Sins of Omission: Textual Deletions in Branagh's *Much Ado About Nothing*

William Brugger
Brigham Young University—Idaho

Kenneth Branagh has almost single-handedly brought back the Bard. His 1993 adaptation of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* resoundingly reminded audiences everywhere that "the play's [still] the thing." And perhaps no other Shakespeare production has been so responsible for touching off what has become an avalanche of successive (and mostly successful) remakes: nearly thirty English-language versions of twelve plays between 1993-1999—a third of which were romantic comedies.

While *Much Ado About Nothing* has been produced as a feature film before—four times, to be exact: in 1926 [silent], 1956, 1963, and 1973—credit for *the* modern cinema version of the 400-year-old play goes to Branagh, whose sunny adaptation (now ten years old) warmed the hearts of both undiscerning moviegoers and discriminating reviewers, many of whom applauded the film's "user-friendly feeling"[1]—the result of Branagh's insistence on broad audience accessibility.

Wondering About "The Wunderkind"

But Branagh's sun-basking also induced some sunburn: many critics—among them Shakespearean purists—were disappointed that the "actor-director Wunderkind"[2] did not produce a more definitive *Much Ado.* One reviewer concluded Branagh erroneously "cater[ed] to a youth culture impatient with too many fine points, too much poetry,"[3] viewing his "populist approach" to the play as a failure to take full advantage of a golden opportunity. Moreover, critics murmured, Branagh's experience, reputation, training, and talent could have attracted a similarly qualified cast and crew. Branagh also had complete administrative control, a picturesque Tuscan countryside, run of a fifteenth-century villa, a decent $8,000,000 budget, and a market niche—carved out with his highly acclaimed 1989 *Henry V* (with help from Zeffirelli's 1990 *Hamlet*). To top it off, Branagh had a perennially popular playscript.

What, then, clouded the production's otherwise sunny forecast? Many complaints were cast-related, ranging from contempt for "a gang of pale-cheeked, thin-lipped British actors"[4] to "American actors [who] will never equal British ones in Shakespeare."[5] But Branagh was most commonly criticized for "cut[ting] and transpos[ing] much of the play, making for less ado and more nothing,"[6] resulting, according to *Washington Post* reviewer Hal Hinson, in a "Shakespeare's Greatest Hits" production, "broad and unintimidating and easy on the eyes." His overall impression echoed others': "Somehow, the movie feels insubstantial."[7]

"Cut!"

For his part, Branagh readily admits to barbering the Bard: "We did cut lines and occasionally scenes," he writes in his *Much Ado About Nothing: Screenplay, Introduction, and Notes on the Making of the Movie.*[8] Exactly how much he sheared Shakespeare Branagh never says (and reviewers for large city newspapers and national news magazines were reluctant to speculate, let alone calculate). Regardless, Shakespearean purists tend to view any significant textual omission as a loss, and, in Branagh's case, their concerns may be justified, as the following table illustrates. Using G. Blakemore Evans' *Riverside Shakespeare* edition of *Much Ado About Nothing* as a standard, this table gives the number of lines Branagh cut, scene by scene, as well as accompanying percentages:

Act/scene	*Riverside* # of lines	Branagh Lines Cut	Percent Cut
Act 1.1	328	128	39
Act 1.2	27	27	100
Act 1.3	75	29	39
Act 2.1	387	134	35
Act 2.2	57	36	63
Act 2.3	264	117	44
Act 3.1	116	77	66
Act 3.2	134	107	80
Act 3.3	180	121	67
Act 3.4	99	99	100
Act 3.5	64	34	53
Act 4.1	336	169	40
Act 4.2	87	28	32
Act 5.1	332	161	48
Act 5.2	104	42	40
Act 5.3	33	23	70
Act 5.4	129	38	29
Total lines:	2,752	1,370	50

