a sexual intercourse. After Hero understands the innuendo and asks her if she is not ashamed, Margaret replies that her answer was honorable, which constitutes another pun – “‘honor’ [being] a homophone for ‘on her.’”¹⁵⁹ Later in the discussion, when Beatrice joins them, they have the following exchange:

BEATRICE
I am stuffed, cousin; I cannot smell.
MARGARET
A maid, and stuffed! There’s goodly catching of cold.
BEATRICE
O, God help me, God help me. [...] By my troth, I am sick.
MARGARET
Get you some of this distilled *Carduus Benedictus*, and lay it to your heart.
It is the only thing for a qualm.
HERO
There thou prick’st her with a thistle.

Ado, 3.4.61-73

¹⁵⁸ Orwell, George (1942). “The Art of Donald McGill” in *Collected Essays*. London. P.178. Quoted in Hattaway, Michael (1994). “Fleshing his will in the spoil of her Honour: Desire, Misogyny and the Perils of Chivalry” in Wells, Stanley (Editor) (1994). *Shakespeare Survey 46: Shakespeare and Sexuality*. Pp.121-136.

¹⁵⁹ Walthall, Bill (October 8, 2014). “Much Ado About... Gulling, Goading, Girl-Talk (and then Claudio sucks the fun out of sex-talk)”. Retrieved July 2nd, 2019, from thebillshakespeareproject.com/2014/10/much-ado-about-gulling-goading-girl-talk-and-then-claudio-sucks-the-fun-out-of-sex-talk/.

The word ‘stuffed’ uttered by Margaret can also mean ‘fucked’¹⁶⁰, or ‘pregnant’¹⁶¹, which explains Beatrice’s scandalized response that she is neither, but is sick and has therefore a stuffed nose. Margaret then gives her a possible treatment for her illness, “*Carduus benedictus*”, or holy thistle, which Beatrice should lay to her heart. The name of the plant is a reference to Benedick, the man she should “lay to [her] heart,” or simply lay – have sex with.¹⁶² Even the reference to holy thistle is a sexual reference, according to Eric Partridge, for whom holy refers to a hole, probably the woman’s vagina, and thistle to a prick, slang for a man’s penis.¹⁶³ Margaret is the most explicit in her language, yet Hero also takes part in the conversation when she adds that Margaret has Benedick prick Beatrice with a thistle. Zitner, in the Oxford World’s Classic edition of the play, writes that the term “prick’st” could also refer to fencing, “a verbal form of which this exchange is.” But more importantly, he states: “The erotic allusion seems out of character for Hero, but possible.”¹⁶⁴ Hero, as we mentioned earlier, is much more proper than Beatrice, or Margaret, and this line is the only sexual reference she utters, hence Zitner’s mention that it seems “out of character.” In this context, however, of a light discussion between women before Hero’s wedding night, it is likely she decided to leave her properness aside for an instant. She was, after all, likely to lose her virginity that night, and her mind might have been occupied with intimate or sexual thoughts.

Hero is a prude, Margaret unabashed, but Beatrice is neither, and although she uses her fair share of sexual puns and allusions, she tries to stay appropriate. For example, during the masquerade party, Beatrice talks to a masked Benedick. She seems not to recognize him, yet it is possible she has, and therefore may be manipulating him. When Benedick claims he has never met the man she is talking about, she describes him as follows:

BEATRICE

Why, he is the prince's jester: a very dull fool. Only his gift is in devising impossible slanders. None but libertines delight in him, and the commendation is not in his wit but in his villainy, for he both pleases men and angers them, and then they laugh at him and beat him. I am sure he is in the fleet. I would he had boarded me.

Ado, 2.1.137-143

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ Shakespeare, William (2008). *Op. cit.* p.157.

¹⁶² Partridge, Eric (2008). *Op. cit.* p.170-171.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.* p.156.

¹⁶⁴ Shakespeare, William (2008). *Op. cit.* p.158.

If the term “boarded” refers to the fact that Beatrice wishes Benedick had talked to her, Partridge interprets it in a lewder sense of the word. According to his glossary, it also means “To accost as a preliminary to wooing or to lovemaking; (Of a man) to coït with.”¹⁶⁵ Knowing this double entendre, it is possible that Beatrice knows the identity of the man in front of him, and teases him with sexual allusions and jibes. One of her jibes is that “None but libertines delight in him.” Knowing a libertine is “a person, especially a man, who freely indulges in sensual pleasures without regard to moral principles,”¹⁶⁶ what Beatrice wants to express is that the men laughing at Benedick’s jokes are rude men. But what could also be understood is that Benedick only attracts women of little virtue, or even prostitutes, just as Don Pedro’s remark about Venice suggests.

Another reference to prostitutes is made by Benedick himself. In the first act of the play, Claudio praises Hero by asking Benedick “Can the world buy such a jewel?” (1.1.176), to which the bachelor lewdly replies, “Yea, and a case to put it into.” According to Partridge, “case” is a slang for the “pudend”, or vagina.¹⁶⁷ Benedick is therefore saying that buying a jewel, or a wife, is as easy as buying a vagina, or a prostitute.¹⁶⁸

Sexual allusions litter the text, from allusions to fencing – Beatrice referring to Benedick as “Signor Montanto” (1.1.29) – to allusions to swords and sheaths – Margaret’s line to Benedick that men should “Give us the swords, we have bucklers of our own” (5.2.18-19). However, if most of those allusions constitute a light-hearted banter between the characters, the sexual accusations directed toward Hero in the fourth act of the play are harsher and more explicit. Borachio is the first to insult the sweet Hero by calling her a “contaminated stale” (2.3.25), yet he knows she is innocent, and his insult is a reference to the image of Hero he and Don John wish to give to Claudio, not a testament of his thoughts on the real Hero. And later, when Don John calls Hero “every man’s Hero” (3.2.100), it is only in order to manipulate Claudio into thinking “The lady is disloyal” (3.2.98). However, act four marks a change in the treatment toward Hero, and Don Pedro and Claudio’s accusations and insults are vehement.

¹⁶⁵ Partridge, Eric (2008). *Op. cit.* p.84.

¹⁶⁶ Oxford University Press (2019). “Libertine” in the “*Lexico*” *Oxford Dictionaries*. Retrieved July 29, 2019, from www.lexico.com/en/definition/libertine.

¹⁶⁷ Partridge, Eric (2008). *Op. cit.* p.96.

