

## **Film Review: Joss Whedon's *Much Ado About Nothing*: Whedon, Branagh, and the Anxiety of Influence**

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Long before he was the internationally famous head of a major Hollywood superhero franchise, Joss Whedon was a beloved writer/director of cult TV shows, boasting a dedicated following of fanatics who parsed his every quirky turn of phrase. In the 1990s, when Whedon was building his fanbase with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Kenneth Branagh was at the height of his dominance as a mainstream interpreter of screen Shakespeare, thanks to the series of adaptations that he inaugurated with 1989's *Henry V*. While Shakespeare plays like *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Macbeth* have received multiple big-screen adaptations, *Much Ado About Nothing* has received only two: Kenneth Branagh's own in 1993, and Joss Whedon's, exactly twenty years later. This essay examines Whedon's adaptation through the lens of Branagh's, noting the many conceptual, stylistic, and industrial similarities that unite them—for despite Whedon's insistence that Branagh's *Much Ado* did not provide him with an adaptational roadmap, the films demonstrate striking similarities in context and content that can't be simply explained by their shared source text.

Indeed, Whedon takes pains to distance his own version of *Much Ado* from Branagh's. Whedon refers to the 1993 film only occasionally in interviews (and generally has to be prompted by his interviewers to mention it at all); clearly he prefers to avoid the issue of comparison. In the introduction that prefaces the published screenplay for Whedon's film (in itself a structural precedent set by each of Branagh's own published screenplays), Whedon's disavowal of the earlier film is much stronger: "I didn't want to try to make what Branagh had already made," he asserts (Screenplay 24). In describing the tonal differences between his and Branagh's film, Whedon rather dismissively references what he calls a "Branagh-like experience" in working with his own cast, surrounded by "sun-dappled vines and a general air of joy and kind of sunny good times and when I looked at the movie as a movie, I realized that that wasn't the sort of overriding emotion that I was trying to evoke" (Screenplay 21). While Whedon expressly denies having used the earlier film as a model for his own, the new *Much Ado* bears unmistakable marks of Branagh's influence.

One style trait often associated with Kenneth Branagh is his use of a core group of collaborators; screening a Branagh Shakespeare film is, at points, much like watching a polished repertory company. Branagh's *Much Ado* features cast staples like Richard Briers (Leonato), Richard Clifford (Conrade), Jimmy Yuill (Friar), and Brian Blessed (Antonio). Behind the camera, Branagh relies on collaborators like production

designer Tim Harvey, cinematographer Roger Lanser, and composer Patrick Doyle (who often appears in character in Branagh films, as he does here, as a provider of diegetic music). In this way, Branagh's film preserves the "company" aesthetic that characterizes much of his filmed Shakespeare work. Alongside core cast and crew members, the presence of American film stars like Denzel Washington (Don Pedro), Keanu Reeves (Don John), and Michael Keaton (Dogberry) testifies to Branagh's desire not only to mix accents, but to combine American box office weight with classically trained British Shakespeare savvy.

As regarding his own casting practices, Whedon expresses a similar commitment to allowing his actors to perform without dialect, claiming that "[t]he thing about Shakespeare is that he works in any voice" (Screenplay 28-29). He refers to his cast as his "troupe," and indeed, nearly every actor in the film is familiar to Whedon's fanbase. Core collaborators like Amy Acker (Beatrice), Alexis Denisof (Benedick), and Nathan Fillion (Dogberry) are fixtures in Whedon-helmed projects, and most of the performers in *Much Ado* list multiple Whedon productions on their resumes. Actors who work with Joss Whedon become famously, fiercely loyal to him: for instance, Tom Lenk, who plays Verges in this film, and who also appeared in Whedon's film *Cabin in the Woods* as well as in a recurring role on *Buffy* and *Angel*, has claimed that he'd do "performance art in a water fountain" if Whedon asked (Screenplay 31). (Fortunately, he needn't bother; Branagh himself took care of this in his own *Much Ado*.) Such intense personal loyalty allows Whedon to staff boutique projects like this film and *Dr. Horrible's Sing Along Blog*; further, this company aesthetic, much like the one facilitated by Branagh, helps to create the very convincing sense of family and intimacy in the Whedon film.

Another point of similarity between the films concerns the locations upon which they were shot. Surrounding its original release, promotional literature for Branagh's film made "much ado" of the fact that its setting is Mona Lisa's country home, the Villa Vignamaggio. This inspires in Branagh a visual style that is suitably pictorialist; note, for instance, the sweeping crane shot that marks the film's conclusion, the self-conscious artifice of the montage sequence that intercuts the nighttime revels at the heart of his film, and the lovingly photographed villa and gardens. The principal set of Whedon's film, famously, is his own house: designed by Whedon's architect spouse, the home and its grounds provide a casually elegant and convincing setting for the "house-party" action of the plot.

Whedon's decision to use his own home as the principal shooting location for his film is motivated less by his palpable love for the property and more by the film's own unique budgetary concerns and conditions of production. Filmed in a super-secret, twelve-day shoot and financed by Whedon's Bellwether production company on a bare-bones budget, *Much Ado* was conceived as a small project, a palate-cleanser of sorts, to be enjoyed between obligations to the massive *Marvel Avengers* franchise. (Notably, Branagh himself directed an early iteration in the franchise, 2011's *Thor*.)