Put simply, Branagh cut roughly 50% of the play (averaging scene percentages actually yields an even higher figure: nearly 56%), explaining Hinson's—and others'—sense of *Much Ado*'s "insubstantiality." The amount is surprising, and perhaps, to purists, even staggering. Branagh retained only about twelve more lines than he cut. Two scenes were deleted entirely: 1.2 (Leonato's mistaking Hero's true wooer) and 3.4 (Hero's premarital preparation), which Branagh said (after filming it), "seemed finally to frustrate."[9] Act 3.2 (Don Pedro and Claudio's teasing of a clean-shaven, perfumed Benedick) was cut by 80%; Act 5.3 (Claudio's visit to Hero's "tomb") by 70%. The play's conclusion—Act 5.4—fared best, reduced by a relatively mild 29%. And, as for the play's five acts, each was edited heavily:

Act 1	Act 2	Act 3	Act 4	Act 5
43%	41%	74%	47%	44%

Of course, these estimates are rough; a word count would render more accurate figures. Also, in the *Riverside* edition, as in others, a line is not necessarily complete; often, it may be comprised of a single phrase or clause—even a single "orphan" word—because of double-column formatting, right margin justification, and light hyphenation.

Assessing the Damage

Defending his actions, Branagh claims his reason for trimming the text was to keep the plot moving quickly.[10] Of course, deciding what does or does not advance a Shakespearean plot would be a challenge for any director because, whether read or seen, a plot's progress and pace is subjective and personal, a function of readers' or viewers' perceptions. What one considers advancement, another may view as stagnation, regression, or digression—and vice versa.

For example, Branagh omitted lines 22-57 of Act 2.2, roughly two-thirds of the scene in which Borachio gives Don John explicit instructions for deceiving Don Pedro and Claudio. Does the scene advance the plot? It depends: uninitiated audiences equating only successive physical events with plot advancement might conclude it does not, yet more experienced audiences glean the scene's psychological value, viewing Borachio as the true mastermind, possessing a level of intelligence Don John esteems enough to pay for. (In Branagh's version, Borachio is reduced to a mere informer.) Don John, as eager as Borachio is methodical, appears more the subordinate sidekick, who asks questions of the more cunning Borachio ("What life is in that, to be the death of this marriage?"

and "What proof shall I make of that?" [2.2.20, 27][11]). The omitted text reveals that it is Don John who commits to follow Borachio's directions ("I will put it in practice" and "I will presently go" [2.2.52, 57]), and his degree of dedication is disturbing. So the scene does advance the plot. By analogy, the scene is an unseen undercurrent rather than an obvious wave, both of which effectively move seawater.

In addition, structurally, the villains' conspiracy follows another conspiracy (Don Pedro's scheme to unite Beatrice and Benedick) and precedes yet another (Hero's giving directions to Ursula and Margaret for ensnaring Beatrice in Act 3.1—also omitted from the film). A meaningful motif emerges on paper which remains blurry in Branagh's abridgement: the amount of energy Don Pedro's company earnestly expends in uniting one couple is equaled by Don John's company in destroying another. Add to this the Friar's conspiracy to "resurrect" Hero (again, heavily edited by Branagh), and the motif is strengthened even further.

With so much excised text, there are other losses in terms of character and thematic development, humor, poetry, language—even truth. As in Henry V's Battle at Agincourt, the number of "casualties" in Branagh's "merry war" is high.

Character Underdevelopment

Though not mortally wounded, among the first injured are most of *Much Ado*'s characters, who, almost without exception, were more dynamic and dimensional in 1598 than in 1993. For starters, Branagh passed on the past, omitting bits of character history. Both Benedick and Beatrice, before the play opens, had trouble committing to eligible others. Leonato complains, "[S]he mocks all her wooers out of suit" (2.1.349-50), while Don Pedro notes, "He hath twice or thrice cut Cupid's bow-string, and the little hangman dare not shoot at him" (3.2.10-11). Even Borachio has a history, as a member of the watch recognizes him as having "been a vile thief this seven year" (Act 3.3.126). As in life, such information both piques curiosity and promotes understanding. For example, Beatrice and Benedick's behavior is more endearing and memorable if viewed as more defensive than offensive. Their history teaches us that, underneath their facades, each deeply desires marriage. This knowledge, in turn, makes their instantaneous infatuation more believable.