¹⁶⁸ Walthall, Bill (October 5, 2014). *Op. cit.*

At the wedding, Claudio delivers a heated speech, in verse, describing Hero's treason (4.1.30-65). According to him, Hero is a "rotten orange", "but the sign and semblance of her honour," seemingly tricking everyone into thinking she is virtuous. She blushes like a "maid", a virgin, yet "she is none. She knows the heat of luxurious bed" (4.1.41), with heat being used in the sense of rut, animalistic need,¹⁶⁹ and luxurious meaning "sensual, amorous."¹⁷⁰ Claudio declares he does not wish to be married to an "approved wanton", meaning a proven "sexually unrestrained woman."¹⁷¹ Although she originally appeared to him as "Dian in her orb" (4.1.57) – Dian being the deity of chastity¹⁷² – she now appears to be more alike Venus, the goddess of love, or "those pampered animals that rage in savage sensuality" (4.1.60-61) – the animals likely being horses, an animal associated to sexuality,¹⁷³ and sensuality meaning a "fondness for love-making."¹⁷⁴ Hero is shocked by Claudio's speech, as well as the rest of the characters, who stay silent. Leonato then turns to Don Pedro for support and asks why he does not react to these accusations. Don Pedro response is even more direct than Claudio's accusations: "What should I speak? I stand dishonoured, that have gone about to link my dear friend to a common stale" (4.1.63-65). The term 'stale', already used by Borachio, refers to a prostitute.¹⁷⁵

Don Pedro talk about dishonor, which is an important part of the play. It seems that a woman's – at least a noblewoman's – honor depends on her maidenhead. Likewise, the man's honor seems to depend on his betrothed's virginity. Sexuality therefore plays a central role in the plot of the play and is important to Benedick, who stays a bachelor out of fear of being cheated on, as well as to Claudio and Don Pedro, who both slander Hero when they have the slightest doubt that she has been unfaithful. However, has sexual intercourse actually taken place during the events of the play? This remains to be proven and depends on the reader's interpretation of the play. Although a lot of references and double entendres are used to refer to Borachio's wooing of Margaret, no one refers explicitly to the act. Only Claudio and Don Pedro refer bluntly to what they have "seen," yet it may be the rage and disappointment amplifying the harshness of their accusations. And as this chapter have shown, if the characters

¹⁶⁹ Partridge, Eric (2008). *Op. cit.* p.153.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.* p.183.

¹⁷¹ Oxford University Press (2019). "Wanton" in the "*Lexico*" *Oxford Dictionaries*. Retrieved July 29, 2019, from www.lexico.com/en/definition/wanton.

¹⁷² Shakespeare, William (2008). *Op. cit.* p.163.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ Partridge, Eric (2008). *Op. cit.* p.234.

¹⁷⁵ Shakespeare, William (2008). *Op. cit.*

have in the habit to use sexual innuendoes and allusions, they are always lighthearted, and likely untrue.

In the first mention of the scheme, Borachio mentions he “is in the favour of Margaret,” and can “appoint her to look out at her lady’s chamber window” (2.2.13-18). He then explains that the Prince and Claudio shall “see me at her chamber window, hear me call Margaret Hero, hear Margaret term me Claudio” (2.2.42-44). So far, there is no mention of any sexual relationship between Margaret and Borachio. Later, when Don John talks to his brother and Claudio, he says that, if they were to come with him, they would “see her chamber window entered, even the night before her wedding day” (3.2.107-108). It seems the mechanism of a rumor has played its role and has exaggerated slightly what was to happen this night. As I mentioned in Part 2 of this dissertation, the scene of Claudio and Don Pedro watching Margaret as her mistress’ window is not played by the characters, and the audience only hear reports of this night. First by Borachio, when he is overheard by the watch saying he had “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” (3.3.144-146). In a sequence reminiscent of *Romeo and Juliet*’s balcony scene, in which Juliet bids Romeo “a thousand times good night” (Rom, 2.2.154), Margaret appears to have exclusively talked to Borachio, and called him by the name of Claudio. This version corresponds to Claudio’s question to Hero at the wedding, wondering, “what man was he he talked with you yesternight out at your window betwixt twelve and one?” (4.1.83-84). Claudio and Don Pedro, however, drew conclusions from the nocturnal conversation they witnessed, thinking she likely had sex, and consider her no longer pure. In a twisted logic, Hero’s answer that she “talked with no man at that hour” constitute the evidence they need to conclude that “why, then are you no maiden” (4.1.87). Although sexuality plays a big role in the play, there is no actual intercourse taking place in any scene, nor, does it seem, offstage. Once again, much was done about nothing.

However, if the original text seems to make no mention of a sexual intercourse taking place at any point in the play, or any kiss, it is likely that the theatrical adaptations have added their own visual representation of the play. A stage director may have therefore chosen to add a scene showing Borachio and Margaret talking to each other, or according to their own interpretation of the play, kissing or having sex. Our question is then how did the two directors chose to interpret the original play? Did they interpret it as a promiscuous encounter between

Borachio and Margaret, or an innocent discussion? I shall discuss these interrogations in the two following chapters.

3. Sexual Exaltation in Branagh's Adaptation

As stated in Part 2 of this dissertation, the directors' interpretation of *Much Ado* greatly influence their adaptation, the mood and style they add into to the film, and the way they present the characters – see Part 3, chapter 2 on the difference of treatment between Benedick and Claudio. Kenneth Branagh's interpretation of the play is that of a sexual play. In the introduction to his screenplay, he states: “*Much Ado About Nothing* seemed much more robust in tone [than the other Shakespearian comedies], rougher and sexier [...]. Its hot-tempered Italianate qualities distinguish it from the more obvious “Englishness” of the other plays” (KB, p.IX). His interpretation of the play was validated in the preceding chapter: the play centers around an alleged sexual intercourse, and whose dialogues are littered with puns and sexual allusions. He therefore chose to adapt the play following this vision, and included a looser form of sexuality, that was probably absent from any theatrical representation of the seventeenth century.

The costume design is the first sexy element to make its apparition in the film. In the first scene, Beatrice reads “Sigh no more” aloud to a group of people sprawled in the grass, in what seems to be an arcadian landscape. The audience gets a first glance at the costumes. The weather looks warm, as the men are wearing what look like breathable linen pants, and white shirts open on the naked chest. The women wear dresses and bodices, that either accentuate their generous chest or is open to show some generous cleavage.¹⁷⁶ We catch a glimpse of Ursula, who is cutting a piece of cheese by maintaining it pressed to her breasts. Finally, the camera pans left to reveal Beatrice, who has hiked her skirts up and taken her shoes off to climb the tree she is sitting in. The first button of her shirt is open, revealing cleavage. If the costuming is a testament of the literal heat of the Tuscan countryside, as well as – as mentioned in Part 2, chapter 1.3 – Branagh's desire to reduce the social differences by making everyone wear the same type of clothing; it also seems to be a symbol of the symbolic “heat” of the play, or its sexual natural. The soldiers' costumes reinforce this theory as well.

In the next scene, which shows the *Magnificent Seven* inspired arrival of the soldiers – namely Don Pedro, Claudio, Benedick, Don John, Borachio, Conrad, and another unnamed soldier – the soldiers' uniform are shown to the public. Once again, their shirts are wide open

¹⁷⁶ Crawl, Samuel (2006). *Op. cit.* p.77.

to reveal their naked chest, but instead of linen pants, they are wearing leather ones. If the choice of costuming is motivated by the fact that horse riders need to protect their thighs to the movements against the saddle, it is also an erotic choice: leather being associated to erotic play.¹⁷⁷ The erotism of the scene is heightened by the movement of the soldiers on their horses: the actors are galloping, which causes their body to repeatedly move up and down their saddle, in a movement that is reminiscent of a coitus. The sexuality of the scene could also be considered accentuated by the uniform fetishism, i.e. the fact that a uniform from a few professions – such as nurses, police agent, stewardess, or in this case soldier – are considered erotic by some people.