The two *Much Ados* share striking similarities in content that do not necessarily proceed from their shared source text. For example, both films choose to dramatize the play's central trick—the "window scene," or Borachio's seduction of Margaret in Hero's clothing. Indeed, windows are as persistent a motif in Branagh's film as mirrors are in Whedon's. Throughout Branagh's *Much Ado*, characters (most often Hero and Beatrice) are shown "framed" in a window, shot from the apparent point-of-view of an admiring onlooker. The frequency of this motif serves to highlight the film's focus on overhearing and appearances, while at the same time foreshadowing the fact that the film's main conflict revolves around a woman in a window. In Shakespeare's text, the "proof" of Hero's disloyalty is rendered verbally; the event occurs offstage and is entirely constructed through the dialogue of other characters. Branagh, like Whedon, chooses to make this incident part of the onscreen action. The final lines of Shakespeare's 3.2, Don John's goading of Claudio and the Prince, provoke an ellipsis in Branagh's film: suddenly, the evening has arrived, and the three men are gazing up at Hero's window. The deception is made complete by Borachio's slightly slurred delivery of the

words “here...oh,” which is naturally interpreted as “Hero” by the men gathered below.

The dramatic necessity of this scene is clear: it is certainly more effective for a screen audience to see the event played out, rather than to reconstruct it from dialogue alone. Further, the scene helps to align viewer sympathies with Claudio, as the audience laments both the dangerous betrayal (Borachio and Margaret’s, not Hero’s) and Claudio’s unbelievable naiveté, which has not been corrected nearly as much as Branagh expects: even backlit, in silhouette, Kate Beckinsale’s Hero and Imelda Staunton’s Margaret bear little resemblance. On this point, Whedon’s film is more convincing, as is his treatment of Margaret throughout.

While Branagh re-orders Shakespeare’s text in order to present the window scene in its real-time flow, Whedon instead makes this a flashback and allows Borachio to narrate the action in voiceover. One fascinating and powerful character moment emerges from this flashback scene, as we see Margaret’s obvious discomfort with being asked to wear Hero’s clothing for Borachio’s benefit: it has become clear by this point that Borachio’s motivation is his own obsession with Hero. This character moment pays off for Whedon later on, when Margaret tries to convince Hero to select a different dress for her wedding ceremony.

Another element of Whedon’s film that seems to find its generative force in Branagh’s involves the relationship between Don John and Conrade in the “plain-dealing villain” scene. Both films sexualize the relationship between the characters, connoting Don John’s lechery while adding action to an otherwise expository scene. Branagh films Keanu Reeves’s Don John receiving a torchlit oil massage from Conrade as he delivers his speech, a choice potentially engineered to capitalize on Reeves’s chief strength in 1993—his appearance—and to downplay the actor’s obvious lack of facility with the text. Whedon stages the same scene as a chatty sex romp between Don John and his girlfriend—not servant—Conrade. By the time Borachio enters the scene in Whedon’s version, and John can’t be bothered to stop “handling” Conrade, the scene recalls a similar moment in Branagh’s *Hamlet*, when Reynaldo relays the results of his surveillance of Laertes to Polonius, who’s actively occupied with a prostitute.

Finally, I’d like to consider the way in which each director treats the flow of Act 5, for I’ve long noted that Branagh’s scene transpositions seem to scramble the narrative logic of the text. Branagh’s film essentially “flips” scene 5.2 (which begins with Benedick composing a love song to Beatrice) with 5.3 (Claudio’s penance at the tomb of Hero); rather than occur on the same day, these events in the film take place in an evening and on the subsequent day. In the source text, the events of Act 5 play out as follows: in 5.1, Leonato and Antonio confront Don Pedro and Claudio, Benedick challenges Claudio, Don John and Borachio’s plot is revealed and Claudio’s penance is set; in 5.2, Benedick tries to compose a poem for Beatrice, who meets him to find out if he has issued his challenge to Claudio, and Ursula relays the news about Don John’s plot and Hero’s innocence; in 5.3, Claudio performs his penance at the tomb that evening; and the “real,” second wedding takes place the next day. In Branagh’s film, Claudio’s penance occurs the night before the film’s equivalent of 5.2, thus straining credibility by asking us to believe that Beatrice, Benedick, and the rest of Leonato’s house do not hear about Borachio’s confession until the day *after* it is revealed to the other central characters. Whedon’s film version replicates this same scrambled flow, rendering Beatrice’s 5.2 conversation with Benedick even more baffling: we saw her watch Claudio’s procession *with Hero*, and therefore we are confused to hear her checking in on Benedick’s challenge and reacting with surprise to the news of the confession. Even more curiously, the published screenplay of Whedon’s film renders Act 5 in its textual, non-scrambled flow, which seems to suggest that the flipped timeline was a late revision, and which leaves Branagh’s film as a fairly obvious precedent.

When asked how his version of *Much Ado* distinguishes itself, Whedon responds with the familiar postmodernist’s lament: “[E]verything you could ever say or do somebody’s said or done,” he sighs, “Usually by Shakespeare, and usually better” (Screenplay 18). Here, without naming names, Whedon is surely referencing the “anxiety of influence” that must come hand-in-hand with essentially rebooting a fairly popular Shakespeare adaptation for a new generation. Frankly, Branagh’s stamp is all over this film, and while Whedon

claims to want the play to speak for itself, the voice it uses sounds suspiciously like Branagh's.

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