In Act 3.5, Dogberry adapts an old proverb: "When ale is in, wit is out," rendering it as, "When the age is in, the wit is out" (34). For whatever reason, much of the wit is out of Branagh's film.

Many key characters are lobotomized. In the text, Claudio comes closer to holding his own with Benedick, as evidenced by his well-timed and well-aimed shots at a wearied Benedick, who entreats Claudio to "choose another subject" (5.1.136-37). In print, despite his age, Leonato's wit is in: when Benedick chidingly wonders aloud whether Leonato ever questions Hero's mother's identity, Leonato retorts, "[N]o, for then you were a child" (1.1.107-108), meaning that, at the time of Hero's conception, Benedick was too sexually immature to pose a threat. Conrade's wit is also withheld, as demonstrated in his ability to extend a metaphor. In the film, he cautions Don John, "[I]t is impossible you should take true root but by the fair weather that you make yourself," while Shakespeare grafted, "It is needful that you frame [create] the season for your own harvest" (1.3.24-26). Even Don John is denied what may be the play's best barb, a pun on possession: "Even she—Leonato's Hero, your Hero, every man's Hero" (3.2.106-107).

Shakespeare's Margaret is sharp: virtually all of her seventy-six lines are witty and she is a much more active participant in the written play's events; on film, unfortunately, she is, with a meager three lines (4%), effectively struck dumb. A once-clever Hero has also been cleaved: only thirty-nine of an original 137 lines remain (or 28%). What unsuspecting moviegoers are denied is not so much Hero's humor *per se*, but her poetry. Prompting Margaret to place Beatrice within earshot, Hero says—alliteratively, figuratively, imaginatively—"Bid her steal into the pleached bower, where honeysuckles, ripened by the sun, forbid the sun to enter, like favorites made proud by princes, that advance their pride against that power that bred it" (3.1.7-11). She is referring, of course, to Beatrice, and warming up to cozen her cousin. In doing so, she accurately refers to Benedick as a "cover'd fire, consum[ing] away in sighs, wast[ing] inwardly" (3.1.77-78), probably expecting Beatrice to apply the simile to herself. Like her marginalized gentlewoman, Hero is less passive on paper than Branagh permits. In her flirtation with Don Pedro (2.1.88-99), she is surprisingly assertive ("I may say so when I please" and "When I like your favor"), as is the case when she openly challenges her suspicious father to prove she talked with another on the eve of her wedding (4.1.180-84).

Even so, both Hero and Margaret suffer identity crises in Branagh's rendition. Perhaps the two women got off comparatively easy: the three inadvertently heroic men enlisted to provide for their safety—Hugh Oatcake and George and Francis Seacole—are nameless in Branagh's film.

Beyond characters' wit, much of their attitude is also absent. Careful readers of the written play get a glimpse of Don John's alienation, as Borachio bursts into his room declaring, "I came yonder from a great supper. The Prince your brother is royally entertain'd by Leonato" (1.3.42-43). The Prince's entertainment afforded by Leonato contrasts sharply with Don John's estrangement from Leonato's entire household. Revealing his attitude toward marriage, Don John wonders aloud to Borachio, "[Who] is he for a fool that betroths himself to unquietness?" (1.3.47-48). These successive images—along with Don John's unfair assessment of Hero in the same scene and his willingness to actually hire Borachio later—combine to form a picture of Don John found nowhere in the film, and offer some motive for his criminal behavior.