The announcement that the soldiers are coming back to Messina cause a pandemonium, as everyone starts running toward the villa, in a haste to get ready to welcome the group. The men and women then separate into two separate groups. The ladies go to their chambers, and start to undress themselves, as well as each other. They then run toward the bathing area, letting the audience get a glance at their bare breasts and naked buttocks. Once in the water, the women wash each other, all the while laughing and playing. On the men's side, the scene is very similar: the men have dismounted their horse and jumped almost directly in the water of what looks like a washing place outside of Leonato's Villa. They run and play, completely naked, and wash each other's hair and back. The whole sequence, on both the men's and women's side, in an unbelievable scene of giddiness, laughter, frenzy and nudity. Samuel Crowl, in *The films of Kenneth Branagh* states, "Branagh makes sure his camera captures enough male and female flesh to reinforce [...] that this is Shakespeare stripped to the bone; or, as Sarah Hatchuel observes, he does this as a symbolic gesture to demonstrate how the film means 'to shake the dust out of Shakespeare.'"¹⁷⁸ This means that, in addition to showing nudity to reinforce the main themes of love and sexuality present in the play, it is also a symbolic choice that represents Branagh's desire to shed a new light of the Bard's work, and modernize it for a new audience.

It seems the arrival of the soldiers is the first social event Messina has had in a while, and its inhabitants wish to appear at their best. They wash themselves, getting rid of the dust and sweat, and putting on clean clothes. Considering the soldiers arriving are war heroes, and

¹⁷⁷ Burt, Richard (1998) "The love that dares not speak Shakespeare's name: New Shakesqueer Cinema". In Boose, Lynda E. & Burt, Richard (Eds.) (1999). *Shakespeare the movie: popularizing the plays on film, tv, and video*. London: Routledge. P.241

¹⁷⁸ Hatchuel, Sarah (2000). *A Companion to the Shakespearean Films of Kenneth Branagh*. Canada: Blizzard Publishing. P.126. Cited in Crowl, Samuel (2006). *Op. cit.* in Crowl, Samuel (2006). *Op. cit.* p.77.

eligible bachelors – the Prince Don Pedro, in particular – the women are likely trying to look good in order to seduce them. Margaret, who wishes to marry above stairs, seems particularly keen on seducing one of the soldiers: the film shows her powdering her breasts, squeezed in a tight bodice that accentuates her cleavage. Men and women, finally dressed, then rush toward the inner courtyard, where “an overhead shot captures their meeting as they form a giant X on the floor,”¹⁷⁹ in a visual representation of the banter and “merry war” (1.1.59) that the audience is about to witness.

Men and women are then invited to mingle at the party organized that evening, a masquerade ball in which men and women’s identities are concealed. While Don Pedro woos Hero in Claudio’s name, and Beatrice talks to Benedick – who is hidden behind a mask and a false accent –, the other guests are drinking, dancing and chatting with the opposite sex. The entire party seems like a matchmaking reception, as couples seem to form in the background. If in the original play, the masquerade ball scene included a conversation between Ursula and Antonio on one hand, and Margaret and Balthazar on the other, Branagh chose to change things by making these encounters more sexual. Ursula and Antonio’s conversation follows roughly the original play’s dialogue, with the exception that Antonio gropes Ursula’s posterior. Ursula is then certain of Antonio’s identity behind his mask, as she exclaims “you are he” (2.1.122) before they run off together. As for Margaret’s conversation, her dialogue with Balthazar, in which she rejects his advances, is changed into a discussion with Borachio, who we know is “in the favour of Margaret” (2.2.13). Borachio utters Balthazar’s line – “Well, I would you did like me” (2.1.98-99) – while groping Margaret’s breasts. If Margaret first plays coy by batting his hand away from her chest, she then laughs and grabs his hand to put it back where it was. She then falls on top of him, seemingly kissing him, while Borachio gropes her derriere. It introduces for the first time the connection between Borachio and Margaret and foreshadows the upcoming scheme conducted against Claudio, in which Margaret plays a part. Moreover, this scene is a visual representation of Margaret’s relation to sexuality present in the original play. Shakespeare depicted a servant who had no problem speaking frankly about sexuality and littered her speech with innuendoes. Branagh went further and filmed a Margaret that was also physically liberated about sexuality.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

This physical liberation of Margaret is confirmed later in the film, when Claudio and Don Pedro see her “talk” with a man at Hero’s window. As stated in the previous chapter, Shakespeare discredited Hero with the simple rumor that she talked with a man at midnight. But a modern audience needs a “greater presumptive sin,”¹⁸⁰ and Branagh understood that. He therefore chose to transform the conversation into an explicit coitus between both characters (see Figure 3 in Part 1, chapter 1.2), accompanied by Margaret’s moans and Borachio’s calling out Hero’s name. Moreover, as mentioned earlier (see Part 1, chapter 1.2), the scene that was only reported through dialogues is here filmed and shown to the audience. This choice can be justified by the fact that, according to Samuel Crowl, “film demands that we see the supposed transgression.” The audience, as well as Claudio and Don John, witness a scene that could not be mistaken as something else than a sexual relationship, occurring in Hero’s chambers.

In conclusion, Branagh chose to heighten the lewdness of the play’s dialogue, as well as the theme of sexuality present throughout the play, with a physical representation of that lewdness. As mentioned above, the medium of film required a visual language in addition to the verbal language; therefore the lines must be supported by a visual representation of said lines. Branagh, as a Shakespeare aficionado, understood very well the sexual allusions littered throughout the text. In order to translate these hidden allusions to a modern public, he infused sexuality into the general mood of his film. The result is a hot, sexy film in which the characters seem to be eager to find a partner and flaunt their attributes in order to seduce them. It is important to note, however, that both Beatrice and Hero, as daughters of noblemen, do not show any physical promiscuousness. Only kisses are exchanged between them and their suitors. Claudio’s first physical contact with Hero takes place during the masquerade ball: Hero gives Claudio a chaste kiss after Leonato has announced their betrothal (see Figure 23). Later, they hug once married. This absence of contact can be explained by the social rank of Hero and her need to be proper, as well as the fact neither character talks a lot to each other. In Beatrice’s case, the first argument does not hold: as the niece of Leonato, she should not be seen kissing someone she is not promised to, yet the rebellious Beatrice does not care about society’s expectations towards her. When she and Benedick confess their love for each other after Hero and Claudio’s interrupted wedding, they share a passionate kiss (see Figure 24).

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.* p.84.

One last notable scene, that will be addressed in more detail later (see Part 3, chapter 5), is one that takes place between Conrad and Don John. In this scene, Keanu Reeves' Don John is bare-chested, lying on a massage table, while Conrad, his hands covered in oil, massages his back. Branagh's writing of the scene, erotic, has sparked controversies: Samuel Crowl says it has "only left the film open to the charge of homophobia by some of Branagh's critics."¹⁸¹



Figure 23. Claudio and Hero kiss after receiving Leonato's approval of their union. In Kenneth Branagh's adaptation.



Figure 24. Beatrice and Benedick kiss in the chapel. In Kenneth Branagh's adaptation.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

4. Modern Sexuality in Whedon's Adaptation

Whedon's adaptation is resolutely more modern than Branagh's. As described in Part 1, chapter 2 of this dissertation, the setting of the play is transferred to the twenty-first century. But the setting, decor and costuming were not the only elements that were adapted to our modern times: sexuality was modernized as well. Contrarily to an outdated conception of marriage, in which women must remain pure until marriage, the women in this adaptation show no shame as they mingle with men. And it seems they are not shamed for it, neither by the directors nor by the characters, and therefore should not be shamed by the audience either.

