

Essay #2

A Deceiver Ever

Film has revolutionized the way in which the modern audience experiences and understands all forms of narrative—even William Shakespeare’s immortal works. In Director Kenneth Branagh’s 1993 film adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*, the audience witnesses a complete translation of the language of the stage into the language of the screen. One important way Branagh’s adaptation of *Much Ado* transforms the original narrative of the play is by ascribing psychological depth and motive to Don Pedro—characteristics he could not have conveyed on the Shakespearean stage. The techniques Branagh employs to create a more believable Don Pedro for the modern viewer soften Don Pedro’s character, omitting his motiveless “wild side” and replacing it with straightforward goodness. In the context of the play as it would have come across on the Elizabethan stage, Branagh’s interpretation of the prince’s character would not make sense, for Don Pedro would have served the crucial role of the vice, the metatheatrical character who often represents the playwright himself, as well as the unsettling powers of theatrical manipulation. Branagh’s decision to alter and soften Don Pedro’s character, while it helps in translating the narrative of the play for modern viewers, removes *Much Ado*’s self-reflexive examination of the potential danger inherent in theater and narrative itself.

On the Shakespearian stage, Don Pedro would not have appeared nearly so gentle as he does in Branagh’s film adaptation; rather, he would have seemed to complement the other vice character, Don John, countering his half-brother’s chaotic evil with his own chaotic good. While Branagh’s Don Pedro provides a warm, calming presence throughout the film, Shakespeare’s Don Pedro would have seemed vibrantly mischievous. In a more faithful interpretation of *Much Ado*, Don Pedro is a master puppeteer enjoying for his own sake the control of others on random

whims, meddling in all affairs for the sole purpose of making sport. In fact, no motive for his actions can be found in the play other than his professed desire to be “the only love god,” (II.ii.365) which attests not to his good nature but to his propensity for chaos and to his inclination to “script” and manipulate the experiences of those around him. Don Pedro and Don John’s proclivity for control creates a distinct family resemblance between the two vice-like half-brothers. However, because he acts as the opposing force to Don John, Don Pedro’s chaotic interferences lead to happy results for the characters affected by his actions. Yet his willingness to manipulate and to deceive highlights a darker, threatening aspect of theatrical diversion.

Don Pedro’s disturbing desire to manipulate appears most obviously at the masquerade, for despite the concealment of his face, his exuberant, flirtatious nature emanates unhindered through his plaster mask. Indeed, his mischievousness emerges the very moment Don Pedro makes his entrance. He is the first of his party to speak, entreating Hero to “walk a bout with her friend,” (II.ii.81) the word “friend” used here to suggest a lover. This banter continues as Hero, taking Don Pedro’s lead, flirts just as unrestrainedly before they exit together. While the actions of Don Pedro and Hero after this exchange are not explicitly shown (there are no stage directions indicating what they do at this time) their flirtation hints at an attraction between them, despite that Don Pedro’s face is hidden behind a mask. And though by the end of the masquerade Don Pedro wins Hero for Claudio, doubt lingers in the audience’s mind as to what transpired between Don Pedro and Hero and just what motivated him to woo her for Claudio in the first place. The audience’s misgivings build as Claudio develops his own suspicions of Don Pedro’s intentions. Claudio is so easily convinced by Don John that Don Pedro “woos [Hero] for himself” (II.ii.166) that the audience must also question Don Pedro’s character and his true motives for trying to win Hero for Claudio. Even after the audience learns that Don Pedro has not betrayed Claudio’s trust,

Don Pedro persists in his flirtation, turning instead to Beatrice. He engages in witty banter with her too, promising to find her a husband as he did for Claudio. When Beatrice flirts, asking for “one of [his] father’s getting,” Don Pedro contributes to the mood, facetiously offering himself to her (II.ii.303-308). Beatrice declines his offer with yet another clever witticism, but Don Pedro is undeterred, content to flirt and plot as he pleases. When Don Pedro tells Leonato, Hero, and Claudio of his plan to make Benedick and Beatrice fall in love with one another, he claims that “[Cupid’s] glory shall be ours, for we are the only love gods” (II.ii.364-365), indicating that to him, love is a trifling affair to be controlled by clever deceiving men, such as himself.