Readers, with clues from the text, may also draw some conclusions about Don Pedro's character. Left out of the film is his decision to leave Messina, according to the play's sketchy time-frame, roughly three weeks short. He informs a puzzled Claudio, "I do but stay till your marriage be consummate, and then I go toward Arragon" (3.2.1-2), his homeland. Perhaps the Prince is drawn home to search for a wife of his own. After all, he has secured Hero for Claudio, and has some assurance that Benedick and Beatrice will unite. It is interesting to note that the Prince does not mention staying until Benedick's marriage is consummated. Once Benedick and Beatrice are betrothed, Benedick observes, "Prince, thou are sad" (5.4.122). Fortunately, Don Pedro is spared a response by a messenger's news of his brother's capture.

Severed Thematic Threads

By cutting so many lines, Branagh also cut certain thematic threads which readers familiar with the play anticipate: cuckoldry, disease, and fashion—among others. Perhaps the most notable is the theme of noting, or taking notice of others' speech, actions, or presence. Shakespeare has virtually every character participate in the weaving of this strand. Beatrice, for example, offers this insightful commentary on Benedick's disposition: "[When] not mark'd, or not laugh'd at, [he] strikes . . . into melancholy" (2.1.147-48)—which is, comically, exactly what happens a mere fifty lines later. Don Pedro and his singer, Balthasar, have pun with the theme. Encouraging a reluctant Balthasar to sing, Don Pedro says, ". . . if thou wilt hold longer argument, do it in notes" to which Balthasar replies, "Note this before my notes: there's not a note of mine

that's worth the noting" (2.3.52-54). Friar Francis takes the theme to another extreme: his usage is associated with moral discernment, a means by which to detect personal honesty and purity. "By noting . . . the lady [Hero]," he can certify her innocence (4.1.158). Similarly, Leonato, about to meet his daughter's slanderer face to face, employs the term as a future means of defense: "Which is the villain? Let me see his eyes, that when I note another man like him I may avoid him" (5.1.260-61).

Foregone Foreshadowing

With so much foreshadowing in his plays, it seems reasonable that Shakespeare wanted to prepare audiences for upcoming events. As true today as in his time, greater audience comprehension meant greater audience satisfaction, which, in turn, meant a boost to both reputation and revenues. Beyond assisting the audience, however, such plot precursors demonstrate a writer's sense of story direction and timing. Unfortunately and predictably, Branagh removed all but a few foreshadowing events from his film. For example, as already mentioned, Branagh axed all of Act 1.2. Very early in the play, Leonato automatically, yet mistakenly, trusts Antonio's account. His refusal to verify inaccurate information results in a misunderstanding that, luckily, will cause only minor embarrassment to a few people later that evening. However, Leonato's lapse in judgment parallels and foreshadows his brief, but much more significant oversight in Act 3.5. It is one thing to trust an Antonio (a sibling, a life-long companion, and responsible estate caretaker), quite another a Dogberry (a well-intentioned idiot). Leonato, therefore, makes a grosser error, this time with calamitous consequences. Had he simply taken time to note Dogberry's message, he would have spared Hero—indeed, his entire household—considerable suffering. Without preparation, in the form of Act 1.2, audiences are denied this drama.

Those having seen only Branagh's film will never know that much of Shakespeare's foreshadowing in this comedy, surprisingly, is ominous. Shortly after Don Pedro's arrival, Leonato unwittingly says to his guest, "[W]hen you depart from me, sorrow abides and happiness takes his leave" (1.1.101-102)—prefiguring their falling out in Act 5. Announcing Leonato's invitation to a month-long Messina vacation, Don Pedro adds, "and he [Leonato] heartily prays some occasion may detain us longer" (1.1.149-50). Within a few days of the army's arrival, both men will, temporarily at least, come to regret the offer. In the same scene, Don Pedro tells Claudio, "[T]hou shalt see how apt it is to learn any hard lesson that may do

thee good" (1.1.293-94), a line which becomes something of a prophecy by Act 3. Finally, in Act 3, Claudio, anxious to hear Don John's news about Hero, urges, "If there be any impediment, I pray you discover it" (2.93-94)—identical to the Friar's preface to the couple's marriage vows in Act 4. The same falsehood becomes an almost insurmountable impediment in both instances, requiring, ironically, Claudio's prayers to overcome it.