As explained in Part 3 of this dissertation, Whedon's adaptation focuses on the relationship between Benedick and Beatrice, and therefore, their couple frame the film: the first scene and the last scene are dedicated to them. Shakespeare's text mentioned some history between them, by having Beatrice says, "he lent me [his heart] awhile; and I gave him use for it, a double heart for his single one" (2.1.276). Joss Whedon chose to interpret it as a modern relationship between them, therefore the first scene of the film shows their past relationship in the form of a one-night stand. After what we guess is a sexual relationship, Benedick puts his clothes back on, while Beatrice feigns being asleep. Sarah Hatchuel declares: "Ce prologue instaure un sous-texte : Beatrice et Benedick ont déjà vécu une histoire d'amour, et Benedick s'est comporté comme un goujat."¹⁸² Beatrice is therefore not a virgin, and the line from the play that suggested so – "Beatrice, get you to heaven; here's no place for you maids" (2.1.45) – was deleted in Whedon's screenplay. The audience's hypothesis that Beatrice and Benedick have had sex is later confirmed: when Don Pedro and Beatrice talk about her past relationship with Benedick, her words are accompanied by a flash back scene. In this scene, Beatrice and Benedick are kissing, undressing each other, drinking wine, and finally lying in bed together (see Figure 25). There is no doubt left as to what they were up to that night. And it seems that Benedick leaving in the morning is what caused Beatrice to be so bitter, and so wary of finding a companion.

The other characters show the same attitude toward sex. During the masquerade party, people mingle, the same way they did in Branagh's film, and couples are formed. A singer sings a jazzy version, of 'sigh no more', while "twin sisters perform an intricate, sensuous act" on a trapeze (JW, p.74). Meanwhile, "a couple sneak down past the back gate with amorous

¹⁸² Philippot, Vital (n.d.). *Op. cit.*

intent” (JW, p.74). Leonato’s Aide – who, as I mentioned earlier, pronounces the lines of the deleted character of Balthazar – tries to seduce Margaret, but is rebuffed by her. He is later seen in the background, kissing Ursula while caressing her breasts. They then leave hand in hand, probably to have sex. Beatrice also rebuffs a man’s advances: during the party, in her banter with the masked Benedick, she is bothered by a “Drunk Man,” who caresses insistently her shoulder and back, and when she leaves to join the dancers, follows her and tries to take her by the hips. One character, however, whose lines require to stay clear of these effusions, is Hero. Her lines, as well as her claim of innocence during the wedding, rings true to the audience because she has not been seduced by anyone, and has remained chaste and pure to the audience’s eyes. Had she and Claudio been seen kissing or caressing each other, her claim of maidenhead would have not been accepted by the viewers.



Figure 25. Beatrice and Benedick make love during a flashback sequence. In Joss Whedon’s adaptation.



Figure 26. Borachio and Margaret make love during a flashback sequence. In Joss Whedon’s adaptation.

The film includes three scenes that display an explicit sexual relationship. One, described earlier in the chapter, involves Beatrice and Benedick, making love in a flashback scene. Another, already mentioned to in Part 1, chapter 2 of this dissertation, involves Margaret and Borachio. In the sex scene between Margaret and Borachio, Whedon, like Branagh before him, has chosen to interpret Shakespeare’s “leans [...] at her mistress’ chamber window, bids [Borachio] a thousand times good night” (3.3.146) as a sexual relationship involving both characters (see Figure 26). The last scene involves Don John and the womanly Conrade, who form a couple in Whedon’s adaptation.

Don John and Conrade seem involved in a steamy relationship, sharing kisses and being intimate in front of the camera. In the first act, Don John discusses his discontentment with his

position, and complains of being “trusted with a muzzle” (1.3.30).¹⁸³ The scene seems erotic from the beginning: the score in the background is a jazzy, smooth music, as the camera shows the two characters lying on top of a double bed. While delivering his lines, he uncrosses Conrade’s foot, slips between her thighs, and unbuttons the buttons of her dress in order to nuzzle his face between her breasts (see Figure 27). Their petting is interrupted by Borachio’s entrance who unabashedly stays right next to them. Don John then continues his discussion with Borachio, but while doing so, slips his hand beneath the covers and starts fingering Conrade, who moans and bites her lips (see Figure 28).



Figure 27. Don John kisses Conrade’s chest.
In Joss Whedon’s adaptation.



Figure 28. Don John caresses Conrade while
Borachio is present. In Joss Whedon’s
adaptation.

Don John and Borachio’s attitude, as well as Borachio’s watching, seems to indicate a tendency toward exhibitionism and voyeurism¹⁸⁴, the latter being heightened by the way Whedon shot the film. His adaptation of *Much Ado* showcases many instances of scenes shot either through a window, behind a door, or through a camera. Sarah Hatchuel states in an interview:

[Le titre] renvoie au thème du **voyeurisme**, qui est très important dans la pièce : il y a beaucoup de moments où les personnages s’épient, se surveillent, s’écoutent. Joss Whedon a très bien exploité cette dimension en encadrant souvent ses personnages à travers des fenêtres, des portes, des vitres, en les capturant dans le reflet d’un miroir ou d’une fenêtre, ou bien en choisissant des angles frappants (en surplomb par exemple), qui donnent le sentiment d’un regard un peu voyeur.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ It is worth noting that this scene in the same scene in which Branagh filmed Conrad massaging Don Pedro. More information on the subject in Part 3, chapter 5 of this dissertation.

¹⁸⁴ This voyeurism is in sharp contrast with the ways in which other characters do their ‘spying’ whilst trying *not* to be seen by those they observe.

¹⁸⁵ Philippot, Vidal (n.d.). *Op. cit.*

Considering the villain of the story is a sexually liberated man, that Margaret having sex with Borachio is what caused Hero's demise, and that Beatrice and Benedick's one-night stand causes them to become bitter and vow to stay bachelors, could one assume that Joss Whedon portrays any sexual relationship in a negative light? In the end, this does not appear to be the case, and Joss Whedon does not shed an inherently negative light on promiscuousness in his film. In the case of Margaret and Borachio, both characters show remorse at the end of the play, Borachio being – according to Whedon – in love with Hero, and Margaret being unaware of his scheme and its consequences. What Whedon warns us against, however, is sleeping with someone in order to manipulate someone else's feeling. In Conrade and Don John's case, their relationship and promiscuousness are not what makes them villains, it is their choices and their manipulation of others that do. As for Beatrice, she is not judged for having had sex with Benedick, but rather pitied, as the audience is made to empathize with her.