Indeed, that Don Pedro toys with love as he does throughout the masquerade scene suggests just how similar his character is to those of the men referenced in Balthasar’s song in a later scene. The song characterizes men as “deceivers ever...to one thing constant never,” indicating society’s belief that men are inherently predisposed to infidelity (II.iii.62-63). Don Pedro’s actions in the masquerade of the previous act and his intent to deceive Beatrice and Benedick reveal that Don Pedro himself resembles the deceiving male figure the song describes. Don Pedro goes even so far as figuratively to cuckold his friend Claudio by flirting so heavily with Hero when he takes her aside to woo her. Don Pedro’s deceit (intentional or not) is so convincing that Claudio even believes he has been cuckolded until he is convinced otherwise. The plausibility of Don Pedro’s deception paints him as a man who could be so inconstant, who could have “one foot in sea, and one on shore” (II.iii.62) as he interferes in the affairs of love. Claudio, at any rate, recognizes Don Pedro’s behavior as evidence that men are “deceivers ever.” Don Pedro’s role as the paragon of masculinity celebrated in Balthasar’s song is never shaken, persisting to the very end of the play when Don Pedro is the subtle master of the final scene. Though Don Pedro says very little in the scene itself, his presence at the wedding reminds the

audience that had it not been for Don Pedro and his actions, the triumphant marriage could not have occurred at all. Furthermore, Don Pedro is the only one of his companions (except his villainous, bastard brother) who has no woman on his arm as the curtain closes. Don Pedro's failure to respond when Benedick urges "Get thee a wife, get thee a wife!" (V.iv.120) only brings to light the prince's freedom from the fear of one day being cuckolded and made into a fool.

But Branagh's Don Pedro does not illustrate the same unrestrained masculine freedom that Shakespeare's prince would have displayed on stage. While Shakespeare's Don Pedro is the precocious leader of a band of vivacious young men, Branagh's Don Pedro seems more like a protective and trustworthy older brother with the best interest of his little siblings at heart. Branagh's casting of Denzel Washington as Don Pedro only emphasizes the inherent trustworthiness of his character. From the start, Washington's Don Pedro is warm and welcoming, proudly displaying a broad and dazzling grin as he is received by Leonato. Yet despite film-Pedro's general allure, Branagh's portrayal of his interaction with Hero at the masquerade diminishes his second role as the flirtatious deceiver. Indeed, Branagh entirely removes Don Pedro's flirtatious interaction with Hero. While the line, "Lady, will you walk a bout with your friend?" remains, the coy teasing between Don Pedro and Hero is nowhere to be seen in the film. This deletion greatly reduces Don Pedro's perceived interest in Hero as well as his prowess as a lady's man, which Branagh never restores to Don Pedro despite many opportunities to do so. For example, as Claudio watches Don Pedro woo Hero from a distance, Branagh allows the viewer briefly to see what Claudio sees—a visibly impassioned speech made by the masked prince and an innocent hug after he unmask. The only suggestive element remaining in their interaction is the kissing of Hero's hands—hardly an echo of the flirtation that

would have occurred on the Elizabethan stage. In fact, because both the viewer and Claudio witness this scene, the viewer trusts Don Pedro far more than the play audience would, for in the play Don Pedro is not on stage when he woos Hero on Claudio's behalf. Thus, the viewer of the film questions Claudio's gullibility rather than honest Don Pedro's intentions; all doubts in Don Pedro are erased from the viewer's mind. There is no reason for the viewer to suspect Don Pedro of any wrongdoing.