Of course, foreshadowing is also used to comic effect, as in a challenge Benedick makes to Don Pedro in Act 1: if Benedick ever falls in love, Don Pedro is to pick out Benedick's eyes "with a ballad-maker's pen" (1.1.252), an instrument Benedick will put to proper use as the love-struck bachelor composes poetry for Beatrice in Act 5. Similarly, in Act 2, Leonato and Claudio tease an eavesdropping Benedick with jokes about Beatrice's love letter-writing, the evidence of which is revealed, to her embarrassment, in the play's final scene.

Every Dogberry Has His Day

In fairness, Branagh's film is funny. His genius for capturing some of the play's smiling moments are best displayed, for example, in Benedick's introspective passages: his "wish list" for a wife ("rich she shall be, that's certain" [2.3.30]) and his warm reception of Beatrice's affection ("the world must be peopled" [2.3.242]). Also delightful is his reinterpretation of Beatrice's grudging dinner invitation ("there's a double meaning in that" [2.3.258-59]), and his festive splashing in the courtyard fountain. Beatrice's "conversion" is equally charming, as she swings in slow motion, arms outstretched to receive an invisible Benedick. (Branagh is consistent, too: Dogberry and Verges "ride" invisible horses).

Given Branagh's talent and opportunity, one wonders why he chose to eliminate so much of the play's abundant humor: for example, Beatrice's poignant personification of Benedick's five wits, four of which "went halting off" (1.1.66), and her rationale for remaining single ("Would it not grieve a woman to be overmaster'd with a piece of valiant dust? . . . to a clod of wayward marl?" [2.1.60-63]). Missing, too, are many of what Branagh believes are Dogberry's "unfunniest lines," although he does admit that "this is an entirely subjective issue."[12] Roughly half of Dogberry's and Verges' malapropisms are omitted (*senseless* for *sensible*, *comprehend* for *apprehend*, *odorous* for *odious*, and *suspect* for *respect*, among others), as well as Don Pedro's mimetic response to Dogberry's disarranged ordinal sequencing ("First, I ask thee what they have done; thirdly, I ask thee what's their offense; sixth and lastly, why they are

committed; and to conclude, what lay you to their charge" [5.1.220-23]). Given the chance, most audiences quickly catch on to Shakespeare's more sophisticated humor. But even if they have to ponder punchlines for a moment, when the humor finally hits, they still experience a bit of self-pride in having lagged only slightly behind one of the world's greatest minds.

The Language Legacy

Shakespeare's work, Branagh would have to agree, is worth preserving as much for the stories as for the language. Even if Shakespeare's neologisms are our archaisms, even if Benedick and Claudio woo their women in Renaissance Italy, readers and viewers—regardless of literacy—still sense the majesty and authority of his prose and poetry. Hence, Branagh's wise decision not to tamper with what text comprises his film.[13] Among the sheared iambs lie the alliteration in Don John's "moral medicine to a mortifying mischief" (1.2.12) and "So will you say when you have seen the sequel" (3.2.134), Claudio's "pure impiety and impious purity" (4.1.104), and Benedick's "You break jests as braggards do their blades" (5.1.186-87). In Branagh's version, there is no hope for Leonato's hyperbole in "the wide sea hath drops too few to wash her clean again, and salt too little which may season give to her foul tainted flesh!" (4.1,140-43), nor for Don John's hypocrisy in "You [Claudio] may do the part of an honest man in it" (2.1.166) and "I am sorry [, Hero,] for thy much misgovernment" (4.1.99). Some of Shakespeare's well-wrought similes are gone: Claudio's lament to Hero that she was once "as chaste as is the bud ere it be blown" (4.1.58); Leonato's impatience with Antonio, whose "counsel . . . falls into [his] ears as profitless as water in a sieve" (5.1.4-5); and a stunned Don Pedro's asking Claudio, "Runs not this speech like iron through your blood?" (5.1.244-45) upon hearing Borachio's confession.