5. Homosexuality and “Shakespeare” Theories

A myth exists, among the Shakespearian scholars, that Shakespeare was a homosexual. The theory was supported by Oscar Wilde or Samuel Butler¹⁸⁶ – both presumed homosexuals –, and based among others on Shakespeare’s Sonnets, the majority of which are read by most critics as addressed by Shakespeare to another man.¹⁸⁷ Richard Burt, in his article “The love that dares not speak Shakespeare’s name: New Shakesqueer Cinema”, declares that “the idea of a bisexual Shakespeare is now considered perfectly normal inside and outside of academia.”¹⁸⁸ However, this theory is not universally accepted, and Eric Partridge refutes it in his book *Shakespeare’s Bawdy*:

Had Shakespeare, so frank and so courageous, been a homosexual, he would have subtly yet irrefutably conveyed the fact. Had he even been much interested in the subject, he would have mentioned it far more often: as it is, he speaks of homosexuals in much the same way as he speaks of eunuchs.¹⁸⁹

Further in his book, Eric Partridge states once more the non-queerness of Shakespeare’s play. In his glossary, under the entry “delight”, he quotes *Hamlet*: “Man delights not me; no, nor woman neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so” (2.2.314–316) and adds: “Only homosexuals could understand this passage as an implication that Hamlet was a homosexual.”¹⁹⁰

Ann Thompson, in the article “Shakespeare and sexuality” published in *Shakespeare Survey 46: Shakespeare and Sexuality*, mentions the different books and analyses conducted on homosexuality in Shakespeare’s play. In her article, she raises the question on whether analyzing homosexuality in the Bard’s play is pertinent, considering the notions of homosexuality and lesbianism may have “[not] even exist[ed] in the modern sense in the Renaissance period.”¹⁹¹ According to her, the references to homosexuality in the plays may

¹⁸⁶ Partridge, Eric (2008). *Op. cit.* Pp. 13-14.

¹⁸⁷ De Grazia, Margreta (1994). “The Scandal of Shakespeare’s Sonnets” in Wells, Stanley (Editor) (1994). *Shakespeare Survey 46: Shakespeare and Sexuality*. Pp.35-50.

¹⁸⁸ Burt, Richard (1998). *Op. cit.* pp 240-268.

¹⁸⁹ Partridge, Eric (2008). *Op. cit.* p.18.

¹⁹⁰ Partridge, Eric (2008). *Op. cit.* p.117.

¹⁹¹ Thompson, Ann (1993). “Shakespeare and sexuality” in Wells, Stanley (Editor) (1994). *Shakespeare Survey 46: Shakespeare and Sexuality*. p.4.

have been more of a homoerotic desire in a context of patriarchal heterosexuality, rather than homosexuality as we conceive it today.¹⁹²

Furthermore, William Shakespeare's biography remains shrouded in mystery, and the plays' authorship is contested. Some think Shakespeare was but a pseudonym and that many wrote under that name.¹⁹³ Therefore, if the plays may be analyzed on their own, drawing parallels between the plays' events and William Shakespeare's life would be a perilous endeavor.

Taking all of this into account, it seems that the analysis of homosexuality in the Shakespearian plays must be approached with caution. Homosexuality as we conceive it may have been unfathomable in the seventeenth century, the plays' references to sexuality must be separated from Shakespeare's personal life story, and even the playwright's existence and authorship have been doubted. However, a queer analysis of Shakespeare's play is an interesting subject that deserves some attention, and the numerous books and scholarly articles on the subject is entirely justified. A Shakesqueer¹⁹⁴ reading of *Much Ado* can add more meaning to the play and spark a debate that could be fruitful in broadening Shakespearian studies.

One of the possible historical sources of Shakesqueer analyses can be linked to the fact that, in Shakespeare's time, women were not allowed on stage, and therefore all women's roles were played either by young man whose voice had not yet been deepened by puberty, or by eunuchs.¹⁹⁵ Boys were asked to dress in women's clothes,¹⁹⁶ and sometimes play the role of a woman passing for a man – e.g. the character of Rosalind in *As You Like It*, or Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*. The female characters' sexual identity was therefore very fluid and could be considered queer. On this matter, Clare MacManus writes: "Shakespeare's theatre layered gender roles to tantalise audiences, drawing on the virtuosic skill of the highly trained young

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

¹⁹³ Nickel, Joe (November / December 2011). "Did Shakespeare Write 'Shakespeare'? Much Ado About Nothing" in *Skeptical Inquirer* Volume 35, Number 6.

¹⁹⁴ The term 'Shakesqueer' was coined by Madhavi Menon for her book *Shakesqueer: A Queer Companion to the Complete Works of Shakespeare*, a collection of essays published in 2011.

¹⁹⁵ Garber, Marjorie (1992). *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Culture Anxiety*. New York: Routledge. P.89.

¹⁹⁶ For more information on the matter, see – among others – Marjorie Garber's 1992 *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Culture Anxiety*, or Laura Levine's 1986 "Women in Men's clothing: Anti-theatricality and Effeminization from 1579 to 1642" in *Criticism*, 28 (1986). Pp.121-43.

men [...] who played these complex female characters.”¹⁹⁷ According to Lee Jamieson in “Cross-Dressing in Shakespeare Plays”, these costume changes were a way for Shakespeare to give his female characters more liberty, and free them from the norms of the Elizabethan era.¹⁹⁸ On the matter of crossdressing, Sarah Hatchuel comments:

Much Ado About Nothing est donc également une pièce sur le genre. C'est d'autant plus fort que les rôles féminins étaient joués à l'époque par des hommes. Quand Beatrice dit : "*Ha si seulement j'étais un homme, je pourrais aller tuer Claudio et manger son cœur sur la place du marché !*", il faut se souvenir qu'à l'époque c'était un homme jouant une femme qui prononçait ces mots. Il y a donc là un jeu sur les frontières entre le masculin et le féminin.¹⁹⁹

Between 1642 and 1660 occurred a period of prohibition in England, and staging any profane play was forbidden. The restoration of the English monarchy put an end to this ban, and Shakespeare's plays were once again staged. It is around that time that stage directors started to take inspiration from the French theater and include actresses in their casting.²⁰⁰ Today, actresses sometimes play the masculine roles, like Cate Blanchett in the role of Richard II in the play *The War of the Roses*, an “amalgam of Shakespeare's history plays about the Plantagenet dynasty.”²⁰¹ Masculine roles have also been staged and played by openly homosexual directors and actors, notably Sir Ian McKellen who played the roles of King Lear and Richard III.²⁰² The evolution of the theater brings more freedom to the genre and allows a greater fluidity of sexual identity and representation.

Delving into the textual analysis of *Much Ado*, what conclusions and interpretations can a Shakesqueer analysis bring to the play's characters? This will be the first analysis conducted in this chapter, the next focusing on Branagh's and Whedon's adaptation of the play and their interpretation of the play's queerness.

¹⁹⁷ McManus, Clare (March 15, 2016). “Shakespeare and gender: the ‘woman’s part’” in The British Library's website. Retrieved August 2, 2019, from www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/shakespeare-and-gender-the-womans-part.

¹⁹⁸ Jamieson, Lee (April 16, 2018). “Cross-Dressing in Shakespeare Plays.” In *ThoughtCo*. Retrieved July 27, 2019, from thoughtco.com/cross-dressing-in-shakespeare-plays-2984940.

¹⁹⁹ Philippot, Vidal (n.d.). *Op. cit.*

²⁰⁰ Manktelow, Hannah (March 15, 2016). “Women playing Shakespeare: The first female Desdemona and beyond” on The British Library's website. Retrieved May 10, 2018, from bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/women-playing-shakespeare-the-first-female-desdemona-and-beyond.