Later in the same scene, Branagh reasserts the innocence of Don Pedro's intentions when he exhibits an apparent unrequited love for Beatrice—far more serious than the flirtation Don Pedro indulges in the play. As Claudio and Hero are successfully brought together thanks to Don Pedro's wooing, Don Pedro and Beatrice move away from the lovers and Leonato to sit alone. The banter between the two begins as the same exchange of wit prescribed in the play text, but in Branagh's version, when Beatrice asks if Don Pedro can find her a husband of his "father's getting," he responds not in jest, but in earnest. The camera cuts to a close-up shot of Don Pedro's face to bring attention to his sincerity as he gazes solemnly into Beatrice's eyes. He then says softly, "Will you have me, Lady?" his voice losing its characteristic confident tone. Beatrice is visibly both shocked and moved by his proposal, and her wit falters for a beat as somber music, low and mournful, fills the her silence. When she recovers herself she creases her brow sadly, saying "No my lord." In a traditional interpretation of the play this statement would lead seamlessly into the rest of Beatrice's joke: "...unless I might have another for working days: your grace is too costly to wear every day" (II.ii.309-310). In the film, however, the joke is postponed as the camera cuts briefly back to Don Pedro who averts his eyes and draws back slightly, as though he were physically pushed back by Beatrice's gentle rejection. Beatrice haltingly attempts to lighten the mood by reverting to her ever-handy wit, smiling awkwardly

until Don Pedro lets out a laugh and shakes his head, gracefully accepting her decision. By the time Don Pedro's confidence returns after this tender exchange, the viewer is ever more convinced of his goodness. Furthermore, the viewer sympathizes with him. The timidity with which Branagh's Don Pedro approaches Beatrice, a woman much his social inferior, suggests that he is already aware of the negative answer he will receive. The proud, self-assured prince, suddenly humbled, reveals himself to be vulnerable and unable to act as a "love god" for himself. Isolated by his high rank, Don Pedro sadly seeks what he cannot have. The poignancy of his vulnerability renders him a sympathetic, trustworthy figure.

This softening of Don Pedro in Branagh's interpretation of *Much Ado* would not have worked in the context of an Elizabethan performance. For instance, in light of the romantic nature of his exchange with Beatrice, the plan Don Pedro hatches to bring Beatrice and Benedick together makes little logical sense. Some might argue that Don Pedro's feelings provide the motive for the plan itself, citing that such benevolent feelings toward Beatrice would prompt Don Pedro to bring her happiness through Benedick. But as convenient as the idea of Don Pedro plotting out of love for Beatrice seems, it makes no sense on the whole, for there is no concrete proof that Benedick could bring Beatrice happiness, or even that Don Pedro recognizes that they would be compatible beyond their propensity to engage in verbal sparring matches. In fact, play-Don Pedro's inspiration to bring the apparently incompatible couple together might derive directly from the monumental challenge such a task would present. As a self-proclaimed "love god," Shakespeare's Don Pedro would have seen a chance to prove his power by joining the bickering duo. Ultimately, the true motive for the plan comes back to Don Pedro's vice-like appreciation for chaos and manipulation for sport. His desire to become like the love god, Cupid, is the only possible explanation for toying with the forces of love.

But even though Branagh's softened Don Pedro makes little sense in the logic of the play, he serves a crucial role in Branagh's translation of the play into a modern film. In the play, Don Pedro shares the metatheatrical role of the playwright with Don John. Don Pedro, as he appears in the play text, is a vice-like character whose decisions sway the direction of the plot, his motives vague or simply nonexistent. Like many of Shakespeare's plays, *Much Ado About Nothing* contains moments of metatheater in which some character or event in the play breaks down the audience's suspended disbelief. In *Much Ado*, Don Pedro constantly dismantles the fourth wall between the actors on stage and the audience with his vice-like actions, bringing to mind the playwright himself. Branagh's film removes this aspect of metatheater by ascribing an actual motive to Don Pedro's actions. Despite that Don Pedro's actions cannot be said to directly help or hurt Beatrice in finding love, the viewer believes in his good will so thoroughly that even Don Pedro's awkward interaction with Leonato directly following Beatrice's rejection seems to translate into a motive for bringing Beatrice and Benedick together. In the wake of such a sentimental scene, Don Pedro's faltering, "She cannot endure to hear tell of a husband," sounds much more like a pledge to help Beatrice find happiness than it does a humorous response to his rejection. As a result, the viewer perceives Don Pedro's motive as a good-natured attempt to bring happiness to one he himself could not make happy. Furthermore, film-Don Pedro has a second motive in concocting the matchmaking scheme as it could provide an opportunity to exercise control over a love he cannot have. The modern audience senses pain in Don Pedro's rejection, and sympathizes with him for the isolation he feels from love. By giving Don Pedro these well-intentioned motives as well as a sympathetic psychology, Branagh deprives him of his metatheatrical role as the playwright and puppeteer and instead draws in the modern audience with a more realistic and believable character. Because cinema does not commonly incorporate