Minimizing Maxims

Part of Shakespeare's timelessness is attributed to the truths his plays contain, often expressed as maxims. *Much Ado About Nothing* contains its fair share; unfortunately, many are missing in Branagh's version, among them:

- "A victory is twice itself when the achiever brings home full numbers" (Leonato, 1.1.8-9)
- "There are no faces truer than those that are so wash'd [by tears]" (Leonato, 1.1.26-7)
- "How much better is it to weep at joy that to joy at weeping!" (Leonato, 1.1.27-9)

- "Time goes on crutches till love have all his rites" (Claudio, 2.1.357-8)
- "Knavery cannot sure hide himself in such reverence" (Benedick, 2.3.119-20)
- "If you dare not trust that you see, confess not that you know" (Don John, 3.2.119-20)
- "What we have we prize not to the worth whiles we enjoy it" (Friar Francis, 4.1.218-9)
- "In a false quarrel there is not true valor" (Benedick, 5.1.120)

Collected here, they read like a string of Old Testament proverbs. They are what the proverbial mountaintop sage is supposed to utter when wisdom-seekers ask, "What is the meaning of life?" If Shakespeare's work is the crowning achievement in English literature, such statements are gemstones in that crown, retaining their brilliance—even increasing in value—over time. Like gemstones, they give weight to the crown and lend authority to the possessor; once removed, there is less to admire, and they are sorely missed.

All's Well That Ends Well

In Act 5.1.271-74, Claudio, upon realizing his role in Hero's "death," pleads with her father,

> I know not how to pray your patience,
> Yet I must speak. Choose your revenge yourself,
> Impose me to what penance your invention
> Can lay upon my sin; yet sinn'd I not,
> But in mistaking.

In what may be the play's most tender passage, Leonato not only forgives Claudio, but also restores him to his former position.

Like Claudio, Branagh never really sinned; he just made some mistakes, with no lasting harm done. Realistically, Branagh had to operate under certain constraints, such as financing. If the film failed to appeal to a large audience, his credibility would likely have suffered, jeopardizing his chances of financing future projects. Many of his cuts were, therefore, necessary. For example, Branagh sensitively removed many of the play's elements which have made Shakespeare traditionally inaccessible to all but the most dedicated disciples: references to Greek and Roman mythological figures, references to time- and location-specific customs and practices, and wording or phrasing simply unintelligible to modern audiences. Fortunately, Branagh's *Much Ado* mission was successful, clearing $30 million at U.S. and U.K. box offices (collectively), and, in the process ensuring an $18 million budget for his 1996 *Hamlet*[14]

After viewing *Much Ado*, *Time* magazine reviewer Richard Corliss, catching Branagh's vision, concluded, "His bold mission is to ensure that everybody—everybody on this planet for whom Shakespeare is unknown or a school punishment—gets it, gets the power and humor of the poetry."[15] If Branagh is indeed Shakespeare's "missionary," as Corliss suggests, he has converted many "sounds of woe" into "hey nonny, nonny."

Notes

1. Keogh, Tom, "Much Ado About Nothing," http://www.film.com/filma/reviews/ quickrev.idc?REV=513.
2. Hinson, Hal, "Much Ado About Nothing," *Washington Post* May 21, 1993:1, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/muchadoaboutnothingpg13hinson_a0a81a.htm.
3. "Shakespeare without Tears," *National Review* June 7, 1993: 3.
4. Hinson, 1.
5. "Shakespeare without Tears," 1.
6. "Shakespeare without Tears," 3.
7. Hinson, 1.
8. Branagh, Kenneth. *Much Ado About Nothing: Screenplay, Introduction, and Notes on the Making of the Movie* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993), xv-xvi.
9. Branagh, xvi.
10. Branagh, xv-xvi.
11. All references to the play are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).
12. Branagh, xv.
13. Branagh, xvi.
14. "Much Ado About Nothing," Internet Movie Database, http://us.imdb.com.
15. Corliss, Richard, "Smiles of a Summer Night," *Time* May 10, 1993: 65.