²⁰¹ Boland, Michaela (January 22, 2009). “The War of the Roses, Part 1 and Part 2” in *Variety*. Retrieved May 5, 2018, from variety.com/2009/film/awards/the-war-of-the-roses-part-1-and-part-2-1200473138/

²⁰² Burt, Richard (1998). *Op. cit.* p.240.

In her queer analysis of *Much Ado*, Shenton Carrington supports that Beatrice and Benedick are both queer, which explains their rebuttal of a heteronormative wedding and their conflicting views toward the opposite sex and toward each other.²⁰³ The line from the play quoted by Sarah Hatchuel on the preceding page – “*Ha si seulement j'étais un homme*”²⁰⁴ – seem to confirm this analysis. After Hero’s failed wedding, Beatrice and Benedick confess their love for each other. Benedick, elated, then asks “bid me do anything for thee,” to which Beatrice answers “Kill Claudio” (4.1.289). When Benedick seems reluctant to do so, Beatrice cries out “O God, that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the market-place” (4.1.306-307). One possible interpretation of this line is that Beatrice wishes she was a man, to be able to avenge her cousin, but also to be free of the social constraints imposed on her gender. It could also signify she wishes to be a man in order to date a woman. This reading is supported by her claiming she “could not endure a husband with a beard on his face” (2.1.28). Leonato then asks if she would rather have a man with no beard, to which Beatrice answers, “What should I do with him? dress him in my apparel and make him my waiting-gentlewoman?” (2.1.33-34). Her answer can be seen as derogatory toward younger men who have yet to grow a beard; but they could also show a real desire: “Perhaps [...] beneath the jest is a real desire – to marry a woman, or to take a man and feminise him until he suits her needs.”²⁰⁵

Other references to Beatrice’s wish to become a man are present throughout the play like her line “Adam's sons are my brethren; and, truly, I hold it a sin to match in my kindred” (2.1.62-63). The first part of the sentences signifies she considers herself a son of Adam, i.e. a man, or at least wishes to claim the same rights. However, the second part of the sentence seems to reject the idea of a same-sex relationship, on the basis that it is a sin. Sheldon Zitner, however, does not interpret the line in that way and brings another interpretation. In a footnote, he states that Beatrice is rather mentioning the “blood relationship of men and women” – the conception that Eve was born from Adam’s rib – and its violation of the “table of Kindred and Affinity.”²⁰⁶ Beatrice does not condemn a homosexual relationship, but rather any incestuous relationship. Finally, the greatest sign of her queerness is her refusal to fit the traditional place of women in

²⁰³ Carrington, Shenton (n.d.). “Queer Shakespeare, Much Ado About Nothing in Slashing Shakespeare”. Retrieved May 9, 2018, from slashingshakespeare.tumblr.com/post/122689360748/queer-shakespeare-much-ado-about-nothing/amp.

²⁰⁴ Philippot, Vidal (n.d.). *Op. cit.*

²⁰⁵ Carrington, Shenton (n.d.). *Op. cit.*

²⁰⁶ Shakespeare, William (2008). *Op. cit.* P.115.

society and her constant desire of independence and rebellion^{207 208}. She refuses to marry and teach Hero that should she be unhappy with her father's watch, she should say "Father, as it please me" (2.1.54-55) rather than submitting herself.

Benedick's sexuality, on the other hand, is put into doubt in the first scene of the play, when Beatrice asks, "Who is his companion now? He hath every month a new sworn brother" (1.1.69). This line could either refer to a platonic companionship between men, or to multiple homosexual relationships. Another line that refers to his homosexuality is Beatrice's jest that "he both pleases men and angers them" (2.1.140). It seems, however, that Beatrice is the only one mentioning his queerness. None of the men doubt is heterosexuality, even considering him a womanizer – as establishes Leonato's joke:

DON PEDRO

You embrace your charge too willingly. I think this is your daughter.

LEONATO

Her mother hath many times told me so.

BENEDICK

Were you in doubt, sir, that you asked her?

LEONATO

Signior Benedick, no; for then were you a child.

Ado, 1.1.99-104

Benedick himself, however, is greatly concerned with femininity and women domination. He refuses to fall in love and submit to a woman's will. One of his fears, as mentioned in Part 3, chapter 2 of this dissertation, concerns his fear of feminization, of seeming womanly. To Benedick, falling in love means to him to yield and fall under a woman's control, and therefore to be submissive, a position that is traditionally reserved for women. Michael Hattaway, in "Fleshing his will in the spoil of her Honour: Desire, Misogyny and the Perils of Chivalry" writes, "when [...] a man turns from chivalric warrior to chivalric 'servant', he is in danger of being 'unmanned', made effeminate."²⁰⁹

However, it seems a relationship with Beatrice is what he wants, maybe because they complement each other so well. Benedick claims he will never trust a woman, and therefore

²⁰⁷ Carrington, Shenton (n.d.). *Op. cit.*

²⁰⁸ Let it be noted that I am not implying in this dissertation that a strong, independent woman is necessarily queer or lesbian. I am simply motivating a possible reading of the play's gender dynamics with elements from the play.

²⁰⁹ Hattaway, Michael (1994). *Op. cit.* p.134.

“live a bachelor” (1.1.237). Yet he falls in love with Beatrice eventually, maybe because she is not a straight woman but rather manly. In Beatrice, he finds a dominant person, who gives him the desire to submit. He is “turned over and over [...] in love” (5.2.35), which for Carrington means his “‘self’ is turned over. He becomes Beatrice’s willing follower, entirely in her power: ‘I will live in thy heart, die in thy lap, and be buried in thy eyes.’”²¹⁰ At the moment Beatrice and Benedick confess their love for each other, he says, “bid me do anything for thee.” This is the exact moment he becomes her “chivalric servant”, her subordinate. The two characters therefore form an unconventional couple, which questions the position of dominance in the traditional couple and also questions sexual identity. Furthermore, both characters are protagonists of the play, and not antagonists, which shows a positive attitude in Shakespeare, and an innovative portrayal of queerness. In Carrington’s words, Shakespeare “is irresistibly drawn to the idea of sexual ambivalence: he longs to cross the great gender divide and explores from within how it might be to be feminine or masculine or both. He does not erode such identities entirely; he plays with them obsessively.”²¹¹

But how did Branagh and Whedon play with those queer identities? And how did they interpret the play’s relationships? As both plays are modernizations of the original, and as gender roles and sexuality have been updated by the directors to fit their conception of the play, according to their time, their nationality and their personal interpretation, so has the homosexual undertone of the play. Furthermore, Whedon’s interpretation of the couple’s dynamics has been influenced by Branagh’s adaptation.