the same metatheatrical themes as did so many of Shakespeare's plays, film-Pedro's motives, illogical as they are for the Elizabethan stage, actually work in facilitating Branagh's translation of narrative of the Shakespearean stage into a film. The audience is satisfied with the motive behind Don Pedro's actions; it is content to see Pedro as a three-dimensional human being, instead of an unruly mischief-maker. Ultimately, Branagh's Don Pedro reflects modern expectations of motive and character. Thus, it is Branagh's Pedro and not Shakespeare's that offers the most convenient route in terms of modern cinematic conventions.

Yet while Branagh's translation of Don Pedro's character facilitates the modern audience's understanding of his role within the narrative, this translation accounts for an unintended consequence affecting the message of the narrative itself. In softening Don Pedro's vice-like tendencies by reading a romantic attraction to Beatrice into his character, Branagh sacrifices not only the "wild side" of Don Pedro but also the message inherent in that aspect of his character. The motives Branagh gives Don Pedro for bringing Benedick and Beatrice together deprive Don Pedro of his role as the playwright as his perceived mission to both bring happiness to Beatrice and bury his own emotions removes his distance from the other characters in the play. Certainly, Don Pedro still manipulates, still contrives the crucial matchmaking plot; but, because Branagh entangles Don Pedro in the romantic events of the play, Don Pedro appears at once vulnerable and powerless in the affairs of love despite his claim to be a "love god." Because he is emotionally invested in his plan, Don Pedro becomes just another character rather than a master of all the others. Branagh's Don Pedro, then, serves as a stark contrast to the unfettered prince of Shakespeare's narrative. The unrestrained playwright we see in Shakespeare's Don Pedro brings to light the power—and the danger—of theater and narrative itself. Because he is not emotionally invested in the Benedick-Beatrice romance in the play, Don Pedro is able to

make the lovers into characters in his own personal drama. Though his manipulations are all in good fun, the audience would have seen the danger of his control. By constructing false narratives and convincing Benedick and Beatrice to believe them, Don Pedro illustrates the power of the playwright to deceive audience. While one might contend that Don Pedro's good-natured playwriting proves that theater's nature is jolly and harmless, it is not ultimately difficult to make the leap to see how one might instead cruelly manipulate for evil ends. For instance, Iago, the antagonist of Shakespeare's *Othello*, illustrates the danger of manipulation. In treating the other characters like puppets, Iago skillfully fools Othello into believing that his dotting wife has been unfaithful. Iago's plot, in the end, is fatal; both Othello and Desdemona lie dead when the curtain closes. Though *Othello* ends with death and *Much Ado* with marriage, it is undeniable that Iago is to *Othello*'s ending as Don Pedro is to *Much Ado*'s. They are both puppeteers, playwrights who stand as Shakespeare's self-reflexive efforts to warn the audience about the potentially dangerous nature of theater and narrative.

In making Don Pedro "complex" and "three-dimensional" by a modern film audience's standard, Branagh's film undermines the self-reflexive warning about story-telling, once so thoroughly embedded in Shakespeare's play. Though the modern audience certainly sympathizes with the Branagh's sad prince, standing alone at the glorious finale, it is deprived the complexity of the metatheatrical message of the play text. Of course, the richness of Shakespeare's plays is impossible to transfer completely onto the modern screen. Time constraints, modern expectations, and the pressing need to generate profit all contribute to the dilution of the original plays. This may not be such a bad thing. After all, today film is the easiest way to access Shakespeare's works. Exposure to these plays through films like Branagh's may prompt a viewer to take another look at the original play, encountering for the first time the brilliant subtleties

Shakespeare constructs. However, the alteration of Don Pedro in Branagh's film much alters the message of *Much Ado About Nothing* as a whole. Don Pedro, manipulator, "love god" and "deceiver ever," is lost in translation, his warning lost with him.

--I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this assignment.

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