According to Richard Burt, many modern film adaptations of Shakespeare’s play have included queerness, in a category he calls “New Shakesqueer cinema.”²¹² In the exuberant adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* by Luhrmann in 1996, Mercutio comes to the Masquerade ball during which Romeo and Juliet meet for the first time dressed as a drag queen, probably a nod to the history of men crossdressing as women in Shakespearian staging. Burt’s opinion is that the incorporation of homosexual or queer roles in Shakespearian plays is a way for the directors to assert the presence of the LGBTQ+ community in society and claiming their right to appear in art and culture.²¹³

²¹⁰ Carrington, Shenton (n.d.). *Op. cit.*

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

²¹² Burt, Richard (1998). *Op. cit.*

²¹³ *Ibid.*

The first reference to homosexuality I would like to point out in Branagh's film is based on cinematic intertextuality, a concept used repeatedly in his adaptation – See Part 2, chapter 1.2. Indeed, the actor playing the young Claudio, Robert Sean Leonard, had previously played the role of Neal in the 1989 film *Dead Poets Society* directed by Peter Weir. In the film, Neal participates in the representation of the play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in the role of Puck, the “Fairy”, which is a “particular American signifier of gay sexuality.”²¹⁴ In addition to Neal playing a queer character in the play, it seems the prejudice toward actors as being homosexual hurts the character's confidence, as well as his relationship with his father. After the play's representation, despite a huge success and his teacher's assurance that he should keep acting in the future, his father forbids him to ever play again, and informs him he must quit his current school and enroll in the army. Neal, devastated, commits suicide. As Burt formulates it: “The film allows one reasonably to conclude that Neal committed suicide because he is gay and cannot come out to his father.”²¹⁵ The choice of Branagh to cast Robert Sean Leonard in the role of Claudio, a few years after *Dead Poets Society*, will certainly evoke in the minds of the audience a character that is vulnerable, young and queer. Branagh's interpretation of Claudio's character, as a young man that is uncertain, lost and impressionable, fits the same mold. His relationship with Don Pedro, as his squire and right-hand, submissive, reliant on him even to woo a lady – as if he was unable to do it himself – suggests a queer relationship.

Another scene that seem to play with queerness is the bathing scene present at the very beginning of the film, and already described in great length in an earlier chapter (see Part 3 chapter 3). The women, free of modesty, undress themselves in front of each other, then bathe in the same pool, while the men do the same in another pool. The scene showcases a closeness between the characters, as women help each other undress. Other snippets from the scene show Hero helping Beatrice wash her chest (see Figure 29), Conrad washing Claudio's hair (see Figure 30), or Claudio and Benedick amiably wrestling in the water. The contact seems to be platonic, yet it also raises questions on the sexuality of the characters. It seems that Branagh shows a physical nearness of the characters, according to their sex. The men, having been to war together, have little to hide, and disrobe or touch each other without the shame that could be expected from men who are uncertain about their sexuality. Or it could be because their queerness does not matter to them. As for the women, Beatrice and Hero are relatives, and they

²¹⁴ *Ibid.* p.258.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

are “bedfellows” (4.1.149), yet a physical contact may show a preference from physical contact with women.



Figures 29 and 30. Bathing sequence: Beatrice and Hero (Left) – Claudio and Conrad (Right) get washed together. In Kenneth Branagh’s adaptation.

Finally, the character of Don John is portrayed as a homosexual character, and very close to his companion Conrad. Their first dialogue together (Ado, 1.3) takes place in a dark cellar, lit by candle lights. Don John wears leather pants – according to Anthony Lane, “*Much Ado* could become Ralph Lauren’s favorite movie”²¹⁶ – and is bare-chested, while Conrade is massaging him with oil (see Figure 31). The scene has a strong homosexual undertone, and even sadomasochistic.²¹⁷ Perhaps Branagh has adapted the notion of ‘servant’, rare in our modern society, in order to transform into that of a sexual slave, satisfying his master’s desires, including giving him an erotic massage or granting sexual favors. Later in the scene, Don John seizes Conrad’s face and maintains it mere centimeters away from his lips (see Figure 32). The audience is expecting a kiss, yet Borachio’s irruption in the conversation startles the two men and they pull apart. The scene is very homoerotic, as the homosexual undertone of the play becomes a full-fledged stereotypical representation of a male gay relationship. Moreover, according to Celestino Deleyto, Keanu Reeve’s casting adds a queer undertone to the character. The author states in his article “Men in Leather: Kenneth Branagh’s ‘*Much Ado about Nothing*’ and Romantic Comedy” that the actor “ ‘signifies’ queer through his body and previous roles, especially the part he had recently played in *My Own Private Idaho* (Gus Van Sant, 1991) curiously enough, another, if much freer, Shakespearean adaptation.”²¹⁸ The film is indeed a loose adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Henry IV* and *Henry V*, in which Keanu Reeves and Joaquin Phoenix play queer characters.

²¹⁶ Cowl, Samuel (2006). *Op. cit.* p.80.

²¹⁷ Burt, Richard (1998). *Op. cit.* p.241

²¹⁸ Deleyto, Celestino (Spring, 1997). *Op. cit.* p.105.



Figure 31. Conrad massages Don John.
In Kenneth Branagh's adaptation.



Figure 32. Don John holds Conrad's face.
In Kenneth Branagh's adaptation.

According to Samuel Crowl, Branagh's choice to change this relationship was made in order to improve Keanu Reeves' terrible performance in the film. Yet, to him the scene did not help the film, and on the contrary, "only left the film open to the charge of homophobia by some of Branagh's critics."²¹⁹ I partly agree with his statement. It seems the scene has brought another layer to Don John's character, who in Shakespeare's play is a "plain-dealing villain" (1.3.30) with an obscure history. However, it seems to me that this scene, if included in a movie in 2019, would have the entire LGBTQ+ community up in arms, protesting the stereotypical and derogatory depiction of homosexuality. Branagh could allow himself to shoot that scene and question the representation of queerness in movies, because the context allowed him to do so.

In comparison, Whedon has not allowed himself the same treatment of homosexuality in his film, yet Branagh's inspiration is very evident in his representation of the Don John - Conrade dynamic. He has indeed chosen to make their relationship even more explicit by putting the two characters in an explicit relationship rather than hinting towards it like Branagh did. Furthermore, their relationship becomes even more sexual, as the two characters converse while caressing each other amorously – See a description of the scene in the previous chapter. Although Whedon seemingly interpreted Conrad and Don John's relationship the same way Branagh did, he did not dare showing a homosexual relationship on screen, and therefore transformed the character of Conrad into a woman.

One can wonder about the reason of this change. It could be related to the question of the audience and critical reception, and therefore of commercial success. Whedon, an American

²¹⁹ Crowl, Samuel (2006). *Op. cit.* p.84.

director well-known around the globe for his blockbuster movies and shooting in the United States – a country known for his “(hyper)straight cinema” according to Richard Burt²²⁰ – may have chosen to please his public by avoiding any mention of queerness. The character’s gender switch could have allowed a greater success in the United States, as well as globally, and could have made it ‘easier’ to watch to a greater public, like children or more conservative cultures. By changing Branagh’s homosexual relationship into a heterosexual relationship, Whedon could effectively implement heteronormativity in his movie. This justification could partly justify his choice, yet Whedon himself offers another element of answer. In the interview included in Joss Whedon’s screenplay of the film, he says:

JW: And it felt to me like, in a play that’s all about relationships, why not play Don John and Conrade as having one? It’s a way to make another sly little comment on all of these romances, and it’s a way to have more sex.

Interviewer: Also, if Don John is going to have a sexual relationship with one of his minions, if Conrade were male, then the main villain is the only gay character, and it could seem like a correlation was being drawn between villainy and gayness

JW: Right. ‘I despise all people and unions between lovers – I’m the evil gay man!’ That didn’t feel like that would fly. I toyed with the idea of having Don Pedro be very obviously gay throughout, just so that when Benedick says, ‘get thee a wife,’ he could look at Benedick like, ‘How dumb are you?’

JW, p.27

The argument, raised by the interviewer and confirmed by the director, is that he did not wish to have the only character in the play being a gay man, and therefore associate “villainy and gayness.” But once again, the question of reception is essential: Whedon “didn’t feel like that would fly.” It seems to imply that he would have been criticized for it and feared the audience’s reaction to his film. Once more, it seems the context of adaptation plays a great role in the making of the film: Branagh’s sadomasochist interpretation of the two characters’ relationship constituted a new take on the original play, and therefore a modernization. Whedon goes further by refusing to cast a negative light on this gay relationship, and therefore makes the villain a straight man.

²²⁰ Burt, Richard (1998). *Op. cit.* p.258.

Conclusion

Much Ado About Nothing is a romantic comedy that could seem at first glance like a straightforward story with forgettable characters. Yet, a detailed analysis reveals that it is not the case. The events of the play are convoluted at times, as the reader must distinguish what seems to be true from what is true; the language of the play adds a double, sometimes triple meaning to its words; the characters are complex and deserve several readings in order to fully comprehend their psyche and their drive. Moreover, many interpretations of the play are possible, and none is more valid than another. The adaptations of *Much Ado* by Joss Whedon and Kenneth Branagh showcase two distinctive interpretations of the Bard's play. The films therefore contribute to the field of Shakespeare's studies by bringing a broader attention to the subject and by sparking the debate in the youth, among adults and critics. The subject matter of the play is particularly interesting to adapt to a modern public, considering the customs of courtship, love and sexuality have greatly evolved between the Elizabethan era and today. *Much Ado* constitutes a critique of society and tradition that is still interesting to raise with a contemporary audience.

The aim of this master's dissertation was to analyze to what extent Kenneth Branagh and Joss Whedon had modernized the play of Shakespeare. Another was to see whether the play's main themes had been modernized to correspond to a modern audience and still be relevant to a twenty-first-century public. My analysis wouldn't exclusively focus on the modernization of material elements such as the setting and costume design, but principally on the modernization of the main themes of the play: gender roles and sexuality. My hypothesis was that both adaptations, because they were filmed in the twentieth and twenty-first century for a contemporary public, would necessarily have some elements of modernization. I also estimated that Joss Whedon's adaptation, being set in the twenty-first century, would have more elements of modernization than Kenneth Branagh's. These hypotheses were globally confirmed.

The modernization of the setting and costume design is the most visible element of modernization of the play. Without surprise, Kenneth Branagh's adaptation was not transposed to the twentieth century, and it wasn't historically accurate either. His adaptation was intentionally set in an unidentifiable era in order to let the imagination of the public run free. On the other hand, Joss Whedon's adaptation is blatantly anachronistic, creating a surprising contrast between the archaic language of the characters and their attire. Joss Whedon's film

seems to be more apt to lead to a questioning from the audience, because it visually confronts their world with a structure of society that belongs in the past.

The question of gender roles is one that is modernized by both directors, but it seems that Whedon has chosen to put more focus on the theme than his counterpart, and has therefore changed various elements of the play in order to fit a more modern vision of society and feminism. Both directors chose to show that Hero was in love with Claudio, and therefore consciously chooses to marry Claudio, which shifts the relationship between them to a more consensual one and give more empowerment to Hero. Branagh went further in the empowerment of women by switching the genre of a few characters from male to female. He also played with the issue of class to exacerbate the situation of Margaret and make the audience empathize with the character. Finally, his portrayal of relationships matches a very contemporary conception of dating, including one-night stands and bad break-ups.

Sexuality permeated both adaptations, although in a different way. Branagh chose to free the characters from their moral and historical confinement and made them show a sexual exaltation; whereas Whedon chose a more subdued and modern depiction of sexuality. Moreover, Whedon did not link social rank and sexuality, while Branagh focused on the differences of sexuality of his three main female characters – Hero, Beatrice and Margaret – according to their position on the social ladder. Finally, the approach of the theme of homosexuality has greatly evolved between Kenneth Branagh's adaptation and Joss Whedon's. If Kenneth Branagh, for different reasons mentioned in this dissertation, could afford to shoot a homoerotic scene with masochistic undertone in 1993, it would probably be poorly received today, or at least leave the director open to criticism. Joss Whedon chose not to risk it and transformed the homosexual couple of Don John and Conrad into a heterosexual couple, which allows him to draw more attention to gender relationships.

In conclusion, the director of an adaptation always films from a unique vantage point, both historical and geographical, which greatly influences their adaptation. Kenneth Branagh's and Joss Whedon's adaptations, directed twenty years apart, consequently, show a different stance on the themes of gender roles and sexuality. Their adaptations are therefore extremely different in regard to the representation of men, women, and sexuality. The play's critique of the patriarchal society offers a fitting model to question the contemporary model and are exploited as such by both directors.

Furthermore, a cinematic adaptation is usually based on the original work, the preceding adaptations, and various cinematic references. Like a dwarf standing on the shoulders of giants, such adaptations form a complex network of influences and references. Joss Whedon's film, for instance, bears the mark of Kenneth Branagh's influence in several scenes, such as the erotic conversation between Don John and Conrade, or the scene in which Benedick poses in front of Beatrice like a peacock. Even the elements that are fundamentally different between both adaptations, like the choice to shoot in black and white or the feminization of Conrad, have been selected partly in order to differentiate himself from Branagh's work.

It is important to remember that a feminist approach of Shakespeare's work, as well as a sexual or class approach, has its limitations. As mentioned in the chapter on Shakesqueer theories, any specific approach must be used with caution, and we cannot draw an absolute answer from it. The relativity of our approach, as well as our personal point of view, influences greatly the results of the analysis. Its results must therefore be presented as biased. However, the variety of those analyses are always interesting to consider, as extreme as they seem, in order to add to the ongoing debate on the various interpretations.

Another limitation is the fact that I am analyzing the original play from my own perspective, i.e. the perspective of a young woman living in Belgium in 2019. The triangular comparison of the original play and its two adaptations has a fourth angle. The elements I considered were worth mentioning in this dissertation may look ludicrous to another student. Being aware of this fact may have helped me limit the expression of my personal opinion, but will never totally disappear.

Finally, if Kenneth Branagh's numerous adaptations of Shakespeare plays have attracted the attention of specialists, and many books have been written on his work, it is not the case for Joss Whedon. The references on his work are sparser, and often less academic. This causes a disequilibrium in the weight of the arguments and analysis of each adaptation.

Regarding future analysis of the play and its adaptation, it would be interesting to analyze later and future adaptations of *Much Ado* in order to see if the portrayal of gender and sexuality has been modernized once more, and to which extent. It could also be interesting to analyze the other main themes of this play, such as deception, masks and language.

Another option would be to deepen the queer analysis of the play, maybe from the perspective of a queer student. As a straight female, I may have another perspective and may

have analyzed other elements than a queer individual would have. To go even further, one may consider asking different profiles to read the play, and analyze their reception, in order to form a corpus of interpretations of *Much Ado*.

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